

## **What is Organizational Culture Becoming?**

- *Seeing Organizational Culture in a Becoming Perspective.*

*Jens Bøgetoft Christensen & Per Darmer*

Jens Bøgetoft Christensen  
University of southern Denmark  
Institute for Organization and Management

Engstien 1  
6000 Kolding  
Phone: 65 50 14 17  
E-mail: [jbc@sam.sdu.dk](mailto:jbc@sam.sdu.dk)

Per Darmer  
Copenhagen Business School  
Institute of Organization and  
Industrial Sociology  
Solbjerg Plads 3  
2000 Frederiksberg  
Phone: 38 15 29 50  
E-mail: [pd.ioa@cbs.dk](mailto:pd.ioa@cbs.dk)

## **Introduction**

Over the years, the organizational culture debate has become not only extensive and diverse but also quite motley. Starting back in the early eighties as a response to a growing frustration over traditional organizational analysis among management scholars, in their attempt to understand the inability of the western industry to match the Japanese competition and success, culture soon became the topic in the management debate. A debate that by no means was characterized by a common understanding of how to understand this newfound theme, but on the contrary covers a wide field from flat out common sense, over contingency theory thinking toward a social constructivist inspired line of thinking.

Through the eighties and the first part of the nineties, the culture debate continued, and as far as the more constructivist inspired part of the debate<sup>1</sup> is concerned, it contributed significantly to the development of an alternative to the mainstream neo-positivistic tradition. Since the mid nineties though, the culture debate seems to have ebbed, and apparently there has been only little further development in the cultural approach to organizational theorizing. Although the concept has spread to newer areas of interest, where it has generally been taken for granted as an instrumental tool for managers<sup>2</sup>. Meanwhile in other areas of organizational theorizing, the social constructivist line of debate has developed further and with inspiration from postmodernism moved towards a debate of both the ontological and the epistemological questions facing organizational research.

Lately new books on culture have appeared (Parker, 2000; Martin, 2002 and Alvesson, 2002 ), but although these authors represent reflections on more contemporary debates, the purposes of these authors differ from the ones we want to bring forth in this paper. Despite these new books, it seems obvious that organizational culture has lost most of its appeal as an approach to organizational theorizing. Why we can only speculate about, but we find that the concept of culture is still essential for the understanding of sociality and organizing.

Thus, the purpose of this paper is to reflect upon what organizational culture becomes in a becoming perspective (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). More precisely, the paper shows how we rethink our social constructivist-based conceptualization of organizational culture, with inspiration from a becoming perspective. This means that the paper will apply the becoming perspective to organizational culture and see what that implies, but at the same time the paper critically reviews the becoming perspective. The paper discusses social constructivism and the becoming perspective in order to get an understanding of organizational culture that is inspired by both without being equivalent to any one of them.

## **The inspiration from a becoming ontological perspective**

Although Chia (1997, 1996) and Tsoukas & Chia (2002) are part of a more recent debate in organizational theory, taking a becoming perspective is not exactly a new idea, but can as they remark themselves, be traced back to Heraclite. In his philosophy, he gave the becoming of things, events and stabilized effects ontological primacy and thereby placed himself in opposition to the Platonic and Aristotelian “being” ontological understanding of reality as a world of stable things and phenomena.

---

<sup>1</sup> Including for example contribution inspired by symbolic interactionism, ethnographic, phenomenological, hermeneutic and later postmodern discourses.

<sup>2</sup> Such as the idea of the learning organization or value based management.

In their expounding of a becoming ontology, Chia and Tsoukas are referring to thinkers like William James, Henri Bergson and Alfred North Whitehead. As inspiration for this preliminary rethinking of culture we ourselves will however rely on the writings of Chia and Tsoukas (Chia and Tsoukas 2002, Chia 1997), and it will therefore be their expounding of a becoming perspective that will be our point of reference as inspiration for our rethinking of organizational culture. It has to be underlined that the paper is a work-in-progress, where some preliminary thoughts about culture in a becoming perspective are displayed, which also bring forth some critic of Tsoukas & Chia (2002).

