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# Beyond the figures of organisational culture surveys

*Perceptions of organisational culture measurement from a sensemaking and sensegiving perspective*

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# ABSTRACT

An increasing number of organisations are purchasing culture measurement solutions without reflecting on how ‘measurement’ mirrors organisational reality. This is because the dominant perspective of culture measurement caters to managers and claims to deliver absolute readings. Concurrently, constructivist scholars have often neglected the potential for culture surveys to act as interpretative structures for aligning multiple, divergent accounts of organisational reality. We aim to explore these unchallenged academic aspects of the culture measurement literature by approaching “*How are employees’ perceptions of organisational reality taken into account when managerial interpretation is based on measurement?*” and “*How can an organisational culture survey be used to give and make sense about organisational reality?*” from a sensemaking and sensegiving perspective. We conducted semi-structured interviews at the international chemical company Chemix’s offices in Finland, Sweden and Latvia, as well as gathered, structured and interpreted empirical data to achieve these ends. Our findings suggest that culture measurement exerts agency over managers’ interpretative processes and broadly disregards employees’ points of view. As a result, managers and employees perceive and approach the culture survey in conflicting ways due to divergently held assumptions about organisational culture, which leads to confusion, frustration and cynicism. We argue that managers should be cautious of using the diagnostic approach to understand organisational reality as it oversimplifies and fails to capture the complexity of organisational culture and life. However, we consider culture surveys to present organisations with valuable opportunities to participatively align divergent realities through sensemaking and sensegiving - an act that may potentially surmount the outcomes of diagnostic measurement.

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# INTRODUCTION

## Background

Nowadays, it seems that everywhere you look in the business world, people are propagating for the importance of company culture. Studies show that 94% of managers and 88% of lower level employees consider organisational culture crucial for achieving a strong business performance (Deloitte, 2012). Executives in particular, are highly invested in how they can create a strong organisational culture (Kohll, 2018). Fortunately, there is an abundance of resources and countless advice about company culture in popular business media, producing headlines like “*A Strategic Leader’s Guide to Transforming Culture in Large Organisations*” (Schmidt & Slaughter, 2017), “*5 Ways to Create a Thriving Team Culture: Building a productive and successful culture is key to business success*” (Perkins, 2018) and “*Building a Strong Culture to thrive during Organizational Change*” (Zurek, 2017). Denison (1984) characterised a ‘strong’ culture as a balance between participation (inclusivity) and alignment (consistency), which is generally the consensus among scholars in mainstream culture literature (Alvesson & Berg, 1992). The organisations that have managed to figure this balance out are awarded with accolades like “Best Company Culture” (Comparably, 2018). The rest who do not make it to the podium have a sea of consultancy firms and corporate solutions at their feet to help them solidify a strong organisational culture, for instance, Denison Consulting (n.d.a) and the Denison Organizational Culture Survey, Hofstede Insights (n.d.) and the Organisational Culture scan, as well as Human Synergistics International (n.d.) and the Organizational Culture Inventory.

To contextualise this depiction of organisational culture’s role in business today, let us introduce what *organisational culture* actually is. There are two main approaches to the theory in academia, namely ‘*strong*’ culture as a tool for effectiveness and culture as a socially constructed system of meaning. One of the most recognised definitions of organisational culture is affiliated with Schein (1985, p.6), who stated that “*Culture is the deeper level of basic assumptions and beliefs that are shared by members of an organisation, that operate unconsciously, and that define in a basic ‘taken-for-granted’ fashion an organisation’s view of itself and its environment*”. This definition has shaped the dominant rhetoric of organisational culture deeming it to be an entity that is both

changeable and imperative to financial performance, efficiency and commitment (Barley & Kunda, 1992; Kohll, 2018; Nord, 1985; Schein, 1985; Smircich, 1983; Wilderom, Glunk & Maslowski, 2000).

The significance of possessing a strong culture encourages managers to assess and adjust their current organisational culture with the use of culture measurement instruments (Ashkanasy, Broadfoot & Falkus; 2000; Cameron & Quinn, 1999). Culture surveys, the most commonly used instrument, are often administered to the members of an organisation and feature normative statements that respondents then are asked to take a stand on (Jung et al., 2009). The format asks participants to *strongly agree, agree, remain neutral, disagree or strongly disagree* with the standardised statements (Jung et al., 2009). The results are then numerically accumulated and graphically presented according to distinct cultural dimensions to form an organisational culture profile that can be compared among organisations and industries (Denison, Nieminen & Kotrba, 2014; Yauch & Steudel, 2003). The cited benefits of an organisational culture survey as a means of assessing culture are that it is time efficient, cost-effective, scalable, replicable, adaptable and easy to administer (Ashkanasy, Broadfoot & Falkus; 2000; Cameron & Quinn, 1999; Carter et al., 2012; Denison, Nieminen & Kotrba, 2014; Jung et al., 2009; Tucker, McCoy & Evans 1990). Additionally, culture surveys are said to make employees' understandings and beliefs about their organisations explicit (Mirvis, 1985).

## Problematisation

Both scholars and practitioners in the culture measurement landscape target managers who wish to improve their organisational culture. The mainstream literature encourages managers to take on an exclusively rational, instrumental approach to culture and its measurement (Alvesson & Berg, 1992). In that, researchers almost exclusively advocate for the use of quantitative methods to assess culture, while their literature focuses exceedingly on the practical considerations of administering such tools (Denison, Nieminen & Kotrba, 2014; Jung et al., 2009; Tucker, McCoy & Evans 1990). On the practice side, practitioners cater directly to managers by packaging commercial culture measurement products that appeal to managers on the basis of simplicity, accuracy, straightforwardness and impartiality. Thus, the 'strong' culture perspective of organisational

culture heavily influences managers and how they choose to make sense of what is going on in their organisations.

However, there does exist a group of vocal critics of organisational culture measurement, whose discursive arena is perhaps comparatively remote from the immediate surroundings of everyday managers - academic culture purists. The criticism against the pursuit of measuring organisational culture via quantitative culture survey has ranged from denouncing the research designs as logical-positivist, quasi-experimental (Ott, 1989) to proclaiming that the act in itself is inappropriate and fails to see what is really there (Schein, 1996). The pragmatists and purists have engaged in a dichotomous debate about organisational culture since the 1970's (Barley & Kunda, 1992). With regard to culture measurement, the discussions have primarily addressed *if* and *how* organisations' cultures should be measured (Ashkanasy, Broadfoot and Falkus, 2000; Smircich, 1985). Albeit, not much is known about the interpretative processes, social dynamics or hidden intentions that surround measurement instruments if organisations do proceed to measure their culture. This possess complications in threefold.

As we now venture into the realm of culture as a system of meaning, we must announce a brief disclaimer to the reader. Henceforth, all references to *organisational reality* should be equated with 'what is going on' or one's understanding of the 'present condition'. To continue, few studies have considered how organisational culture surveys capture multiple perceptions of organisational reality. In quantitative culture measurement, it is assumed that respondents hold homogenous assumptions about what culture is, how it functions, how it should be 'fixed' and how it manifests itself in organisational life. Thus, pragmatists assert that numerical survey results say enough about the status, effectiveness and strength of an organisation's culture in themselves. We find it problematic that so little is known about how culture surveys consolidate multiple accounts of reality, because it opens up the possibility that culture surveys do not mediate the employees' perceptions of participation and alignment, i.e. the components of strong culture, in their realities, which is what the survey should be measuring in the first place.

Secondly, little is known empirically about what role employees play in managers' interpretation of organisational reality. In quantitative culture measurement literature, employees are asked to

describe their perception of reality according to pre-structured normative statements in a culture survey (Jung et al., 2009). They are, however, not necessarily expected to participate in the process of interpreting the survey results or contribute to the understanding of what the results say about their organisational culture (Cameron & Quinn, 1999). Hence, mainstream culture measurement literature is generally devoid of considerations of employee agency in interpretative diagnostic processes. We find this problematic as managerial interpretations of what is going on in their organisations rely heavily on the assumptions of diagnostic principles and ‘strong’ culture literature, and less so on employees’ accounts of reality.

Thirdly, inquiry into whether culture surveys have the capability to contribute to cultural improvement in alternate ways than merely the diagnostic, is also limited. The academic culture ‘purists’ from the social constructivist camp have overlooked the possibility to empirically explore the interpretative processes and social dynamics that take place around a quantitative tool, because they strongly dispute the very idea that organisational culture can be ‘measured’ at all (Trice & Beyer, 1993; Van Maanen & Barley, 1985). This is problematic because researchers have forgone the opportunity to acknowledge the survey’s function as an interpretative meaning-making structure that can both create, influence and reinforce accounts of reality through reflection and discussion (Pekkola, Hildén & Rämö, 2015). Thereby, there are scarcely any studies that take a qualitative approach, with social constructivist assumptions, to investigate alternative approaches survey administrators and respondents may employ using a culture survey to improve organisational culture according to ‘strong’ culture outcomes, i.e. increased participation and alignment of perceptions.

Based on these problematic gaps in the organisational culture measurement literature, the objective of this thesis is to explore how *diagnostic* and *meaning-centered* approaches to culture surveys capture, influence and limit/encourage various perceptions of organisational reality. The study will also examine how these disparate perceptions of organisational reality shape the social dynamics between managers and employees in terms of participation and alignment (i.e. the components of strong culture). As this exploration will consider divergent perspectives and assumptions adhered by different organisational members, we believe that the sensemaking and sensegiving perspective is relevant, appropriate and beneficial for our research because it enables us to approach the

phenomenon with a vocabulary that describes how organisational members attempt to structure unspoken thought processes and the implied (Weick, 1995). Furthermore, an article by Pekkola, Hildén and Rämö (2015) has inspired us to depict the survey as a reflective practice, which ties in with the retrospective nature of sensemaking and influential nature of sensegiving (Weick, 1995). Our objectives have led to our two research questions, which are:

- 1. How are employees' perceptions taken into account when managerial interpretation of organisational reality is based on measurement?*
- 2. How can an organisational culture survey be used to give and make sense about organisational reality?*

In order to achieve these determined objectives and answer the research questions, we have conducted qualitative interpretive research. As we want to explore different underlying assumptions, meanings and perspectives held by various organisational members, this research approach with its focus on investigating subjective meanings that inform action, is considered to be relevant and appropriate (Saunders et al., 2009). We have conducted semi-structured interviews individually with members of the top management team and in groups with lower level employees. As the company featured in our empirical research operates internationally, we were interested in exploring the national culture element within the topic of our interest and thus conducted interviews in Finland, Sweden and Latvia. Our interviewees included representatives from different business units and functions to more accurately portray a subset of the organisational population.

On a personal level, we have a keen interest in culture measurement surveys, because the two of us have in the course of professional lives been participants in organisational culture measurement surveys and have reflected on the ambiguous (and sometimes non-existent) relationship between responding to the survey and seeing actionable changes in organisational culture. It has led us to further reflect on:

- What role a culture surveys plays in an organisation and what meaning is attached to it?
- What culture surveys convey about management's view on organisational reality?

- How managers recognise and aid employees' sensemaking and sensegiving attempts of organisational reality?

Our personal experiences were accompanied by concerns expressed by a member of management team in the organisation we conducted our research on. For context, Chemix (the name has been changed in sake of anonymity) is an industrial chemical supplier who in 2018 conducted a survey to assess their organisational culture. Further information on this organisation will follow in the Findings chapter. One of the first issues we discussed during the first interview with the Human Resource manager, was related to the organisational culture survey that took place the previous year. The HR manager shared her account of being surprised and puzzled by the low results that the company had received in 2018. Thus, the management was highly interested in exploring the results and the reasons behind these results in more details. The company expressed its interest in our general research endeavour and our intent to study what was going on in terms of this culture survey, as a result of which we began our research on culture surveys and the processes around them.

## Relevance

The study of Chemix introduces an empirical account of how members of an organisation interpret and relate to a quantitative culture measurement tool through a sensemaking and sensegiving perspective. As this has rarely been done before, our study is relevant in the sense that it further introduces scholars and managers alike to interpretative processes and social dynamics that have the capacity to foundationally impact organisational cultures in real life.

For instance, multiple interviews with members of top management have demonstrated how managers fixate on annual, numeric development of culture and overlook the importance of understanding what is behind these figures. Thus, our intention to explore organisational culture surveys as sensemaking/sensegiving tools that create, reinforce and are interwoven in a rich tapestry of social interaction, assumptions and diverse perspectives, could be relevant for managers with regard to acknowledging the complexity of organisational reality. Moreover, our findings voice certain perceptions of organisational reality that are seldom heard in culture measurement

literature, namely *employees*'. By contrasting managers' and lower level employees' perceptions of reality, we grant employees an agency that has seldom been considered in previous research.