In the writing of Tsoukas & Chia (2002) the becoming perspective is defined as part of a dichotomy where, on the one hand, we have a “being” ontology, that asserts “...reality pre-exists independently of observations and as static, discrete and identifiable “things”, “entities”, “events”, “generative mechanisms”, etc.” (p.33). On the other hand, from a becoming ontological point of view reality is understood as a perpetual flux of becoming, “...hence unrepresentable through any static conceptual framework or paradigm of thought.” (Chia, 1996, p. 46).

This dichotomy raises the question of whether reality is best understood primarily in terms of stability, order and fixity or reality is best understood in processual terms as a flux of becoming; a question that has generally been answered in favor of the former, as a common feature across scientific paradigms, forming a ruling tradition in western philosophy (Tsoukas & Chia 2002; 569), which, as we will come back to, also applies to social constructivism. However the postmodern as an understanding of the present, with its focus on development and desire for change and newness seems also to have displaced the attention of the organizational theory debate towards these themes and, as in the case of this paper, a rethinking of our understanding of organizing from a radical process perspective.

As part of this debate Chia (1996) formulated what can be considered not only an anti-“being ontological” doctrine, as the reference to postmodernism might let us expect, but to a wide extent also a new becoming ontological doctrine: “The actual world is fundamentally in a process of becoming so that every phenomena of which we are aware – from galaxies to electrons, from human being to amoebae, from human society and families of crystals to nursery rhymes and creational myths – each exist only as a stabilized moment in an interminable process of becoming. Thus, there are no fixed entities, no ultimate terms, no essences. In short, transition is the ultimate fact.” (1997; p. 696).

Chia (1997; p. 696-697) continues by characterizing the becoming perspective in four themes that together outline a set of theoretical priorities of a perspective taking such a process-based becoming perspective. First, and obviously, a radical process perspective is privileging activity and movement over substance and entities. Instead of thinking in terms of discrete individualities, the emphasis is on the primacy of process, interaction and relatedness. This does not differ from traditions of social constructivism or social constructionism in social science, that both focus on the process of the social construction of reality, stressing respectively either the cognitive or the relations as the primary area of interest. (Berger and Luckmann 1963, Schutz 1975, Gergen 1994).

Second, this is leading to thinking in terms of the constant state of becoming that will have to be the consequence of a world that is never coming into being. Third, in a world that never comes into being, the understanding of change as something that takes place between periods of equilibrium and stability doesn’t make sense. On the contrary, change is the essential existence of nature, and

stability only an abstraction. Fourth, in this continuous process of becoming, every moment of activity is already incorporated in the next moment, as an immanent part of the many activities going on as the world is in the process of becoming, transforming and perishing. This idea of immanence is also part of social constructivism, as for example thematized in the phenomenological concept of incorporation or in the concept of the hermeneutic circle.

Thus in Chia and Tsoukas' expounding of an becoming perspective, there seem to be clear similarities with a social constructivist tradition, while at the same time it also seems to challenge what is left of fixity in this tradition from a more postmodern perspective. Yet, as already indicated, there seems to be some contradiction in terms, because the outline of the becoming ontological line of thinking is not only formulated as an anti-being ontological doctrine, as the clear reference to postmodernism (Chia 1996) might lead us expect, but to a wide extent also as a new becoming ontological doctrine.

We agree with the deconstruction of the becoming ontology as a doctrine where essences and fixity as findings only mirror the predisposition of certain researchers to think in static, structured and discrete terms. But the very same thing can be said about the predisposition of Chia, Tsoukas, and Heraclite to think in activity, movement and process terms. It is no solution to the reflexivity problem raised with the reference to postmodernism in Chia (1996, p. 46) to replace one doctrine with another (that of the Whiteheadian process cosmology).