Finally, we see our study to be highly relevant for practitioners by drawing their attention to the importance of reflection and reflexivity in their workplace. Our study identifies some of the ways in which culture measurement deceives, misleads and blinds managers to interpretative obstacles like national culture, employee intentions, desire for change and competing perceptions of reality. Our analysis encourages managers to exercise caution when interpreting and communicating survey results to avoid misunderstanding, frustration and cynicism within an organisation. This example and our own professional experiences have led us to believe that reflexivity should be certainly integrated to managers' daily work life, which is underpinned by Schön (1987) who claims that it is crucial to continuously extend one's professional expertise within professional work life.

## Disposition

We commence our study with the theoretical background of the organisational culture and culture measurement literature, which is followed by the critique against this literature. We start with presentation of two major theoretical camps within organisational culture, that is the objectivist view of culture as the way how to improve financial performance (Smircich, 1983; Nord 1985; Wilderom, Glunk & Maslowski, 2000) and socially constructed view of culture (Pettigrew, 1979). Thereafter, we present literature about culture surveys and their underlying assumptions, which is followed by the critique against them. Finally, we introduce the way we aim to contribute to the existing literature, considering the topic from a sensemaking and sensegiving perspective.

In the next chapter, we introduce our methodological approach. We start with the discussion with our research approach, which is qualitative interpretive research. Then we present all the relevant aspects related to the data collection and analysis processes. We conclude the chapter with a description of our considerations related to data quality assurance, introducing important aspects with regard to preparation, conduct and interpretation of interviews. Furthermore, we highlight the

importance of reflexivity in our study and introduce the way we have ensured critical reflection throughout the whole research process.

The methodological chapter is followed a presentation of our findings. In this chapter, we show the competing perspectives and assumptions adhered by the top management and lower level employees of Chemix who try to make and give sense about organisational reality around the culture measurement tool. More specifically, we present divergent views held by managers and employees regarding the role of the organisational culture survey as a tool and on organisational life around the culture survey, in general.

In the discussion, we consider culture surveys' exaggerated, deceptive, and at times, unfulfilled promises towards creating a strong culture as well as the survey's intermittent failure to identify crucial aspects of organisational culture. We argue that managers should employ caution when attempting to draw conclusions based on the numeric survey results. Thereafter, we present the case for how the culture survey can be used by organisational members to make and give sense about organisational reality and draw from the sensemaking and sensegiving literature to advise how superior outcomes of organisational culture can be achieved through this perspective.

In the conclusion, we present a summary of our empirical findings, our main theoretical contribution, a consideration of the limitations of the study, some suggestions for future research and finally, the study's relevance for practitioners.

# THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

## Introduction

In this chapter, we introduce the reader to the debate on organisational culture. Within this larger debate, scholars have naturally taken various standpoints regarding how culture should be used and approached in organisations. Our aim is to familiarise the reader with some of the most commonly held positions on deliberations such as ‘*can culture be measured?*’, ‘*how should culture be captured quantitatively?*’ and ‘*how must culture be understood to fulfill its purpose?*’. As we will chronicle in greater depth, the academic community has been highly divisive on these matters and have contributed to a substantial amount of research supporting each respective side.

In the following sections, we aim to present a theoretical background to the culture measurement literature as well as a summary of the main critique towards it. We will begin by outlining the history behind the two main academic approaches to organisational culture, namely ‘*strong culture as a tool for effectiveness*’ and ‘*culture as a socially constructed system of meaning*’. We suggest why the field has been dichotomised and explain some implications of this rift. We will then present a brief summary of the culture measurement literature and explore the underlying assumptions on which this literature is based. This will ultimately guide the reader to gain a deeper understanding of the foundational beliefs that culture measurement literature is built on. Following our review, we will introduce the critique towards this literature to illustrate the richness of the current debate to the reader. Finally, we will address how we will approach and contribute to this debate with the use of ‘sensemaking’ and ‘sensegiving’ concepts as a theory and perspective.

## Organisational Culture and its Measurement

The academic interest for cultures that preside exclusively within organisations was born out of the Human Relations movement and is believed to have taken form as a reaction to the rational control systems like Total Quality Management that became fashionable among academics and practitioners in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (Barley & Kunda, 1992). At that point in time, social forces

in society led employees to yearn for a higher quality of work rather than merely a paycheck (Barley & Kunda, 1992). Proponents of organisational culture held that the control systems were detrimental to employee loyalty and commitment, which subsequently led to the development of organisational culture literature in the academic community (Barley & Kunda, 1992).

Despite being closely linked to sociology, the academics who developed the concept within 'organisational behaviour' borrowed perspectives, methods, models and concepts from a wide range of disciplines like accounting to ethnography (Alvesson & Berg, 1992; Van Maanen & Barley, 1985). By the late 1970s and early 1980s, two theoretical camps had emerged (Barley & Kunda, 1992). On the one hand, organisations were deemed to be socially constructed systems of meaning by researchers such as Pettigrew (1979), which implied that people's beliefs, perceptions and appreciations were "*rooted in our own worlds of our own making that we come to accept as 'reality'*" (Schön, 1987, p.36). On the other hand, management writers and practitioners popularised the idea that a *strong* culture could be used to enhance a firm's competitiveness and financial gain (Alvesson & Berg, 1992). This theory was supported by from pragmatic approaches to organisational effectiveness like 'Organisational Excellence' (Peters & Waterman, 1982) and 'Theory Z' (Ouchi, 1981). Conclusively, the prevailing rhetoric around organisational culture that has dominated organisational studies for the past four decades is the latter, which implies that cultures are malleable and can be designed and manipulated by carrying out interventions that instil desirable values, beliefs and emotions in employees (Barley & Kunda, 1992).

Some argue that these opposing ideas of social evolution and productive stability dichotomised the images of acceptable organising (Alvesson & Berg, 1992; Barley & Kunda, 1992). For instance, the once divisive 'organisational culture vs. organisational climate' debate shaped researchers' ideas about "*differentiating culture, as a qualitative tradition, from climate, as a quantitative tradition*" (Denison, Nieminen & Kotrba, 2014, p.146). This had methodological implications for future inquiry as mainstream academics and practitioners alike started developing instruments for measuring organisational climate rather while neglecting culture (Denison, 1996). Hofstede (1998), one of the most influential culture measurement researchers in the field, articulated that although case-study descriptions and observations do provide deep insight to organisational cultures, these methods are somewhat problematic with respect to their subjectivity

and reliability. Further, Tucker, McCoy and Evans (1990) concluded that qualitative cultural exploration was too intrusive, resource demanding and required distinct skills of managers. Hence, as an alternative, an assortment of instruments for conducting quantitative culture measurements emerged by the mid 1990s - some developed academically and distributed for free and some packaged by management consultancies and sold as commercial products (Jung et al., 2009).

In order to grasp the fundamentals of the culture measurement literature, it is important to disclose what is actually measured in an organisational culture survey and which items the instrument contains. Ashkanasy, Broadfoot and Falkus (2000, p.132) hold that culture surveys are an appropriate measurement tool when “*the focus is on the ‘observable and measurable manifestations of culture’, such as values and behavioural norms*”. Researchers and practitioners have thus found surveys to be a practical tool to understand the observable characteristics of an organisation’s culture (Denison, Nieminen & Kotrba, 2014). One study goes one step further and claims that quantitative measurement is the more competent method of uncovering the depths of organisational culture, since culture is rooted in perceived practices and will therefore reflect a more operative reality in the organisation (Hofstede et al., 1990).

The items that organisational culture surveys assess are usually measured through Likert scales, wherein respondents are presented with normative statements and are asked to indicate if they *strongly agree, agree, remain neutral to, disagree or strongly disagree* with them (Jung et al., 2009). According to Ouchi and Price (1978), the benefit of using Likert scales in culture surveys is that they empirically reveal patterns of employee interaction that distinguish successful organisations from unsuccessful ones by way of strong organisational cultures. Surveys can therefore be used as a diagnostic tool in management initiatives (Denison, Nieminen & Kotrba, 2014).

Culture measurement instruments come in a wide range of categories and function. Firstly, an instrument can be *formative* in its central ambition to explore organisational culture or *diagnostic* by identifying, assessing and realigning an existing culture towards a ‘high-performing’ standard (Jung et al., 2009). Diagnostic tools typically provide managers with a numeric assessment of the

organisation's culture that can then be compared, contrasted and benchmarked to other organisations (Denison, Nieminen & Kotrba, 2014; Yauch & Steudel, 2003).

In terms of output, instruments can be *typing*, which implies that an organisation's culture falls into mutually exclusive culture types or *profiling* which means that organisational culture is described using a set of dimensions that form a profile (Ashkanasy, Broadfoot & Falkus, 2000). Some examples of typing instruments are *Organizational Culture Assessment Instrument* (Cameron & Quinn, 1999), *Competing Values Framework* (Cameron & Quinn, 1999), and *Interactive Projective Test* (Aurelio, 1995). Additionally, *Hofstede's Culture Measure of Organizational Culture* (Hofstede et al., 1990), *Organizational Culture Profile* (Ashkanasy, Broadfoot & Falkus, 2000), *Organizational culture inventory* (Cooke & Lafferty, 1989), and *Denison Organizational Culture Survey* (Denison, Nieminen & Kotrba, 2014), are prominent examples of instruments that yield a dimensional culture profile (Jung et al., 2009).

Profiling instruments typically have three sub-categories which are: *person-culture fit*, which measures value congruence between employees and the organisation, *descriptive measures*, which aim to capture temporal, geographical or functional differences in organisational culture without drawing inferences about effectiveness, and lastly, *effectiveness instruments*, which do the same but do draw inferences about organisational effectiveness (Ashkanasy, Broadfoot & Falkus, 2000). The main distinction between descriptive measures and effectiveness instruments according to Denison, Nieminen and Kotrba (2014, p.147) is that "*purely descriptive instruments may remain value-neutral, but effectiveness instruments must be rooted in a theory of how specific behavioural norms and values lead to higher effectiveness*".

## Culture surveys and underlying assumptions

It was mentioned in the introduction that Schein's (1985) definition of organisational culture is the most recognised one in the academic community. Schein (1985, p.5) considers culture from an objectivist point-of-view and thus defines it as an 'it', whilst conceding that 'it' can mean different things. At its core, this characteristically objectivist view thus takes on an instrumental perspective that views organisations as multi-part machines that can be designed and fine-tuned for efficiency

(Smircich, 1983). Hence, 'strong' cultures are based on an epistemology of technical rationality, which suggests that problems are instrumental and should be solved with the most appropriate technical means, scientific knowledge and professional technique (Schön, 1987). This epistemology also coincides with the rational aspect of culture that informs managers that there are systematic ways to create strong, purposive cultures (Alvesson & Berg, 1992).

These beliefs are based on a number of assumptions as outlined by Louis (1985). Firstly, the *assumption of linearity* illustrates a pattern of logic assuming that 'strong' cultures are linked to high performance, ergo weak cultures are linked to low performance (Louis, 1985, p.87). Secondly, the *assumption of 'all else being equal'* refers to generalising the conception that a relationship holds in a context (e.g. within an industry) if all other variables are constant (Louis, 1985, pp.87-88). Thirdly, the *assumption of correspondence* signifies that research findings from a certain department or group are transferable and applicable elsewhere, for example at organisational level (Louis, 1985, p.88). In consequence, these three assumptions directly affect how managers interpret survey results and how they are guided to understand reality.

A few cited examples of the benefits of a strong culture are that they “*Reduce collective uncertainties (i.e. facilitate a common interpretation system for members), create social order (i.e. make clear to members what is expected), create continuity (i.e. perpetuate key values and norms across generations of members), create collective identity and commitment (i.e. bind members together), and elucidate a vision of the future (i.e. energise forward movement)*” (Cameron & Quinn, 1999, p.4). Indeed, cultural pragmatists argue that organisational culture is essential to profitability, commitment, effectiveness, balance and productivity (Nord, 1985; Smircich, 1983; Wilderom, Glunk & Maslowski, 2000). Schein (1985, p.2) even proposed the idea that creating and managing organisational culture is “*the only thing of real importance that leaders do*” in terms of internal integration and external adaptation.

The above-mentioned assumptions and understandings of culture are mirrored in the commercial offerings of 'strong corporate culture' products that are marketed to organisations (Alvesson & Berg, 1992). Product features typically include: *recipes for success, concepts, models, ambiguous word choices and theoretical perspectives* that inform managers how to interpret their culture

(Alvesson & Berg, 1992). Although these products are marketed as miracle workers, pragmatists are quite aware that diagnosis is only the first step towards improvement. In a handbook on diagnosing and changing organisational culture, Cameron and Quinn (1999, p.129) mention a brief disclaimer at the very end of their multiple chapter instructions that one should not assume that the “*job is completed by reaching the 20 steps above*”, but that the difficult part is the implementation of initiatives and subsequent follow up. We will follow up on this idea in our Discussion chapter.

## Critique against Culture Measurement and its assumptions

As we have presented the mainstream view and assumptions of mainstream organisational culture, organisational effectiveness and culture measurement literature, we now move on to present the substantial body of critique towards these theories and assumptions. This section aims to demonstrate the status of the organisational culture debate.

As early scholarship of organisational culture emanated firmly from anthropology, many researchers discounted the possibility that culture could be measured and compared with standardised survey instruments (Trice & Beyer, 1993; Van Maanen & Barley, 1985). Schein (1996) for example, felt that in attempting to measure culture through surveys, one was dedicating attention to an inappropriate instrument at the expense of failing to see what was really there. Similarly, Ott (1989) rejected what he deemed to be logical-positivist quasi-experimental research designs as he found the potential outcome of qualitatively discovering unanticipated findings and deep insights to be far greater than establishing quantitative ‘facts’, a view shared by many (Alvesson & Berg, 1992; Jung et al., 2009). Others argue that the attempt to measure culture reduces and diminishes the holistic perspective of organisations to traditional behaviour variables (Alvesson & Berg, 1992; Ashkanasy, Broadfoot & Falkus, 2000). Louis (1985) argued that quantitative approaches were inappropriate and produced irrelevant and superficial results. Organisational members are often part of several distinct subcultures that are rarely captured in a survey (Yauch & Steudel, 2003). The measurement literature thus falsely assumes culture is homogeneous in an organisation (Yauch & Steudel, 2003). Hence, the image of culture that emerges from quantitative data may no longer be grounded in organisational reality (Sackman,

2001). Ashkanasy, Broadfoot and Falkus (2000) further criticised the measurement literature for contributing to a narrow, simplistic, stereotypical view of organisational culture.

The very notion that organisational culture can be managed brings ridicule by some scholars to the debate (Louis, 1985). It is a firmly held belief by constructivists that culture is a meaningful expression of needs that emerges among an organisations' members and can therefore not be managed by leaders in the name of money or increased productivity (Van Maanen & Barley, 1985). Michaelson (1989) contests the very existence of positive, negative, good or bad cultures. Even though people can have the same understanding of values and culture, their behavioural expressions can be coloured by national culture and other contexts (Fey & Denison, 2003). A few find the attempt to judge a culture according to appropriateness deeply problematic as the appropriateness of a culture is not static (Jung et al., 2009). These attempts, moreover, do not consider culture's relations to history, power or epistemological perspectives (Hawkins, 1997).

The problem with cultural practice in the real world is that complications do not present themselves in coherent, logical ways (Schön, 1987). Smircich (1983) argues that culture is not a variable open to instrumental manipulation of the same type as structure or strategy. Some say that organisational theory has curved itself to meet the demands of practitioners by prioritising practical relevance and "usefulness" over depth and richness (Alvesson & Berg, 1992). A cultural analysis should ideally illuminate underlying values, assumptions, meanings and issues and question conditions that are taken for granted (Smircich, 1983). Smircich (1983) argues that the rational model of organisation analysis does not live up to these demands. Surveys in particular have been criticised for their inaptness to capture deeper culture elements mainly through their use of predefined, standardised questions (Denison, Nieminen & Kotrba, 2014; Jung et al., 2009; Smircich, 1983).

The use of Likert scales in culture questionnaires have been highly criticised due to its association with "*cultural variations in several types of response bias*" (Smith, 2004). For instance, Likert scales have been criticised for producing systematic errors with reference to participant representations of: relationship with administrator/sponsor (Groves, 2006), time/burden (Groves, 2006), language interpretation (Ciuk & James, 2015), phrasing (Flaskerud, 2012; Hodge & Gillespie, 2007), distance between points on response scale (Flaskerud, 2012; Hodge & Gillespie,

2007; Smith, 2004), personal attributes (Groves, 2006), non-western frameworks of thought (Flaskerud, 2012; Hodge & Gillespie, 2007).

As no data has been obtained on how respondents interpret the question, there is no quantitative way to verify that a question was understood in the intended way (Jung et al., 2009). This brings up the question of reliability, validity and statistical errors that many researchers have found to be lacking in organisational culture studies (Ashkanasy, Broadfoot & Falkus, 2000; Carter et al., 2012; Jung et al., 2009). Alvesson and Berg (1992, p.151) offered a harsh critique about rigour of diagnostic measurement tools: *“This is evidently an attempt to give the impression of rigour and credibility and to make believable they by replacing perceptions and interpretations with numbers that can be processed, scientific rigour and accuracy will increase”*. Even Hofstede (1998), who is an adamant supporter of culture measurement surveys, later in his career admitted that organisational culture should not be studied exclusively with case studies or questionnaires.

Organisational culture is sometimes seen by practitioners as the solution to all problems (Alvesson & Berg, 1992). Abraham Kaplan's (1964, p.28) law of the instrument summarises this critique: *“Give a small boy a hammer and he will find that everything he encounters needs pounding”*, in other words, diagnosing and repairing one issue with a single instrument leads to the perception that all issues can be solved in a similar way. Such has been the case with organisational culture when seen as a tool to organisational health (Alvesson & Berg, 1992). In reality however, it has been demonstrated that management initiatives to promote organisational cultures and values incite indifference, ambiguity and ambivalence among employees (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015). Part of the problem with an objectivist, positivist view of organisational culture is that it supports the perception of that diagnosing and modifying a culture is, firstly, possible and, secondly, easy (Smircich, 1985). Schein (1985) holds that it is in fact, very complex to learn and unlearn deep-seated assumptions and beliefs that regulate our social behaviour. Some of the literature does oversell the culture concept and presents an exaggerated view of what can realistically be accomplished (Alvesson & Berg, 1992). A practical example is that diagnostic culture measurement tools may lead to inferences about cultural effectiveness without considering potential contingency factors (Denison, Nieminen & Kotrba, 2014). Alvesson and Berg (1992) present a case in which the link between strong cultures and high performance is weakly correlated

and scientifically unsupported. A thorough review of empirical research that studied the culture-performance relationship came to a similar conclusion (Wilderom, Glunk & Maslowski, 2000). The sceptics see corporate culture as an opportunity for managers to exert control in a masquerade of improving rationality of managerial action (Alvesson & Berg, 1992; Smircich, 1983).

In addition to the presented critique above, we also noted some additional observations. The results of an effectiveness tool can only tell the interpreter *if* the organisation is effective or not and *where* the issue with effectiveness stems from. Furthermore, we noticed that the literature rarely mentions lower-level employees in terms of having any agency in their organisational lives (Smircich, 1985).

## A sensemaking and sensegiving approach to culture surveys

Although the current state of the debate on organisational culture has yielded a multitude of satiated and contested concepts and dimensions of culture, there is an apparent lack of inquiry into how the act of ‘measuring culture’ informs the social dynamics of the organisational culture. As researchers from the social constructivist camp have previously discarded attempts to measure culture all together, they have missed out on an opportunity to empirically study the social processes that surround this positivist activity. We argue that the lack of interest by both practitioners and scholars is problematic as it neglects the role of the survey as an interpretative structure from which reflection can be used as a practical tool to make sense of what is going on (Pekkola, Hildén & Rämö, 2015). Possible implications could be that faulty interpretations could severely influence the outcome of the survey results and the action which is based upon them.

If we look at the culture survey as an item and/or event that triggers and is surrounded by interpretative processes, influencing processes, social dynamics, competing perspectives and approaches to organisational reality, we argue that it is appropriate to adopt sensemaking and sensegiving literature to guide our research endeavour.

Sensemaking refers to “*the retrospective development of plausible images that rationalise what people are doing*” (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005, p.409) and is an essential human activity

that produces a discursive construction of reality depicting one's perception in a meaningful way (Maitlis, 2005). Practically, it means that one's perception of reality emerges as one attempts to retrospectively make sense of what is going on (Weick, 1993). The attributed originator of the theory, Karl Weick, has been an adamant advocate for the sensemaking perspective during the past four decades (Weick, 2017). However, an academic resource search result revealed that the theory has predominantly gained popularity in the last 15 years, and thus, most empirical research on the matter is fairly new. In an organisational context, sensemaking is a social construction process that is realised at all levels of the organisation (Maitlis, 2005; Weick, 1995). It occurs when members of the organisation encounter surprising or perplexing issues, events or actions (Weick, 1995). For instance, at management level, sensemaking can occur in connection with strategic activities, environmental scanning and decision-making (Thomas, Clark, & Gioia, 1993). The purpose of sensemaking is to enable sensemakers to decide to act on their reality (Weick, 1993).

A related concept within the realm of constructed reality, is Gioia and Chittipeddi's (1991, p.442) sensegiving, which is "*the process of attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others toward a preferred redefinition of organizational reality*". The sensegiving process is thus about using narrative and language to communicate in a way that persuades the receiver of the message to recognise and adopt the sensegiver's version of reality (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). It is a prevalent interpretative process in organisational life that is utilised by both managers and employees (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis 2005; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007). Managers in particular can benefit from sensegiving in their management endeavours to strengthen employees' commitment to the organisation's goals, facilitate enthusiasm and acceptance for change, and shape employees' and other managers' accounts of what is going on (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007).

Although these two concepts are separate, the processes often function collectively in everyday organisational life. Firstly, sensemaking is cyclical in nature considering that it both precedes and follows decision-making (Weick, 1993). Secondly, sensegiving shapes decision making through a political process that aims to influence others' sensemaking (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007). Thus, both sensegiving and sensemaking activities can directly or indirectly affect each other as well as

their outcome, and can concurrently create a multitude of accounts about perceived organisational reality (Maitlis, 2005).

According to Eden (1992), social sensemaking processes at organisational level were quite understudied. In fact, not much has been written about bottom-up sensegiving or how managers make sense of employees' sense-giving attempts in its various forms (Maitlis, 2005). Previous studies on sensegiving practices have concentrated on which actors engage in the practices and which strategies they use to effectively convey their reality (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007).

With regard to our research topic, we argue that sensemaking and sensegiving literature will aid us in understanding how organisational culture surveys can be alternatively used to give and make sense about organisational reality, because it acknowledges multiple realities that may be at odds with each other. The meaning-centered interpretative nature of sensemaking and sensegiving will allow us to more deeply access organisational members' perceived realities as well as their assumptions that reinforce their interactions with and around the measurement instrument. Our research will have relevance to both organisational culture camps as our endeavour will aim to interpret how respondents make sense of the way their narrative accounts of reality are captured numerically in a culture survey. Lastly, the sensemaking and sensegiving literature will enable us to highlight employees' agency in a qualitative measurement process, which is often neglected in culture measurement literature. By this we mean that we will be able to showcase employees' deliberate attempts at voicing their opinions and what the implications for this may be.

# METHODOLOGY

## Introduction

In this chapter we present our methodological approach to the research study we conducted between February and May of 2019. We familiarise the reader with the methodological decisions we have made regarding process, ethical considerations and such. We commence this chapter with a section that details our general research approach, namely qualitative interpretive research (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). The next section proceeds with a portrayal of our data collection process, where we consider relevant aspects of the semi-structured interviews we conducted with the top management and lower level employees at Chemix's offices in Finland, Sweden and Latvia. Thereupon, we demonstrate how the empirical material was analysed. By the end of the chapter we offer our considerations about quality assurance of the data, discussing significant aspects related to how we prepared for, conducted and interpreted the interviews. We also consider the role of reflexivity in our research, outlining our approach to critical reflection.

## Research Strategy

One of our research endeavours is exploring sensemaking and sensegiving processes around an organisational culture survey. We see the culture survey as both a *tool* and an *event* that can be used by survey administrators (management) and respondents (employees) alike to capture and reflect on their own perceptions of reality as well as attempt to influence others'. Thus, we recognise that a culture survey can serve as an "*extracted cue*", which is a concept within the sensemaking literature that refers to "...*simple, familiar structures that are seeds from which people develop a larger sense of what maybe occurring*" (Weick, 1995, p.50). We assign this designation to the culture survey to narrow our investigative scope of organisational reality to one relevant phenomenon.

The multidimensional nature of the sensemaking and sensegiving perspective demands that the organisation's social dynamics should be investigated from multiple viewpoints (Weick, 1995). Accordingly, we have been inclined to adopt "*the perspective of those being studied – what they*

*see as important and significant...*” to ensure that our study would sufficiently capture the depth and complexity of individual and collective realities (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p.416). Our approach to achieving this end, was to conduct in-depth interviews with individual managers and groups of employees “*to enter the social world*” of the organisation (Saunders et al., 2009, p.116). As we visited three of the main offices located in Finland, Sweden and Latvia, we were able to transcribe some perceptions of reality in different national contexts.