Looking critically upon the becoming perspective and the concept of flux, another problem appears. When everything is in "flux" there still seems at least one fixed term and essence: The idea that everything is in flux (in the becoming) is the only thing not in flux or in the becoming. It seems to be something firm. It might be argued that the flux in itself is not an essence, but to us it seems that it becomes unquestionable that everything is in flux, making it reassemble a universal truth as the essence of the world.

This is becoming more interesting as Tsoukas & Chia, 2002 talks about things both changing and remaining the same in the world of becoming: "The organization is both a given structure (i.e., a set of established generic cognitive categories) and an emerging pattern (i.e., the constant adaptation of those categories to local circumstances)(p.573). Then everything is apparently not in flux all the time (we return to this discussion later in the paper at a more specific level).

On the contrary the becoming line of thinking seems only to apply to their more general (ontological and epistemological) discussion, whereas when it comes to their more specific discussion of organizing, they seem to rely more on the traditional social constructivist line of thinking. Thus, what we are going to take with us in the rethinking of organizational culture is the becoming ontology as outlined above, whereas we will try to take their reflection on organizational becoming (2002; 573) a step further in the direction of a radical becoming perspective in our rethinking of organizational culture. Not as yet another grand theory, but on the contrary as just one perspective among many others as part of and situated in a contemporary organizational theory debate; a perspective that might displace our attention towards interesting possibilities of new understandings and handlings of everyday life.

## **Organizational culture as social construction**

Before we delve into rethinking our understanding of organizational culture with inspiration of the becoming perspective, we shall shortly outline what has so far characterized our understanding of culture and position ourselves in the organizational culture debate, thereby outlining the basis for this rethinking. Luckily, this doesn't mean that we have to rehearse the culture debate of the eighties and go through the wide range of different schools of organizational culture.

To show our position we need only the now classic organizational culture dualism proposed by Smircich (1983), dividing the literature into a dichotomy consisting of a Critical Variable perspective and a Root Metaphor perspective. The latter has been further elaborated by Darmer (1992) and at the same time renamed the "social construction perspective" to emphasize the broad but mainly social constructivist foundation of the different contributions within this perspective. In this way, we end up distinguishing between two fundamentally different perspectives on organizational culture consisting of a critical variable and a social construction perspective.

We will not unfold the debate between a functionalistic understanding of culture as critical variable and a social construction perspective. Instead, we will allow ourselves the luxury to consider this discussion already dealt with and take the social constructivist understanding of culture as our point of departure. However, taking a social constructivist approach is not exactly unambiguous, as it includes a wide variety of contributions that, besides being in opposition to a functionalistic approach, share only a rather vague assumption about reality being a social construction. On our way towards a becoming ontological inspired rethinking of culture, we will therefore (have to) unfold our understanding of culture in more detail.

## **Towards an understanding of organizations as cultural flux**

The social construction perspective offers a rich discussion of organizational life, which does not only suggest another understanding of culture and the undermining of the conceptualization of the organizations as a firm thing. It also expresses an objection towards meta-narratives and universal theories and the emphasizing of the local and specific as a starting point for perceiving organizational life as heterogeneous and fragmented, with no solid foundation for a universal and objective reality (Kvale 1995, p. 19). This leaves it to the individuals to interpret and create an understanding of reality for themselves; an understanding that has to be created and recreated in an ongoing interplay with a plurality of other actors' similar understandings through the social interactions of daily life.

The understanding of social interaction as a constituent of our understanding of reality as a social constructed phenomenon of consciousness made up the leading idea of the social construction perspective. This means that, on the one hand, reality is an individual matter of subjective interpretation, forming one's reality or "lifeworld" (Schutz, 1975). On the other hand, this lifeworld is also always, inevitably, a social matter as the continuous process of the creation of meaning is always imbedded in a sociality given by the social cultural context - a context created within the very same process.

As already mentioned earlier in this text, the domination in western research traditions by a being ontology also applies to social constructivism. Even though the social interaction is seen as the process in which lifeworld is socially constructed, and therefore to some extent focuses on the process, it is still something that is "constructed". Social constructivism shares the focus on the

process in stressing the social interaction as basis for the constitution of our lifeworld, but it still attempts to capture something firm to which the activities of organizing can be nailed. E.g. “cognitive structures”, “systems of symbols”, “structures of language”, “structures of relations” or “lifeworld” (the concept preferred in this paper).

Therefore, a paradox exists within social constructivism between the understanding of lifeworld as constituted through the ongoing social interaction and at the same time the understanding of lifeworld as a rather firm cognitive structure. This is exactly the puzzle that we hope to bring some kind of relief to, by giving social constructivism a becoming ontological twist. Compared to social constructivism, taking a becoming perspective means that we radicalize our understanding of “process” and focus on the verbs instead of trying to arrest (Chia 1997, p. 696) the reality in its unfolding through the reification and use of substantives. Why do we primarily talk about organizations, when it is organizing that is going on? Or for example knowledge management, when it is “knowing” in the concrete context that matters?

First of all, taking a becoming perspective means that, instead of regarding the social interaction as the process that constitutes the lifeworld of everyday, this process of social interaction is the lifeworld in itself. In other words, the process is not something that leads to reality - on the contrary, it is the reality as it is lived in the here and now. Thus, from a becoming perspective we therefore have to rethink lifeworld in that we do not consider it to be a reality that can passively be called forth, but rather as an active process of life in which every lived moment is brought into, or as Berger puts it: “memory itself is a reiterated act of interpretation. As we remember the past, we reconstruct it in accordance with our present ideas of what is important and what is not.” (Berger 1963, p. 70, jf. Tsoukas & Chia 2002, p. 575).

In social constructivism, lifeworld has the character of cognitive categories and classifications, that as a stockpile of knowledge or repertoire of actions can be retrieved into any given situation as our possibility, but also restraint in making sense of, and handling this situation. Rethinking the concept of lifeworld with inspiration from a becoming perspective leads in the direction of a lifeworld that emerges as a flux of understanding in everyday life. A flux of interpretation and ascription of meaning that never comes into a state of being but is always in its becoming as we try to deal with our life in a meaningful way.

This rethinking of the lifeworld implies that the sociality, which the culture concept refers to, will have to be considered an ongoing process of interpretation and creation of meaning as regards this specific sphere of a person’s lifeworld. Whereas the lifeworld concept draws our attention towards the individual side of meaning creation in the process of living, the concept of culture draws our attention towards the social side of this process. As such, the concepts of lifeworld and culture thematize the same flux of ongoing life, but with the substantial difference between the notions that lifeworld is being a concept of individuality while culture is a concept of sociality.

A rethinking of culture as social constructions, from a becoming perspective, means that we turn our attention towards the social interaction and the ongoing process of creating, recreating and organizing meaning in the handling of everyday life, as the proper meaning of organizing. Instead of speaking of organizations as socially constructed cultures, maybe we should talk about organizing (verb) as cultural flux – a social praxis of interpretation, the reinterpretation of remembrance and oblivion in daily social interaction among those taking active part in a sociality.

A process in which culture emerges as a cultural flux that never comes into being, but is always in the process of becoming.

This focus on social interaction and the ongoing process of creating, recreating and organizing meaning means that what have traditionally been considered a special process of change from one stable situation of things being towards another being of things, now becomes the normal condition of reality. Taking a becoming ontological perspective on organizing (as cultural flux) therefore draws our attention toward the question of how to understand this ongoing process of change – a question that Tsoukas & Chia (2002) reflect upon.

### **Culture as continuously re-constructed**

Thus taking a becoming perspective as their basis, Tsoukas & Chia (2002) take the dichotomy of being and becoming into the discussion of change, resulting in two corresponding perspectives on change. Building on the writings of Orlikowski, Weick, Feldman and others who take a process perspective on organizational change, their ambition is to extend their perspective into a even more radical process view on organizational change (p. 569). In accordance with the becoming perspective they want to reverse the ontological priority according to organization and change by giving change ontological priority to organization.