In order to capture both expressed claims and implied meanings of our respondents, we have focused entirely on *what* the interviewees have said and *how* they have described what is going on in their organisation. This goes in line with the argument of Gubrium and Holstein (1997) who support that both *what* and *how* should be taken into consideration by researchers to capture both the expressed and the implied. We have thenceforth interpreted the interviewees’ responses to identify what has been subtly implied and which assumptions underlie each statement. To guide our process, we have chosen to epistemologically follow the *interpretivist philosophy*, meaning “*that it is necessary to explore the subjective meanings motivating the actions of social actors in order for the researcher to be able to understand these actions*” (Saunders et al., 2009, p.111). We argue that this approach is appropriate with regards to sensemaking and sensegiving theories, as our aim with this study is indeed to identify and explain the divergent perspectives and subjective meanings held by various organisational members.

Sensemaking and sensegiving theories suggest that reality is subjective and “*is socially constructed through acts of interpretation*” (Prasad, 2018, pp.13-14), which is the position we have taken to investigate how different perceptions of reality may be at odds with each other. Particularly, we have been informed by the ontology of “*constructionism*” which views entities “*as social constructions built up from the perceptions and actions of social actors*” (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p.32). As mentioned in the literature chapter, it is uncommon that organisational culture measurement has been studied from a constructivist standpoint, which we believe give us an edge to perhaps discover unanticipated findings within the field. Hence, the study we have conducted is characteristically within the qualitative tradition (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

## Data Collection

The collection of the empirical material was conducted via individual and focus group semi-structured interviews, which imply the set of topics and questions prepared in advance that can be adjusted according to the context (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Saunders et al., 2009). So, during semi-structured interviews the sequence of questions can change and some of the questions can be either neglected or added, which in turn enables the researchers to acquire vital information and deepen their understanding in a way that contributes to the research (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Saunders et al., 2009). During the interviews we conducted with managers and employees, we omitted evidently less relevant questions and asked some follow-up questions in order to challenge or understand better the expressed ideas (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Saunders et al., 2009). Both of us were physically present in all the conducted interviews, as a result of which one of the researchers acted as an interviewer and the other one was responsible for making observations and writing comments, then the roles were switched (Saunders et al., 2009). Thus, the interviewer who acted as an observer had time and opportunity during the interview to carefully assess the relevance of one or another question and, in case of necessity, propose additional ones. This in turn contributed to a deeper understanding of interviewees' responses and the researched phenomenon, in general (Saunders et al., 2009).

As argued by Saunders et al. (2009), a semi-structured interview with its capacity to evoke a more fruitful discussion and reflection is considered to be relevant and beneficial in interpretive research. Through the interviews, we aimed to explore different perspectives and assumptions held by different organisational members around the culture survey. In order to enter the realities of the respondents and understand their perspectives as it is practiced in the interpretive study (Saunders et al., 2009), we have primarily focused on posing "*open questions*" (Saunders et al., 2009, p.337). The openness refers to that we have ensured a free and open conversation by inviting respondents to describe their experiences and give some examples (Saunders et al., 2009, p.337). For example, to explore interviewees' understanding of organisational culture, we simply asked them to describe in their own words what culture meant to them. We also asked some "*probing questions*" in order to obtain additional information or clarification about the ideas respondents shared with us during the interviews (Saunders et al., 2009, p.338). For example, since the researched company has a matrix structure and the reporting process is quite complicated, we asked our interviewees to

elaborate and explain in a clearer way how this process works in practice and who is involved. These follow-up questions helped us to create a full and clear picture of how the communication between managers and employees currently takes place.

Bryman and Bell (2015, p.514) claim: *“The focus group offers the researcher the opportunity to study the ways in which individuals collectively make sense of a phenomenon and construct meanings around it”*. As our objective was to explore how different hierarchical groups give and make sense of organisational reality around a culture survey, we considered adopting focus group interviews that encourage collective, participative sensemaking activities (Bryman & Bell, 2015) to be highly relevant. Moreover, we experienced engaging discussions between participants while they answered the questions and interviewees also assessed, viewed and reflected on ideas expressed by other participants in the group. We see that this in turn positively contributed to the understanding of our researched phenomenon as we uncovered deeper and richer insights about divergently held perceptions, which is one of the benefits also introduced by Saunders et al. (2009). Taking into account that power relations can potentially negatively influence the dynamics and quality of the responses, employees were interviewed in groups separately from the top management (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, Jackson & Jaspersen, 2018). It was a big challenge to organise group interviews with a significant number of interviewees from the top management, which is why we decided to conduct individual interviews with the representatives from the top management. Some were done in person and some via conference call. Overall, we conducted eight individual interviews with members of the management team and three group interviews with employees.

A Human Resource specialist at Chemix kindly assisted us with organising individual interviews with the managers and invited employees to the group discussions. The official invitation to participate in group interviews included a description of the research project and was sent out via corporate e-mail to workers from different departments and functions. The invitation scheme is aligned with *“self-selection sampling”* within which *“...you allow each case, usually individuals, to identify their desire to take part in the research”* (Saunders et al., 2009, p.241). Since the organisation operates in different countries, invitations informed participants that the interviews would take place in their native geographical area, i.e. Finland, Sweden and Latvia.

The reader may inquire as to why these three countries were selected. The organisation's headquarters and the senior top management is located in Finland. As one of the study's authors is Swedish and one is Latvian, each of who relates to the corresponding national culture, Sweden and Latvia were selected for our research as well. Colleagues who work within the same local office and thus know each other moderately well, are believed to be more active, open and honest in discussions (Morgan, 1998). Furthermore, selecting employees that originate from the same country is considered to be "*homogeneous sampling*" (Saunders et al., 2009, p.240). We have observed that this type of sampling enabled respondents to freely relate to each other on the level of national culture, thereby reinforcing productive and deep discussion, which is also affirmed by Morgan (1998, p.64) who states that a fruitful focus group discussion is reached "*by bringing together compatible participants*".

The number of participants who attended our group discussions ranged from four to five people. This is in line with a typical number of respondents in group interviews, which is normally four to eight interviewees, but can of course differ according to the context (Saunders et al., 2009). The group discussions lasted from 45 minutes to 1 hour and 10 minutes, whereas individual interviews went on between 30 minutes to 1 hour and 15 minutes.

As recommended by Bryman and Bell (2015) and Saunders et al. (2009), all individual and group interviews were recorded. Before commencing our interviews, we verbally requested participants' permission to record the sessions to maintain a standard of ethics (Saunders et al., 2009). The possibility to record interviews allowed us to primarily focus on the actual conversation, i.e. ask relevant additional questions, reflect on the given responses, and engage interviewees in the discussion and make observational notes (Bryman & Bell, 2015). We have since transcribed all interviews. As stated by Saunders et al. (2009, p.339): "*The need to create a full record of the interview soon after its occurrence was identified ... as one of the means to control bias and to produce reliable data for analysis*". Despite the process of transcribing took a considerable amount of time, we completed the task shortly after each interview while *what* was said and *how* it was said (emotion, tone of voice, gesticulation) was fresh in our memories (Saunders et al., 2009). This allowed us to ensure that all the valuable empirical data (both verbal and non-verbal)

was recorded and that the general accuracy and reliability of the data was secured, as it is also supported by Saunders et al. (2009). Additionally, we vowed to maintain the anonymity of the company and all interviewees secured so we would be able to store and use a large amount of uncompromised data (Saunders et al., 2009).

## Data Analysis

Once we had collected the empirical data from our interviews, the next step was to systematically structure it in such a way that would crystallise an analytical point within the current organisational culture measurement debate. Thus, we first engaged in “*sorting*” (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018, p.69) and “*reducing*” (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018, p.107) the amount of the data, and lastly used the excerpts to “*argue*” our analytical point in the discussion chapter of the research paper (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018, p.25). We will present these steps in further detail below.

As suggested by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018, p.105) in terms of sorting activities, “*Identifying, highlighting, differentiating and listing different kinds of data leads to order and an overview*”. We undertook these activities during the analysis of our obtained data as well. After conducting all the interviews, we encountered that our obtained empirical material was quite diverse and unstructured due to the length and semi-structured nature of the interviews, so in order to create an order as suggested by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018), sorting and reducing of this material was set as our primary task. We dedicated a considerable amount of time for getting acquainted with the empirical material and discovering the way how to approach it. It is also supported by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018, p.84), who claim that “*Sorting is a way of spending time with the data – a way of dealing with it*”.

As one of our objectives is to explore how different organisational members give and make sense about their perceived organisational realities around the culture survey, we initially decided to outline four main topics: ‘*Sensegiving by management*’, ‘*Sensemaking by employees*’, ‘*Sensegiving by employees*’, and ‘*Sensemaking by management*’. We thought that distribution of the data into these four main topics would have helped us to clearly separate and explore each of the process in details. To visualise the data, we created the table with 4 columns - topics, within which the excerpts were correspondingly distributed. The distribution of excerpts was done

according to the definition of sensemaking and sensegiving that we have presented in the literature review. Thereafter, while carefully investigating the distributed excerpts in terms of “*metaphors*”, “*analogies*” and “*repetitions*”, as well as “*differences*” and “*similarities*” (Ryan & Bernard, 2003, pp.89-91), the relevant themes within each of the major topic have been developed.

However, as we were continuing to investigate the literature on organisational culture and culture measurements, new ideas and analytical points that could potentially be made induced an interest for us in considering our empirical material from a different perspective. Inspired by our new ideas and way to approach the data, we decided to re-sort it. Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018, p.77) also believe that throughout the sorting processes such kind of a situation can take place: “...*an initial sorting does not by any means suggest that it is the last*”. Moreover, these authors also acknowledge the role of the literature: “*Reading up on a new authority...may provide a great energy boost when looking at the data*” (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018, p.85).

So, we started to attentively re-read the empirical material. We were inspired by “*Open Coding*” introduced by Strauss and Corbin (2008, p.195), which implied that the obtained material was “*disaggregated into conceptual units and provided with a label*” (Saunders et al., 2009, p.509; Strauss & Corbin, 2008) as well as encouraged by the literature on the subject that we had lately read. We then proceeded to comment on and assign short summary notes to certain excerpts to indicate their content. As suggested by Strauss and Corbin (2008), we left the similar notes/labels on excerpts with the similar content. Some examples of concepts we used were “*metaphors*”, “*analogies*” and “*repetitions*”, also “*differences*” and “*similarities*” (Ryan & Bernard, 2003, pp.89-91). Notes that were frequently repeated informed the main themes of our research, which occurred to be the following: ‘*Survey as a tool to confirm preconceived notions*’, ‘*Survey as a tool to voice the opinion*’, ‘*Survey as a pulse checker*’, ‘*Survey as a voting*’, ‘*The rational view on the organisation*’, ‘*Socially constructed view on the organisation*’, ‘*Linear reasoning about culture outcomes*’, ‘*Non-linear reasoning about culture outcomes*’, ‘*Culture as an instrumental measurement*’, ‘*Inclusive discussion as a part of good culture*’. Thereafter, we recognised the relationships between the derived categories, as a result of which we were able to develop a “*core category*”, or more precisely two of such kind of categories (Strauss & Corbin, 2008, p.263). So, we finally arrived at following two major topics, within which the initial categories were

distributed: *'The culture survey as a tool'* and *'Understanding organisational life around the survey'*.

As some of the excerpts with differing contents have not found their relevance in our research, we have neglected this empirical data and thus applied the step of *"reduction"* of the material (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018, p.107). As argued by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018), because of the limited opportunities for introducing all the findings in the research paper, prioritising some parts of the material and deciding what should be presented and analysed is a crucial step.

In general, we have performed an abductive study (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). According to Alvesson and Sköldberg (2018, p.5), this method implies that the acquired qualitative data is considered to be an initial foundation of the subsequent analysis (as it is in case of *"induction"*); however, it does not exclude the possibility of referring to established theories and concepts (which is more related to *"deduction"*) (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018, p.5). In our research paper, the sensegiving and sensemaking approach applied throughout the analysis and discussion of the empirical material enabled us to consider the culture measurement tool from a different perspective, thereby acting *"as a source of inspiration for the discovery of patterns that bring understanding"* (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018, p.5).

In the findings chapter, we aimed to introduce the empirical material in a coherent way, as a result of which we were inspired by the *"excerpt-commentary unit"* style of presenting the material, as suggested by Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (1995, p.182). This means that our presentation and analysis of each of the topic consists of four steps (Emerson et al., 1995). Initially, we start our analysis by outlining the topic of our interest, for example, employees' consideration of the survey as an opportunity to voice their opinions, thereby introducing the *"analytic point"* (Emerson et al., 1995, p.182). Then we make an introductory statement to the subsequent quote, thus suggesting the *"orienting information"* (Emerson et al., 1995, p.182), which is followed by the actual quote, that is, the *"excerpt"* (Emerson et al., 1995, p.182). Lastly, we elaborate on the discussion and analysis of the specific topic based on the quote introduced, which is called *"analytic commentary"* (Emerson et al., 1995, p.183).

In the discussion chapter, when using our findings and the insights from the culture measurement literature, we “*argue with or against other authorities...*” (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018, p.25). Namely, one of the objectives of the discussion part is to criticise some aspects of the Culture Measurement literature and make our contribution to it. We accomplish this with the help of our empirical material underpinned by the relevant sensemaking/ sensegiving literature.

## Considerations related to the Quality of data and Reflexivity

In order to acquire data of high quality, one must carry out thoughtful preparation for interviews (Saunders et al., 2009). This was a crucial step that we devoted a lot of effort to. Even before we planned the interviews we emerged ourselves in the Organisational Culture and Culture Measurement literature to understand how the study may be of value to the academic community. Additionally, we carefully analysed the survey content and results of the DOCS that Chemix had conducted in 2018 in order to get an idea about how subgroups had responded. In our view, our preparation aided our capability of understanding what interviewees might be referring to in their organisational reality and also enabled us to ask participants to clarify their accounts by asking follow-up questions. Demonstrating our knowledge about the company, situation and the culture survey helped us to create an engaging and sincere atmosphere that facilitated deeper discussion of our topic of interest, as it is also suggested by Saunders et al. (2009).

We were also aware of the argument of Tucker, McCoy and Evans (1990) that qualitative investigation of culture can be seen as intrusive and requiring special social skills. Keeping this knowledge in mind, we also devoted special attention to presenting clearly formulated and understandable questions to the interviewees and exerted “*a neutral tone of voice*” (Saunders et al., 2009, p.332). We pursued this neutrality to “*reduce the scope for bias during the interview and increase the reliability of the information obtained*” (Saunders et al., 2009, pp.331-332). All the transcripts were carefully analysed and interpreted during several joint meetings between both of the authors. Furthermore, we were aware that our individually held national cultures had a limiting possibility of influencing our interpretation of the data (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Saunders et al., 2009), but mitigated this through continuous critical discussion with each other, as being inspired by Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2018). Since one of the authors is Swedish and the other one is Latvian, it was decided that the authors would interview managers from their

respective countries so that we would further mitigate conceivable cultural interpretation bias (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Saunders et al., 2009). We especially paid attention to analytically approach the transcripts from the interviews conducted in Finland with caution due to the fact that none of us are deeply acquainted with the Finnish national culture.

We also acknowledged a potential risk in relation to influencing our data since one of the authors has family connections in the studied organisation. The potential hazard was that the author might influence the family member's perceptions of their organisational reality through private conversations. However, we attempted to mitigate this risk by being highly reflexive, aware of risks and cautiously engaging in private discussions throughout the whole process of writing the research (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018; Mason, 2002).

In order to minimise the risk of bias in the interpretation phase of the research, Alvesson and Sköldberg (2018) encourage researchers to be highly reflective and reflexive of numerous aspects within the conducted research. "*Reflection can... be defined as the interpretation of interpretation and the launching of a critical self-exploration of one's own interpretations of empirical material...*" (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018, p.11). Researchers are highly encouraged to carefully acknowledge throughout the analysis of the obtained data "*perceptual, cognitive, theoretical, linguistic, (inter)textual, political and cultural circumstances that form the backdrop to...the interpretations*" (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018, p.11), which otherwise might lead to serious biases in the interpretation of the acquired data (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). We believe that our distinct cultural, social, educational and professional backgrounds have positively impacted our abilities for critical reflection with regard to problematising and challenging deeply rooted assumptions and perceptions held by each other. In line with Alvesson and Sköldberg (2018) and Mason (2002), these factors support the strength of our analysis, as high levels of reflexivity are enacted through questioning each other's preconceived notions with respect to theoretical knowledge, experience, perceptions of the data collection process and approaches to different perspectives. Our reflexive approach to the research enabled us to consider not only what was directly stated by our respondents, but also recognise the underlying meanings, assumptions and perceptions held by different organisational members at Chemix.

# FINDINGS

## Introduction

Our research endeavour is primarily interested in the conflicting thought processes and assumptions held by managers and employees who attempt to give and make sense of their perceived reality around an organisational culture survey. Our aim in this chapter is to feature these identified tensions on different hierarchical levels in order to empirically show what lies beyond the figures of an organisational culture survey. The chapter shows not only how groups and individuals come to terms with what is going on, but also how the survey and its subsequent discussion of results become a critical focal point of the organisation's interpretative processes.

The following sections of this chapter will outline how managers and employees perceive culture surveys as a tool as well as how they see organisational life around the survey. We will commence by introducing the reader to specifics of the culture survey that was used, namely the Denison Organisational Culture Survey, and the multinational chemical company that our research is based on. Sequentially, we will present a number of excerpts from interviews we held individually with members of the top management team as well as in groups with lower level employees. The excerpts will touch on topics such as change, opinions, national culture, communication, intercultural understanding, employee agency, management ideals, trust, causal relationships, numerical development, unity and power.

## DOCS at Chemix

The Denison Organisational Culture Survey (hereafter referred to as DOCS) is a measurement tool that claims to measure organisational culture in accordance with “*mission, adaptability, involvement and consistency*”, i.e. four distinct dimensions that allegedly foster organisational effectiveness and high performance (Denison Consulting, n.d.a). One of the originators of DOCS is Daniel R. Denison who was formerly a Professor of Management and Organization at the International Institute for Management Development (IMD) in Lausanne, Switzerland (Denison

Consulting, n.d.b) and is accredited as the father of the ‘strong culture’ hypothesis (Denison, 1984). DOCS is classified as a profiling, effectiveness instrument and provides clients with a numeric evaluation of their current cultural situation (Denison, Nieminen & Kotrba, 2014). According to Denison, the most effective organisations exhibit high results in all dimensions, thus displaying ‘full’ culture profiles (Denison Consulting, n.d.a). The aggregated DOCS results offer clients an overview of important strategic questions, such as *“Does your team understand your mission and where you’re headed?”* and etc. (Denison Consulting, n.d.a). These results can then be compared and benchmarked to other organisational culture profiles from around the globe (Denison Consulting, n.d.a).

The subject of our study is Chemix, an industrial chemical supplier that provides customers with various industrial chemicals. The company is family owned and over 100 years old. Headquartered in Finland, it has subsidiaries in Scandinavia, Baltics, Ukraine, Belarus and India. The organisation operates under a matrix structure which is separated into four core business units and six supporting functions. Each business unit operates internationally, meaning that colleagues are geographically dispersed and managed by a business unit director and an assistant manager. Each geographical area is also supervised by a local area coordinator, which at times complicates the chain of command and distribution of responsibilities.

Chemix’s management team conducted DOCS for the first time in 2015 with administrative assistance from Denison Consulting. The survey was administered digitally to all employees in the organisation and was available in English, Swedish, Finnish and Russian. Since then, the survey has been repeated once in 2016 and once in 2018. As we were about to commence our research, Chemix had just received the DOCS results for 2018 (see Appendix 1).

The comparison of results for the 2018 DOCS round showed quite diverse results among the international subsidiaries according to geography - specifically between Scandinavia and other geographical areas. Scandinavians responded unfavourably to the dimensions of *“Involvement”* i.e. *“concerns the personal engagement of individuals within the organization...”* and *“Adaptability”* meaning *“employees’ ability to understand what the customer wants, to learn new skills, and to change in response to demand”* (Denison, Nieminen & Kotrba, 2014, p.151). At the

same time, Belarus and Ukraine responded that Chemix was near perfect in all dimensions. Having expected with great certainty the results to improve in all regions in 2018, the irregular results were perceived to be quite surprising and perplexing to management. One manager expressed their bewilderment like this: *“The company is managed in the similar way. And still the experience in Sweden is pretty much different compared to, for example, Baltic countries, or even to Finland”* (interview, manager). The management team expressed their intention to investigate the results and dig deeper into the problem, but also saw value in the research we conducted to investigate what was going on at Chemix. The DOCS results were first presented by Denison Consulting to Chemix’s top management team, then relayed to lower level employees in person by Chemix’s managing director. Finally, the results were discussed collectively in the various offices.

Our group interviews with lower level employees revealed quite contentious feedback and feelings in relation to the processes around this organisational culture survey. Throughout the interviews, the employees clearly manifested feelings of frustration, annoyance, discouragement and cynicism. Some of illustrative examples are presented below:

“[Interviewer]: But if we all just imagine that you get an email and it’s about the culture survey, it says please fill it in, what is your first thought?  
[Respondent]: Oh my God, not again.” (group interview, employees)

“I cannot feel that the survey somehow changes my life or working experience here. So, it is just to get our opinion... Maybe some miracle will happen next time.” (group interview, employees)

“I received no reply on my offer how to change something, I think that it's just waste of time, because there is no reaction.” (group interview, employees)

## The culture survey as a tool

In this section we introduce a comparison of how managers and employees make and give sense about the organisational culture survey. We present contrasting narratives and perceptions about the purpose of the survey, which varies between management and employees.

### Confirming preconceived notions vs. Voicing of opinions

When asked about the purpose of conducting the DOCS, managers proposed the idea that the survey could be used as a tool to confirm managers' preconceived notions about what was going on in the company.

“...it was my idea about five years ago that we should measure the company's culture because this should be more agile, we should be quicker in changes and we should be more customer-oriented than we were. And also, one part of this culture survey is understanding vision and strategy of the company, and I also knew that quite many people in our company come to work and they don't actually know and understand how the whole part of the work is related to the strategy or the vision of the company. And then we started to measure that, is it true that our people don't understand our strategy, and is it true that we are not so quick in making changes and do we not listen to our customers well enough?...It was the main idea behind measuring of company culture that we should be able to make changes a little bit quicker than we were or that we are also doing today.” (interview, manager)

It seems that this manager has a preconceived notion about the current state of organisation's culture based on their own individual interpretation and assumptions. The manager's understanding of the situation is that it does not live up to expectation in terms of environmental agility, strategic orientation and employees' comprehension of the organisation's direction. The use of the word 'should' in the excerpt, indicates a desire to live up to external ideals, as it is used in conjunction with contemporary buzz words like 'agile' and 'customer orientation'. In this

respect, the survey is seen to function as a diagnostic tool and serve to confirm the accuracy of the manager's preconceived notions. When utilised in this way, managers gain a material justification of their beliefs, but lose out on the opportunity of letting the survey results inform and deepen their perception of organisational reality, and more specifically, organisational culture. This use of the culture survey reflects a fairly instrumental and diagnostic perspective of organisational culture.

Employees, on the other hand, expressed another purpose of the survey from their point of view. They maintained that responding to the culture survey was a way of making their voice and opinions heard. Their ambition was to reply to the survey in such a way that it triggered cultural development efforts and actions to address the problems they perceived within the company.

“Yeah, I see also that way that there is the place to say your opinion and not like complaint behind someone's back, or also if you answer the survey, there is your chance to influence.” (group interview, employees)

According to this employee, the survey is perceived as an official invitation, extended by management to the employees, to openly voice their opinions, complaints and suggestions. The excerpt connotes that the survey is a forum to proclaim opinions that are otherwise not accepted in daily organisational life. Moreover, the act of voicing one's opinion through the survey is seen as morally superior to complaining “*behind someone's back*”. Correspondingly, the “*chance to influence*” implies that respondents see the survey as an opportunity to initiate change within the organisation.

However, it seems that not all employees approach the survey in the same way. Throughout our interviews with management representatives, a common theme revolved around the influence of national cultures on organisational culture, and the survey results in general. One manager articulated the following:

“But they have their cultural differences. I think that cultural differences maybe is one reason that impacts how people react. Because I think that in the Baltic countries, people are used to what they are to do. But in Scandinavia perhaps people are expecting more discussion and

understanding of what they think and how it could be done together, not just come and say that ‘okay, this is the way how you should be working in the future’. Perhaps the way of putting these things is not working.”  
(interview, manager)

The manager recognises that the effect distinct national cultures can have on an organisation’s own internal culture is quite substantial. In her example, she differentiates between her impression of the compliant Baltic culture versus the consensus-seeking Scandinavian culture. Although these perceptions coincide with Chemix’s 2018 results, wherein Scandinavians conceived significantly lower results than, for example, the Baltics, it does not seem that the manager is keen on responding to these differences. In fact, the manager concedes that her approach to culture initiatives may not be operational in reality, but does not offer any pledge to act in a different way. It is concerning as the approach suggests a passive, singular, simplistic approach to a context that is evidently diverse and complex.

Employees seem to be distraught by management’s approach to culture and the survey results. In their view, communication from the headquarters in Finland comes in the form of restrictive monologue, devoid of consideration for national culture differences.

“I mean, we work together as a team and bla, bla, bla. But are they really listening to our ideas? Or is it just Finland's ideas? I mean, so it's just words. I mean, they don't use it in the daily work. Because we are always told how to do things. And in the past, we have done so many changes where I work in [name of the business unit], and not always to the best. But who's listening to that?” (group interview, employees)

The excerpt shows disbelief and low trust towards management in Finland, suggesting that there is not only a geographical distance between the two parties, but also a hierarchical one. The interviewee feels that employees ideas and suggestions fall on deaf ears and are not taken into consideration on an operational level. Instead, the management favour their own ideas.