Through their rethinking of organizational change from a becoming perspective, they want to go beyond what they refer to as synoptic accounts of change that approach change from the outside and "try to understand change by transforming change into a succession of positions." (Tsoukas and Chia 2002; 571). This reduces change to series of static positions in a tradition that conceptualizes change in stage model frameworks.

Thus, this synoptic perspective is related to the traditional view on organizational change (with stage models like Lewin's: Unfreeze – move – refreeze) and what Stacey (2000) denotes orthodox theories. In orthodox theory, organizational change is seen from a cybernetic perspective, where organizations strive for and focus upon stability and equilibrium. In other words, when the "real" world outside the organization changes, the organization has to adapt to the real world so the organization fits the "real" world (the environment of the organization) in order to stay alive and get competitive advantages. The organizations that are able to adapt and find the equilibrium with their environments are those that will survive and prosper. A regulator of the domestic central heating system is an example of cybernetics, just like the regulator of the home temperature, the organization will stabilize its own fit with the environment. Meaning that change occurs when things (stability) are interrupted, and they have to be disinterrupted to get back to "normal" again.

The idea of Tsoukas & Chia is to replace the orthodox view of organizational change from a stability perspective with a more radical view on organizational change from a becoming ontological perspective on change. A perspective that through approaching change from within seeks to do justice to the open-ended micro-processes of change and "acknowledge the ever-mutating character of life, where partial decay and partial growth, continuity, and difference all coexist." (Tsoukas and Chia 2002; 571). In their attempt to establish such a radical process perspective, they find the advice of Bergson and Wittgenstein useful and invite us to dive back into the flux itself and bring ourselves in touch with reality through intuition; get to know from within and don't think, but look." (2002; 571).

In this way, they establish a classic distinction between the understanding that lies in the conceptualization and a direct unfiltered understanding that emerges through intuition and immediate experience from within: “Direct knowledge (intuition) and conceptual knowledge are complementary of each other. One provides what the other cannot.” (Tsoukas and Chia 2002; 572).

This of course implies potentially deep trouble for their own possibility through the conceptualization of an academic account to offer any account of change that goes beyond synoptic accounts. They seem to find a way out in that they introduce the idea of performative accounts that “...through their focus on situated human agency unfolding in time, offer us insights into the actual emergence and accomplishment of change – They are accounts of change par excellence.” (Tsoukas and Chia 2002; 572).<sup>3</sup>

Anyhow, they continue by putting forward a performative model of organizational change under the heading Organizational becoming. In the model, they seem to get rid of or simply ignore these troubles by cutting back to traditional social constructivism, referring to Berger and Luckmann and even Weick, who they claimed to go beyond. In doing so they, in our point of view, miss the opportunity to enrich social constructivism and offer an alternative understanding of the paradox discussed earlier.

Thus, it is therefore questionable how much further (if at all) Tsoukas & Chia go than the three scholars they are inspired by and claim to use as their theoretical foundation to go even further. First of all, the three scholars are not applied very much in the text, and in some regards it seems to us that Tsoukas & Chia are not going just as far in a change perspective as those scholars they aim to extend upon. (The paper will not go into this critic in more detail, but we find it is part of discussing a becoming perspective to criticize Tsoukas & Chia for not taking the “full” consequence of their own change perspective).

It also seems that in spite of the radical thinking on the ontological level which is put forward by both Chia (1996, 1997) and Tsoukas and Chia (2002), when it comes to the more specific discussion of organizing and change, they end up with straight forward social constructivism. Therefore it is not surprising that they end up with a similar understanding of sociality (organization) as something in between stability and change, as Stacey did in his former book (Stacey, 1996), where he talked about ordinary and extraordinary management that had to be balanced.