Nonetheless, some middle managers at Chemix recognise this tension and have taken this matter into own hands and approached their team in the following way:

“And then for me also, I decided to have two different mini teams, the one which was the Finnish mini team and then another one was Scandinavian mini team, because the reality is different and then there are some kind of physical barriers, which prevent your open discussion.” (group interview, middle manager)

This approach suggests that the manager is actively aware of national culture differences between the factions of his team and thereby engages with employees in different ways, adjusting his approach to each international subsidiary. Our multiple interviews both with managers and employees (including the excerpts presented here) have revealed to us top management’s adherence to the diagnostic approach to culture that assumes that one approach to all employees in an international organisation is sufficient. In reality, top managers forego the prospect of fostering intercultural understanding between various sub-groups, subcultures and embedded national cultures existing within the organisation. Complex contexts demand an understanding of how things work in other countries, continuous interaction across borders and a thorough awareness of how people in different nations hold particular beliefs, values and norms.

### Pulse checker vs. Voting

As we probed further about how the culture survey could be used to fulfill the intended purpose, managers introduced the perception of the survey as a pulse checker.

“So, I don't see that the culture survey is really like a measurement... it's a pulse of the situation of the company’s corporate culture what we're trying to measure. It's not really measuring themselves, they're just giving an input, based on what we are measuring the status of the culture within the organisation at a given time.” (interview, manager)

Pulse checking is a metaphor from the medical discourse, which implies that the survey is seen to act as a tool for capturing a temporary situation or status of the culture. The interviewee then assumes that ‘the situation’ or ‘corporate culture’ is something that moves, changes or develops on a continuous basis. The culture survey is thus an instrument that can grant managers a snapshot of this living thing. It is significant that this manager seems to think that culture is separate from the lived experience of the respondents, as he states their task is to describe something that is external to them. It somehow implies that employees do not have agency in the co-creation of culture.

At the same time, a contrasting metaphor of ‘voting’ was introduced by employees in the inquiry about how the culture survey could be used to fulfill their intended purpose. They considered their participation in the survey as a deliberate act of exercising employee agency to gain direct influence on important matters within the company.

“Exactly. It's like with voting. You have to do it to be able to give your voice... And you are allowed to complain. That's the carrot [laugh].” (group interview, employees)

The quote clearly shows that the employees’ view of their role in the culture measurement process is at odds with the management’s. *Voting* implies that the survey and its subsequent follow-up discussions and actions are based on democratic principles, meaning that sovereignty is located at the lowest levels of hierarchy and that all people’s views, thoughts, concerns are heard and accepted (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019). However, this perception of the culture survey may not hold in reality as the managers in the organisation are not elected nor obliged to exercise the will of the people (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019). Moreover, the interviewees allude to not being permitted to complain outside of the context of the survey. It is unclear whether this restriction is imposed by the management or employees themselves, but the opportunity to voice unfavourable opinions is regarded as an external motivator to responding to the survey. All in all, each party has their own assumptions about what organisational culture is, and chooses to use the survey instrument accordingly. In the next section, we will further explore these discrepant assumptions.

## Understanding organisational life around the survey

In the following section, we demonstrate the contrasting assumptions and views on organisational reality held by managers and employees at Chemix, outlining how these affect relationships and communication between these organisational members. We aim to present the tensions that arise from interaction between groups who hold fundamentally divergent perceptions of organisational reality.

### The rational vs. socially constructed organisation

One of our first interviews with members of the management team clearly indicated that they held a quite rational view of organisational culture, especially with regards to expectations.

“Because even if people are satisfied, we still had a feeling that people are not... The organisation is not behaving everywhere like we wanted it to behave. And we saw that there were the conflicts and tensions, we saw that there was not a perfect collaboration in all parts of the organisation, so we wanted to analyse that in a more structured way.” (interview, manager)

As seen in this excerpt, the manager perceives the organisation as a single entity that is deviating from his ideals. The symbolic use of the phrase “*we wanted it to behave*” connotes that the organisation is likened to an inferior being such as a child or a pet whose obligation is to act according to its superior’s desires. Moreover, the use of the word ‘perfect’ captures an intense desire to live up to these presumed ideals. The manager expresses an awareness of what is going on in the organisation, but is inclined to inspect the problems according to rational principles.

Similarly, the management team’s approach to interpreting and discussing survey results with the subsidiaries was structured and presented in a logical fashion.

“So we have gone through the results not only in areas, but also then in business units. So, I think that we have been spending quite a bit of time

on this, and, as I said, there's always room for improvement, but I think that we have been trying to communicate and discuss with people and interact with people sufficiently.” (interview, manager)

This manager understands interaction in a way that relates to requirements and standards. He affirms that he has shared the results with *all* geographical offices and *all* business units. He then confidently conveys his perception that he has invested a considerable amount of resources, in this case time, in discussing the results and listening to others’ opinions. Furthermore, the interviewee justifies the amount of interaction he has engaged in by appraising it has reached an adequate level. From a rational perspective, the quote describes a straightforward, unbiased, methodical account of organisational reality, in which the manager lives up to expectations.

Nonetheless, when approached from a different angle, the concept of organisational culture can take on distinctly different meanings and yield discordant interpretations of reality. One employee painted an alternate picture of Chemix’s reality by affectionately voicing their discontentment with managers’ aloofness around the DOCS.

“Why do they want to do it each year - if they don't listen to us? I mean, I don't know, but we are such good, we are so good people. Really good people and good teams and we get along well and do our best. Everybody's doing their best and work as idiots, but they need to understand that, and need to somehow trust our ideas and take it in and, I mean. It's difficult to explain in English.” (group interview, employees)

This interviewee interprets managers’ dialectic as distrust towards employees’ accounts of organisational reality. The excerpt suggests that social exchange between managers and employees is hindered by divergently held views of organisational reality and that these are not sought to be converged. The employee demonstrates that language barriers are a prime example of how different views of reality can be misconstrued. Moreover, the employee fails to make sense of why the culture survey is repeated year after year, if culture initiatives are not based on discussions grounded in a collective, social reality. Here we clearly see that the employees’ deep-seated

assumptions about the nature of organisational culture is rooted in social construction, which is disputes rationalism.

### Presumptive reasoning about culture outcomes

Throughout the interviews we conducted, we got an inclination that some managers drew conclusions about culture effectiveness based on fairly linear reasoning, i.e. that management efforts directly lead to high scores on the culture survey, which in turn reflects high organisational effectiveness. Consider the following quote:

“... but I think that we have been succeeding pretty well when it comes to communicating values, because when you look at all the results of our culture surveys, so the perception of how people see how well we walk the talk when it comes to values, so it has increased every year in the past three years or four years, so I think that we have done a pretty good job there”  
(interview, manager)

The quote makes inferences about the management team’s effectiveness (“*how well we walk the talk*”) based on the annually improving results which are accredited to management’s communication activities (“*communicating the values*”). The manager’s logic is absent of considerations that changes in the results and employee perceptions could be the product of other factors such as turnover, financial stability or management styles.

Employees seem to disagree with this point and make the case for that management actions do not lead to higher results or organisational effectiveness in such a linear fashion. Their responses show that one does not necessarily trigger the other in every context.

“You have the survey, and then to say okay, results are better, they are good there. Fine. Let's see what we get next year, when we don't have any plan how to develop this or to improve the results.” (group interview, employees)

As we understand the statement, managers must acknowledge that numerical improvement of survey results does not necessarily equal confirmation that employees will keep producing positive results. It became clear in this quote that employees from geographical areas and business units that typically scored highly on all culture dimensions in survey, were also expecting some sort of development agenda to maintain an effective organisational culture in the years to come. The quotes highlight contrasting conclusions drawn based on the past for the prediction of the future. In general, employees seemed to focus more on planning for future culture outcomes than managers who attempted to make sense of past events.

### Instrumental measurement vs. inclusive discussion

The use of measurement instruments encourages managers to see reality in a linear way. One member of the management team voiced his assumptions that the subject of measurement, in this case organisational culture, should develop in a quantifiable way between certain time intervals.

“And once you start with the survey, you want to repeat that, because then you want to see the development, how the culture or whatever you would be measuring is developing.” (interview, manager)

Overall, this quote highlights the common perception that the culture survey is an appropriate technical instrument to capture what is going on in the organisation. The assumption here is that anything an organisation seeks out to measure should according to the manager’s expectations develop over time. According to this perception, development should manifest itself physically year-on-year so it can be graphically compared and contrasted to previous outcomes. In this, the manager neglects to apprehend that culture can develop relationally in a way that perhaps is not numerically explicit. It discounts the social facets of culture in terms to how organisational members interact and affect culture.

The employees’ approach to organisational culture and the culture survey, however, is more geared towards social interaction and relationships. Throughout the group interviews we conducted, the common thread among the groups was a sincere commitment to the idea that open discussions

following the presentation of survey results would yield an opportunity to foster understanding between managers and employees in terms of assumptions, beliefs and perceived realities.

“The important thing is not the question or what you reply, it's what you want to discuss. So I think these things, it's unifying the group, it might be right or wrong but it's important that we sit and discuss it, and we take a little bit step in the right direction.” (group interview, employees)

“Yeah, it's more important to discuss... So you can explain yourself in a better way and you can also have feedback - what they are thinking. You make yourself understand better.” (group interview, employees)

Employees see the survey as a way to start a dialogue with management so that all members of Chemix have an opportunity to contribute with their thoughts, meanings and views towards a collective reality. They acknowledge that views and perceptions of organisational reality can differ between hierarchical levels, which is why they stress the importance of open communication, discourse and collaboration. The cultural development they desire presents itself through unity, transparency and compassion, which are perhaps more difficult to linearly quantify. They believe these are the superior outcomes of organisational culture compared to numeric improvements on a chart.

In terms of engagement, one manager hinted that the reality of Chemix's cultural situation may be difficult to grasp because many employees do not take time or opportunity to reflect about the organisation's culture. He expressed his frustration over previous attempts to engage with employees to uncover their opinions about culture, but that he was instead left with mere pleasantries. Hence, in this quote, the survey is seen as a means for making people think.

“Because if you ask how do you feel, people will most often say that everything's fine, but this survey really forces people to think about what's going on in the organisation.” (interview, manager)

The interviewee assumes that asking employees for their opinion face-to-face does not yield deeper reflection or honesty. In response to employees' passiveness, the manager therein justifies his reasoning for 'forcing' people to think about an issue. He sees the survey as a quick-fix reflective practice as a means to determine the organisation's status. In a way, the quote illustrates how managers hierarchically use measurement tools to coerce employees to achieve a certain outcome.

Employees, on the other hand, collectively identify their perception of mutual engagement in the development of organisational culture from a different point of view. In the group interviews, a substantial amount of employees indicated that the top management team were not inclined to listen to the ideas expressed by the staff.

“Also, the last time when [name of manager] was here presenting, he asked for reasons for the answers, and when the reasons came, at least I felt it was quite defensive...or more than defensive sometimes. And if we then speak about being open minded, or having input and doing something about it, this was a little bit “no, no”. And then it's difficult to see that there will be a change in one direction or another.” (group interview, employees)

As we see here, the interviewee expressed considerable doubts about whether the management team was interested in the employees' ideas, concerns and contentions, as their contributions were met with confrontation. One could suggest that employee voices were suppressed when they deviated from the structured reality the survey results presented. This idea is perhaps a natural consequence of the coercion expressed by a manager in the previous excerpt. The implication of these power dynamics is that managers who adopt an instrumental approach to culture may (directly or inadvertently) suppress and discourage employees' views of reality. This leads to a decrease in the amount of clarity employees have about the strategic direction of a company. As we identified in the very beginning of this chapter, the purpose of conducting the culture survey was to improve employees' understanding about the organisation's direction. In this instance, we see that conducting the DOCS was detrimental to that aim.

## Chapter Summary

Managers and employees at Chemix held different views about what was going on in their organisation. We attribute this divergence in understanding to organisational members' differing perceptions and assumptions underlying organisational reality and on their approach to the survey as a tool. Our findings suggest that these discrepancies made it difficult for both parties to collectively establish a common perception of organisational reality, thereby hindering meaning alignment and collective participation which are the components of strong culture. More specifically, the existence of these tensions in combination with an incomplete understanding of the opposite party's rationale, lead members of the organisation to express a great deal of cynicism, frustration and confusion. Although several interviewees interpreted the situation at Chemix in slightly different ways, we will synthesise the dominant views in this final section to illustrate how managers and employees make and give sense about an organisational culture survey and organisational life around it.