In doing so, he returned to orthodox theory by making stability (the proper balance between ordinary and extraordinary management) ontologically prior to change. Tsoukas & Chia to some extent repeat the mistake of Stacey (1996) by making stability prior to change in talking about a balance between stability and change. It seems to us that Stacey (2000) in his radical theory is more radical about the becoming perspective than Tsoukas & Chia (2002) because Stacey (2000) realized

---

<sup>3</sup> This however leaves us with at least two epistemological questions that they do not attempt to answer themselves. First, how do we create the performative accounts in an intuitively way that gives us the kind of direct knowledge that seems the ambition of the model? A puzzle that is very similar to the problem of transcendence in transcendental phenomenology. Second, and closely related to the former, how are these accounts to be presented outside the concepts of language? In their prior discussion, they build upon an example from Bergson that uses art and the example of the painter to illustrate how a more direct understanding of reality can be presented, but also the rest of the article is in printed text, with no hints about the possibility in employing art in the understanding and managing of change.

that and called it a theory with radical elements ending up in orthodox conclusions, and therefore becomes orthodox in nature. Stacey (2000) overcomes the problem by introducing radical theories that remain radical.

Stacey's (2000) radical theories on gesture-response and conversation are another way to look at social interaction and thereby making conversation an ongoing process, as conversation is always developing in gesture and response, since every gesture is followed by a response, and every gesture is in itself a response. Therefore conversation is an ongoing process of change where we can never predict where it will end, because we can never be sure how others will respond to our gesture, or how we ourselves will respond to the gestures or responses of others. Conversation becomes an uncontrollable process always in motion.

Therefore, we find that Stacey (2000) goes further in the direction of a becoming perspective on change than Tsoukas & Chia do themselves. An elaboration will illustrate this (we hope). Tsoukas & Chia (2002) emphasize that "change must not be thought of as property of organization. Rather, organization must be understood as an emergent property of change. Change is ontologically prior to organization – it is the condition of possibility of organization." (p. 570). This means that change is essential and organization is a manifestation of change – a way of dealing with change.

The central question for Tsoukas & Chia, therefore, becomes: "What must organization(s) be like if change is a constitutive of reality?" (2002; 570). Organizations are the result of change. Tsoukas & Chia talk about organizations being both a way of dealing with change and something emerging from change. It is through this duality of organization and change that we find Tsoukas & Chia reassemble what Stacey calls theory with radical elements ending up in orthodox conclusions, because when Tsoukas & Chia take this point of view, change becomes stabilized by organization and thereby a stabilizing perspective "creeps" in and takes over.

This is highlighted in the following quote that ends by underlining that organizations aim at stabilizing ("stemming") change, meaning that stabilizing change is what it is all about. "Viewed this way, organization is a secondary accomplishment, in a double sense: First, it is a socially defined set of rules aiming at stabilising an ever-mutating reality by making human behavior more predictable. Second, organization is an outcome, a pattern, emerging from the reflective application of the very same rules in local contexts over time. While organization aims at stemming change, it is also the outcome of change." (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002, p. 570).

We find that Tsoukas & Chia, if they were to be "true" to their own idea of a change perspective and change being a property of organizations, they would have to see organizations as continuously changing, but they conclude: "Our argument in this paper has been that there are ongoing processes of change in organizations. That, however, should not be taken to mean that organizations constantly change." (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002, p. 580). The blend between stability and change is obviously present. In our view, it is necessary to go beyond that. To be "faithful" to a becoming perspective we find it necessary to emphasize the continued re-construction in the ever becoming of a constantly changing reality. "Re-construction is transformation, since nothing is ever re-constructed the same way it was constructed before (just like you never step into the same river twice)." (Darmer & Christensen, 2002).