Managers approached the culture survey from an instrumental and diagnostic perspective. In terms of expectations, managers presumed that organisational culture would develop in a numerically significant way on an annual basis. This assumption proved to neglect the possibility that culture can develop relationally in a way that is not always numerically explicit. This led them to inspect the ongoing situation according to dialectic principles with the aim of affirming their preconceived notions about reality. In general, the instrumental perspective of organisational culture prohibited managers from attaining a deeper understanding about the forces that were behind the results. For example, one manager saw the culture survey through the metaphor of a pulse-checker, implying that the survey captured a snapshot of something external to the lived experiences of employees. This perspective erred in considering that employee agency and intention could be a driver behind the current results. Another manager justified their attempts to coerce employees into engaging with organisational culture, but discounted that the use of power suppressed employees' contrasting views of reality. Furthermore, managers seemed unconcerned by the prospect that external variables could affect the relationship between culture, survey scores and effectiveness. For instance, when a rational, singular and simplistic approach was taken to managing culture in a complex and diverse context, managers forwent the prospect of learning about how people in different nations operate according to different beliefs, values and norms. In fact, managers were

so convinced that their interactions with employees fulfilled the requirements and standards of a rational approach, that it led the managerial team to believe that their efforts were enough and that the survey results gave them a full picture of reality.

As the excerpts showed however, employees found that managers did not live up to their ideals. The critique towards management was based on employees' assumption that culture initiatives should stay close to participative interpretation and discussion, which is in line with the social constructivist perspective of organisational culture. Employees acknowledged that multiple realities existed and were held within the company. With this, employees rather deliberately utilised the survey to influence managers' perception of reality by communicating their views, complaints and opinions. Their aim was ultimately to trigger cultural change within the organisation. Employees deemed open dialogue to be the best approach to aligning divergent perceptions into a collective awareness of reality. Moreover, the lower level employees rejected the existence of a symmetrical relationship between organisational culture, survey scores and organisational effectiveness. They demonstrated that high scores were not necessarily linked to satisfaction with management's actions by expressing frustration and confusion over the lack of survey follow-up. Overall, employees felt discouraged about continuing to raise their voice and conveyed confusion about the direction of the company.

In the next chapter, we will explore what these identified tensions mean for the Culture Measurement literature and how an aligned perception of reality can be achieved if organisations approach the culture survey from a participative, discussion-based sensemaking and sensegiving perspective.

# DISCUSSION

## Introduction

Our empirical material shows that the acts of administering, completing and reviewing results from an organisational culture survey can lead to internal tensions between hierarchical levels. We draw the conclusion that the attempt to measure culture in a meaningful way, that captures multiple facets of organisational life, is not straightforward or uncomplicated. The road to an accurate diagnosis of culture is riddled with obstacles like national culture, employee intentions, desire for change and competing perceptions of reality.

In this chapter, we will present the implications of our findings to the reader, both in terms of literature and practice. The first half of the discussion will explain what the identified tensions mean for the Culture Measurement literature. In that, we argue that the diagnostic approach to culture surveys do not deliver what they promise, do not identify some crucial aspects of organisational culture, and in different ways further mislead managers who use them. With regard to our first research question, we hold that employees' perceptions of reality are not sufficiently taken into account when managers interpretation of organisational reality is based on diagnostic measurement. Thus, managers should thus exert caution when using culture surveys by being attentive and reflexive. The second half of the discussion directs attention to the alternate possibilities for culture improvement that culture surveys present. We argue, referring back to our second research question, that conducting a culture measurement survey *does* offer members of an organisation an opportunity to give and make sense about organisational reality if it is approached as a reflective practice. We do this by empirically identifying the ways in which sense was given and made at Chemix. Furthermore, we propose that the prospect for discussion-based, participative interpretation and meaning alignment may surmount the benefits of obtaining a culture dimension profile, because the social interactions it brings about are consensual, inclusive and firmly planted in a collectively established organisational reality.

## The fallacy of measurement tools

Starting from an ontological point of origin, the culture measurement literature claims that organisational culture is an ‘it’ (Schein, 1985), which implies that culture is something an organisation has rather than something an organisation is (Smircich, 1983). It assumes that culture can be measured when “*the focus is on the observable and measurable manifestations of culture, such as values and behavioural norms*” (Ashkanasy, Broadfoot & Falkus, 2000, p.132). These numeric measurements can then be compared, contrasted and benchmarked against other organisational cultures to give managers an indication of how ‘strong’ their culture is (Denison, Nieminen & Kotrba, 2014). Although this positivist perception of organisational culture is the dominant in literature, our research shows that this is not exclusively held by all members within organisations. Our study featured one manager (p.40) who described the culture survey as an instrument that shows a snapshot of a living thing that is separate from the lived experience of the respondents. Using the survey as a medical device assumes that the state of culture can and should be benchmarked to standardised parameters to assess the level of “health”. Conversely, an employee used the metaphor of ‘voting’ (p.41) as an approach to filling in the culture survey. Using the survey as a ballot assumes that organisational culture is a subjective referendum.

We argue that the limitation of making the ontological assumption that culture is an ‘it’, and that ‘it’ can be measured and compared, is that it fails to acknowledge that others may have different interpretations of what culture and “*strong/healthy*” culture is. When managers and employees make assumptions about organisational reality that are rooted in separate ontologies, they find it difficult to make sense of each others’ actions and reasonings. It leaves both levels of the hierarchy in a state of confusion, grappling to make sense. Moreover, the ontological tension begs several questions. Are manifestations of culture observable and measurable in cases when culture is considered to be perception-based and socially-constructed? To what degree of certainty can a culture profile be compared and benchmarked when organisational members can not come to terms with what culture is? To what extent can external variables affecting organisational culture stay constant if culture is socially constructed? These are questions that culture measurement scholars like Ashkanasy, Broadfoot and Falkus (2000) and Denison, Nieminen and Kotrba (2014) must consider.

With regard to observable and measurable manifestations of culture, our next topic of discussion revolves around how well culture surveys are able to capture organisational culture. According to DOCS promotional material, administering the survey allows managers to “*Identify areas of cultural strength and weakness*” and “*Troubleshoot points of internal friction*” (Denison Consulting, n.d.a). Ouchi and Price (1978) proclaim that culture surveys that feature Likert scales are able to clearly distinguish successful organisations from unsuccessful ones. We dispute these arguments as we believe the elements of organisational culture that culture surveys are able to assess are too shallow to make inferences about organisational culture as a whole. Survey results are not able to describe the complexity which encapsulates organisational life. We see culture surveys as problematic in their endeavour to fulfil their own promises.

Our research shows that diagnostic culture measurement tools like DOCS do not capture some critical and moderately observable aspects of organisational life that impact organisational culture. For instance, one manager in our study justified his decision to ‘*force people to think*’ (p.46) through the act of measuring culture, while an employee chronicled how another manager had become confrontational and defensive (p.47) during the discussion of the survey results. Our study demonstrates that social interaction around a survey can impact how employees understand social dynamics, and thereby organisational culture. A standardised culture survey that presents normative, predetermined ‘effectiveness’ statements to its respondents thus lacks the meta-reflective capacity to identify *cultural strengths and weaknesses* and *troubleshoot internal points of friction* in its immediate organisational context. In this case, the culture survey was not able to capture the power dynamics (coercion and domination) that guided organisational culture initiatives like the DOCS. Furthermore, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, the DOCS did not have the capacity to capture underlying assumptions and expectations held by administrators and respondents (p.37-38), or the effect that national culture and subcultures had on the survey results (p.38-39). We hold that organisational culture surveys do not necessarily live up to their advertised promises and do not adequately describe organisational culture in its richness, complexity and multifaceted nature.

Thirdly, Hofstede et al. (1990) and Denison, Nieminen and Kotrba (2014) have through their research set forth that rational, dialectic measurement instruments and culture initiatives are

superior to qualitative, constructivist methods of uncovering organisational culture. They indicate that rational measurements will reflect a more operative reality because the instruments are rooted in perceived practices (Hofstede et al., 1990). We argue that this rational perspective of organisational culture is problematic because it fails to consider perspectives that fall outside of traditional, scientific logic. In line with our argument, Swidler (1986) holds that rationality hinders organisational members from conceiving that culture initiatives can take place outside the realm of scientific principles and logic. This then regulates which actions, patterns of cooperation and modes of authority that are plausible and imaginable (Swidler, 1986).

Managers, in particular, who assume a singular, rational view of organisational culture are in jeopardy of overlooking alternate ways of achieving their managerial ideals. For example, the manager who felt that the organisation was not behaving like we wanted it to behave (p.42) was inclined to analyse the situation in a structured, dialectic way rather than focusing on engaging in discussions with employees. Employees argued that the members of the organisation *did* behave exemplary and that the perceived aloofness from managers was grounded in distrust towards employees' accounts of organisational reality (p.43). Our findings indicate that the rational approach to organisational culture lacks consideration for how others may understand one's own reasons and initiatives as insufficient. We stand firm with the notion that those who adopt a social constructivist stance, may at the very least apprehend the *possibility* that others hold separate perceptions of organisational reality and thus can conceive and identify tensions between these different ideas within a social context.

Our fourth point approaches the problematic principles of instrumentality. In line with an instrumental approach to organisational culture, the culture measurement literature assumes that cultures are malleable and should be designed in a systematic way that are useful to managers (Alvesson & Berg, 1992). It also presumes that cultural problems should be solved with appropriate technical means, scientific knowledge and/or professional technique (Schön, 1987). Our study revealed that adopting an instrumental approach to measuring culture came at the expense of deeply understanding organisational culture.

According to one of the managers in our study, a key reason for repeating the survey annually was that it was expected that culture would develop every year (p.45). This inclined the manager to use the culture survey to fixate on numerical accuracy and visible, linear development of that which was measured in order to understand the emerging results. With this approach, the manager neglected to accept the employees' bid to foster understanding, reconcile beliefs and share perceived realities through collective meaning-making (p.46). Feldman and March (1981) attribute this fixation to Enlightenment ideals in the Western world where *information* is appreciated for what it symbolises (i.e. rationality, ideas, reliability) rather than what it actually says about an organisation. Consequently, the problem with the instrumental approach to measuring culture is that it blinds managers to the opportunity of capturing what is really going on beyond the figures. In the words of Schein (1985, p.60), "*If members of a group hold widely divergent concepts of what to look for and how to evaluate results, they cannot develop coordinated remedial action*". We argue that certain improvements within organisational culture, like the quality of relationships, are not always graphically measurable, but it does not mean that culture has not improved. Rather, managers must embrace to the possibility culture can develop in deep, organic, non-purposive ways outside the realm of instrumentality and rationality.

Finally, there are many culture measurement products that promise lofty outcomes of conducting surveys (Cameron & Quinn, 1999; Denison Consulting, n.d.a). Nevertheless, as Cameron and Quinn (1999) stated in their book about diagnosing cultures, that measurement is the easy part. The pair declare that the subsequent implementation of initiatives and follow up is where the "*real work*" begins (Cameron & Quinn, 1999, p.129). While we agree that cultural implementation and follow up requires a significant amount of managerial dedication and resources, this kind of phrasing suggests that measuring culture is a comparably simple and effortless task. We believe that this oversimplified view of how to approach organisational culture neglects to consider just how complex an organisational context can be and how much involvement it may require.

For example, our study featured a manager (p.42-43) who according to his own rationalist view had methodically fulfilled his duties in terms of the survey. The employees disagreed and held the constructivist perception that managers had not engaged in co-creating a common perception of reality (p.46). This prevailing tension between standards that govern what is considered to be

‘enough’ culture work, disproves that culture measurement can be carried out easily and sufficiently without contentions. We hold that culture measurement and its literature is packaged and marketed in a misleading way, in which diagnosis and subsequent discussion of results are portrayed as homogeneous, straightforward processes that yield homogenous, straightforward outcomes. Indeed, culture measurement products and academic literature tend to oversell what the instrument can achieve (Alvesson & Berg, 1992). The language practitioners use to describe the culture measurement process may severely impact how managers understand their own contributions to organisational culture.

In summary, our overarching argument about diagnostic culture measurement aims to critique scholars such as Cameron and Quinn (1999), Denison, Nieminen and Kotrba (2014), Hofstede et al. (1990), Ouchi and Price (1978), and Schein (1985). We argue that mainstream culture measurement literature is based on flawed assumptions and weak argumentation for relationships between variables. It also embraces an approach to organisational culture that is, in our view, too simplistic and narrow-minded to capture what actually goes on beyond the figures. We have made three arguments, (1) that culture surveys do not produce a rich image of an organisation’s culture, (2) that the literature is based on assumptions that do not hold in reality and (3) that culture measurement practitioners oversell the capabilities of the survey. Chiefly, the problem with culture measurement is that it exercises agency over managers’ interpretative processes, as it is often steadily relied on to give absolute readings of an organisation’s culture, to the point that managers have more confidence in survey results than their employees’ accounts of reality.