There are some remarks in Tsoukas and Chia (2002; 573), though, pointing in that direction. Thus, in their discussion of the "...interaction with the outside world", they argue that actors have to

undertake situated action "...that compels him/her to partially revise his/her plans and the rules he/she is working with (2002; 573). However, the discussion of this issue from the perspective of interaction with the outside world emphasizes even more their understanding of organizations as a firm thing. The rest of their discussion is therefore not surprisingly based on the classic concepts of cognitive structures and prototypical versus no prototypical categories that do not connect to their conceptualization of a becoming perspective.

As indicated earlier, the radical theories of Stacey (2000), even without an explicit becoming ontology, go at least one step further than Tsoukas & Chia, 2002 in the discussion of gestures and responses never being quite the same as they are always relational and situated. Meaning that even when we make the same response we made yesterday, we can never be sure that it will be interpreted the same way as gestures and responses are interpreted all the time in order for us to make sense of them (both the gesture and response from ourselves and others). Conversations are never the same, as our responses are never quite the same – even though our verbal response may be so, our quiet conversation (Stacey, 2000) with ourselves will not be so.

This is illustrated when to the gesture "hello" we respond with the word "hello". We are sometimes happy to see people, other times just being polite, and sometimes not even aware that we responded as the quiet conversation we have with ourselves goes on uninterrupted by the mechanical response to the mechanical gesture. It is these quiet conversations that make conversation unpredictable, because we never know which associations we will have on the gesture of others and which implications these associations will have for your response. Conversation is always (ex)change of words, and thereby never the same as the meaning of words are always re-constructed. We never have exactly the same interpretation of a word, since we have already heard it before, and we will always relate it to the situations and relations we are in. Therefore everything is related and situated, and continuously re-constructed.

The discussion of organizational change gives us the possibility to thematize change not as something stabilized through organizing, but as an immanent part of life as an unfolding flux of constructing and re-constructing meaning. It also means, as already argued, that culture is not something stabilized and firm emerging from change, but instead constantly re-constructed, making culture a fragile process of social construction and reconstruction and is therefore always changing. It becomes a process that never really ends, where we continuously are making sense (Weick, 1995) of our organizations by re-constructing them as cultures.

Related to our above discussion of verbs vs. nouns, it should be underlined that it is more appropriate to talk about organizing (Weick, 1979) in relation to this as it is about (never-ending) processes. We have had a hard time finding a concept for culture similar to organizing, since culturization is not a good concept, we discussed organizational culture formation, but ended up preferring re-constructed. The discussion of culture formation underlines another important point, when culture is related to a becoming perspective the way it is done here. The point being culture and culture formation becomes two sides of the same coin as culture is always in-the-making, being dynamically re-constructed. Therefore, it does not make sense to distinguish between organizational culture formation, organizational culture and organizational culture change. Culture is always in formation and changing. We can never say that this is our culture, as it is being re-constructed and altered, as we utter that.

Culture is in flux, as it is continuously being re-constructed by its members. Talking about organization formation in the traditional sense becomes obscure, because nothing is ever going to stabilize itself as something firm coming into being. Organizational culture will always stay in formation. We can never pin it down, frame it in a couple of values, and exhibit it on the wall for everyone to follow, as it is forever changing. Change being the property of culture means (to us) that change is the perspective we have on culture, implying that culture is continuously re-constructed and never stays the same. We might use the same words or values but the meaning of them is constantly changing. Therefore, it makes no sense to talk about cultural change in a becoming perspective; culture is always changing and can be understood only this way.

## **Illustration**

Above we said that we can never pin down the organizational culture, frame it in a few values, and stick them on the wall. That is not quite right. Many organizations actually do write down their values and frame them on the wall for all members to see and follow. What we do mean is that organizations might do that, but that does certainly not mean that members interpret the values alike and interpret them the same way all the time. On the contrary, we argue that the organizational members will continuously re-construct such values, and therefore these values are in a constant process of becoming.