We do not believe that quantitative measurement of organisational culture is inherently wrong or inadmissible, but our study shows how it is problematic in a lot of ways. In the previous paragraphs we have identified the ways in which the culture measurement literature has neglected opportunities to more deeply understand and describe organisational life. For instance, organisational culture literature fails to acknowledge different perceptions of what culture is. Additionally, the instruments used do not adequately describe the complexity or multifaceted nature of culture. Rational assumptions underlie the literature and limits managers from comprehending views about culture than lay outside of traditional, scientific logic. For example, just because cultural improvements can not be outlined graphically, it does not mean that culture

has not improved. Finally, we contend that the linguistic portrayal of culture diagnosis and follow-up implies that culture work is simple and that managers are entitled to engage ‘sufficiently’ with employees according to their own standards.

Measurement instruments should thus be used with caution and potential users should be aware of the elements of the culture measurement that can have a negative effect on organisational culture overall. Awareness and reflexivity are key here. However, our findings also suggest that the culture survey may offer organisations an additional opportunity to affect organisational culture as well.

## Hidden opportunities for collective interpretation

The importance of interpretative processes in organisations have been argued by many scholars, yet not many have studied it empirically. As Pekkola, Hildén and Rämö (2015, p.19) concluded in their article, “*Although reflection is widely accepted as a theoretical construct, relatively few studies have investigated how it materialises in real-life organisations and what its requirements are at all necessary levels*”. From a constructivist point of view, in which organisational culture is defined as socially constructed systems of meaning, interpretation plays a fundamental part in meaning creation (Pettigrew, 1979). Crossan, Lane and White (1999, p.528) define interpretation as a “*social activity that creates and refines common language, clarifies images, and creates shared meaning and understanding*”. In terms of interpreting organisational reality, Pettigrew (1979) holds that people must have an enduring sense of what reality is in order to function within a given setting. However, in organisational life it is easy to forget the expressive social fabric that gives meaning to everyday tasks and objectives (Pettigrew, 1979). In summary, organisational reflection and interpretation are said to be foundational in how employees create and understand their everyday organisational lives. In the following paragraphs we will outline how the findings of our study fit into the sensemaking and sensegiving perspective and what the implications may be for the way culture surveys are used in organisations.

To begin, we remind the reader that sensemaking refers to “*the retrospective development of plausible images that rationalise what people are doing*” (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005, p.409), whilst sensegiving refers to “*the process of attempting to influence the sensemaking and*

*meaning construction of others toward a preferred redefinition of organizational reality*” (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991, p.442). The culture survey will henceforth be regarded as an extracted cue, that is, “...*simple, familiar structures that are seeds from which people develop a larger sense of what maybe occurring*” (Weick, 1995, p.50). With this said, we circle back to our second research question and will now demonstrate that our study supports the case that culture surveys *can* and *have* been used to make and give sense about organisational reality in our study.

A concrete example of how our study has empirically demonstrated that organisational members have used a culture survey to give and make sense about organisational reality, is manifested in hierarchical tensions between competing assumptions. We draw the reader’s attention back to the manager who preceded to retrospectively draw conclusions about organisational effectiveness based on a sequence of events that according to his perception led up to the current survey results (p.44). Employees then disputed this claim by suggesting that other external factors such as ‘future development agendas’ would directly interpret their perceptions of reality and how they would interact with the culture survey going forward (p.44). The manager is clearly using past survey results to attempt to make sense about current reality, while employees attempts to redefine future reality by giving a contrasting sense about the relationship between culture, survey results and organisational effectiveness. Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld (2005) hold that although it is possible to develop plausible images to rationalise what has occurred, the validity of these are based on subsequent activity. In that sense, the legitimacy of an interpretation about organisational culture made by managers, must be supported by future action. The same can be said for employees. This leads us to believe that discussions around the culture survey must yield actionable outcomes to be collectively meaningful.

Another tension between management and employees that was raised in the Findings chapter was the competing metaphors of ‘pulse-checking’ (p.40) and ‘voting’ (p.41). On the one hand, the manager expressed his intention of obtaining a reading of the present situation, which can be argued as an attempt to reflect and assign meaning about what is going on. At the same time, employees expect the culture survey to act as a democratic voting ballot, considering it as their chance to express their views and reinforce power and influence over managers and their decisions. This deliberate attempt to influence others’ meaning creation can be categorised as sensegiving.

What we know about sensegiving is that it is contingent on “*organizational routines, practices, and structures that can either hinder or enable sensegiving*” (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007, p.80). The culture survey is therefore necessary for sensegiving practices to take part in the first place.

An example of where our study showed potential for sensemaking and sensegiving practices to occur in relation to the culture survey, was in discussions around expectations for future cultural development. The excerpts highlighted a manager who expected organisational culture to develop in a visible, numeric, linear way on an annual basis (p.45) and employees who demanded inclusive discussion as a development of culture (p.46). The two parties held different views about what culture development was supposed to look like and disregarded the opportunity to reconcile these ideas by not sharing them with each other through discussion. As we see it, the survey result discussions could have been utilised as a platform to negotiate how future outcomes of culture would be appropriately assessed. This would require that both parties were open and willing to co-create and attach shared meanings about expectations of culture survey outcomes by engaging in sensemaking through multi-party negotiations (Maitlis, 2005) and sensegiving activities in which ‘sensegivers’ possess “*the discursive ability... to construct and articulate persuasive accounts of the world*” (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007, p.80).

In the examples above, we have demonstrated through the sensemaking and sensegiving perspective how reflection around a culture survey *can* and *have* materialised in real-life organisations. We have also suggested how reflective practices can be aided by integrating insights from the sensemaking and sensegiving literature. In short, our findings argue that organisational culture surveys have the ability to act as concrete structures for interpretation and meaning creation as they are means to several ends and accessible to all hierarchical levels of an organisation. One approach to interpreting organisational reality by means of a culture survey would be to draw on the abovementioned sensemaking and sensegiving reflective practices and use open discussion between managers and employees as a focal point for achieving the outcomes of strong culture, namely alignment and participation. We do concede that additional research is needed to establish which conditions that practically need to be in place for the discussion-based approach to yield these outcomes, but we will muse how it could be seen as an alternative to diagnostic dimensional culture profiles.

The value of a discussion-based approach to culture surveys could be that it, to a greater extent than the diagnostic approach, is a participative, interpretative activity that aligns divergently held perceptions of organisational reality as discussion “*creates and refines common language, clarifies images, and creates shared meaning and understanding*” (Crossan, Lane & White, 1999, p.528). Thus, the aligned understanding about what is going on in an organisation and what culture looks like in the present condition, would emerge from an inclusive, reflective practice that is firmly grounded in social interaction rather than effectiveness theory or scientific principles. We further argue that under ideal conditions, this outcome would be superior to that of a diagnostic dimensional culture profile, as the discursive portrayal of an organisation’s culture would likely be more richly and deeply described, consensually constructed through negotiation, aligned in terms of meaning, considerate of employee agency and attached to collectively established actionable improvement measures.

## Chapter Summary

As stated in the beginning of this chapter, this thesis does not vehemently argue against the idea of attempting to quantitatively measure organisational culture. We do however advise that managers engage in these activities with great caution because diagnostic culture measurement instruments do not always live up to their promises in terms of adequately portraying reality. Nevertheless, it is essential that practitioners exercise openness and reflexivity in cultural initiatives as competing assumptions may result in frustration, confusion and cynicism. A reflective approach to organisational culture measurement through sensemaking and sensegiving enables managers and employees to consider different interpretations and perceptions of reality. It is our belief that organisational members who inhabit awareness may be able to mitigate some of the pitfalls of the rational, diagnostic approach to organisational culture. By this we mean, managers who are aware of the existence of various perspectives to organisational culture, and who apprehend that some underlying assumptions of the culture measurement literature may not hold in reality. This belief is supported by similar claims made by Schön (1987) and Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2018).

Even though reflection is regarded as both significant and broadly accepted in organisations, it is often viewed as a separate practice outside of everyday work activities (Crossan, Lane & White, 1999). As we have demonstrated, our study has shown that culture surveys have the capacity to be used as interpretative structures and platforms that trigger sensemaking and sensegiving activities in organisations. A possible outcome of taking a discussion-based approach to a culture survey could be that employees and managers participate discursively in reflective activity in order to establish a aligned perception of organisational culture. For this to occur, members of an organisation must partake in negotiation, persuasion and interpretation of present reality and expectations for the future (Maitlis, 2005; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007). We encourage managers to make space in their cultural measurement initiatives for independent and collective reflection and sensemaking through constructive dialogue.

# CONCLUSION

## Empirical Findings

In the study on Chemix, we found that the act of measuring organisational culture can contribute to outcomes like frustration, confusion and cynicism. We attribute this to managers and employees holding divergent views of organisational reality, which in turn affected their assumptions about organisational culture as well as their approaches to DOCS as a tool. We identified tensions between the two hierarchical levels in terms of national culture, intentions, desire for change, ontology and culture assessment preferences. Our findings suggest that these discrepancies made it difficult for both parties to collectively establish a common perception of organisational reality.

## Theoretical Contribution

Mainstream culture measurement scholars assume that culture is an ‘it’ that can be measured and compared to other cultures. It makes grandiose promises about what can be achieved with a culture survey and takes on a rational, instrumental perspective to culture which centres around numbers, western logic and linear reasoning. Culture measurement can also exert too much agency over managerial interpretative processes and was further criticised as our findings suggested that: (1) the literature is based on flawed assumptions, (2) culture surveys do not reflect culture in a complex way, and (3) practitioners oversell culture surveys’ capabilities. We have also argued that culture surveys can be used as interpretative structures and platforms for cultural sensegiving and sensemaking activities in organisations. We suggest that the outcomes of a discussion-based approach to culture surveys could, under the right circumstances, potentially have the ability to trump the outcomes of diagnostic dimensional culture profiles, as the discursive portrayal of an organisation’s culture would likely be more richly described, consensually constructed through negotiation, collectively aligned in terms of meaning and considerate of employee agency.

## Limitations

Our research focuses on two hierarchical levels in a specific company, in a certain industry, which limits the generalisability of the findings and outcomes of the study. National culture can play a significant role in how members of an organisation approach an organisational culture survey, and so, the study may only be significant for a few geographical regions as it deals with Swedes, Finns and Latvians and does not consider non-western frameworks of thought. The interviews we conducted asked managers and employees to give a retrospective account of organisational events and personal perceptions. It is quite likely that other events that occurred after the DOCS 2018 process was completed, affected interviewees' sensemaking processes about what actually happened. It is also possible that employees and managers may have forgotten some vital aspects of the instances they were asked to describe.

## Future Research

To strengthen our presented theoretical perspective of culture surveys as a sensemaking and sensegiving tool in organisations, scholars should observe and engage with an organisation's interpretative processes 'in-action' to eliminate some of the limitations of retrospective accounts of reality. Further, sensegiving and sensemaking activities should be investigated in a broader context for increased relevance, i.e. in different organisations, diverse organisational structures and in a multitude of countries, including those who hold non-western frameworks of thought. Finally, we suggest that practical conditions for achieving the anticipated outcomes of the discussion-based approach to culture survey should be determined to validate the suggestion.

## Relevance for Practitioners

Culture measurement instruments should be used with caution and awareness due to their problematic influences on organisational culture. The way to combat the duplicity of culture measurement instruments, is through continuous reflection, reflexivity and interaction with other members of an organisation.

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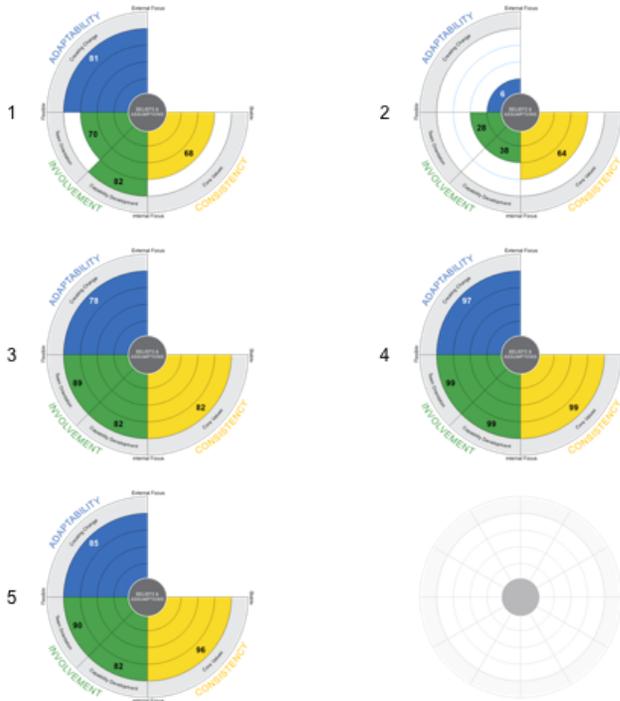
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# APPENDIX

## Appendix 1



1. 2018	Oy	N = 39
2. 2018	Scandinavia	N = 19
3. 2018	Baltics	N = 19
4. 2018	Belarus & Ukraine	N = 8
5. 2018	India	N = 22

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QUARTILE

1st	2nd	3rd	4th
1st	2nd	3rd	4th
1st	2nd	3rd	4th