The paper will end with a short illustration of what we mean by this. Collins & Porras (1991) give some examples from organizations that they use in their linear argument for how to use vision as the tool to gain competitive advantages. We reuse one of Collins & Porras' examples to illustrate what culture might become in a becoming perspective with change as the basic property. This of course stands in clear opposition to how Collins & Porras (1991) use the example themselves. Figure 1 briefly highlights the values and beliefs and the purpose of the corporation Giro Sport Design in 1991.

**Figure 1**  
**Giro Sport Design (from Corporate Vision Statement, 1991)**

Values and beliefs:

- Customer satisfaction is first and foremost
- It takes great products to be a great company
- Integrity is not to be compromised; be honest, consistent, and fair
- Commitments made are to be fulfilled
- Never cut corners, get the details right
- The Golden Rule applies to peers, customers, and employees
- Teamwork should prevail, think “we” not “I”
- There is no reason to do any product that is not innovative and high quality
- Style is important; all of our products should look great.

Purpose:

- Giro exists to make a positive impact on society to make peoples live better – through innovative, high quality products.

Source: Collins & Porras, 1991, p. 49.

Giro Sport Design did exhibit their values and purpose by framing them on the wall (or rather in the corporate vision statement). The idea behind doing so is that all members of the corporation shall internalize and follow the values, making the corporate army march to the same value beat and accomplish effectiveness. Just like it is prescribed in theories about organizational culture in the critical variable perspective, the theories on value based management and the learning organizations, etc. Thereby, creating a stable core of values that everybody has internalized and applied to makes culture a firm thing that controls and makes the behavior of members predictable and controllable.

Our argument is a different one, altogether. We argue that although all members of the Giro Sport Design corporation are exposed to the values in figure 1, there is still a long way to go from exhibiting the values on the wall to get them to be applied homogeneously in practice. We find it most unlikely that all members will construct (and re-construct) these values the exact same way, and even more unlikely that they will put them into practice in the same way.

Meyerson (1991) supports our argument in her research on hospital social workers. The social workers all shared the overall purpose to help people. But when the overall purpose was to be applied in practice, it was certainly not done in any common way since “social workers vary in their beliefs about medical orientation, how to “help”, and even what it means to “help”.” (Meyerson, 1991, p. 132). The same way the members of Giro Sport Design most likely differ in their interpretation of what integrity and great products are, and how to avoid compromising the former and make the latter.

Change is an immanent part of this process as the values of Giro Sport Design are interpreted continuously to put them into practice. However, this does not mean that we think values and practice necessarily are tightly coupled. It might be that they are loosely coupled or even decoupled, depending upon how the members of Giro Sport Design interpret the values in general, and how they interpret to follow them in particular. The managers of Giro display these values, but that is certainly no guarantee that the members of Giro will follow them, meaning that some members might deliberately go against the values (counterculture).

This implies that different members have both different positions to and interpretations of the values of Giro Sport Design, making it very difficult indeed to get a common practice. The culture of Giro Sport Design will be relational and situated and continuously re-constructed. The last as the practice of these values influences on how the values are interpreted, so that the contents of the values change over time, or rather all the time as conversation (gesture-response) between practice and values and about the values and on how they are to be practiced, permanently take place in Giro Sport Design. In short: There is an ongoing interaction (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002) or conversation (Stacey, 2000) about the values where they are constantly re-constructed and changed.

Giro Sport Design has mainly been used to argue that change is a permanent feature of values, practice and culture as they are all processes, and it is imperative that they are understood and (re-)constructed as such.

## **Concluding remarks**

The paper has argued that culture in a becoming perspective is to be understood as something always in motion. Meaning that culture is a process where it is always in formation and never get stabilized as a firm thing. The paper agrees with Tsoukas & Chia (2002) that change is essential. On the other hand, the paper disagrees with Tsoukas & Chia regarding what a becoming perspective implies, as the paper criticizes Tsoukas & Chia for not taking the becoming perspective far enough. Instead of taking the possibility of enriching social constructivism with a radical process perspective, they cut back to traditional social constructivism, ending up in orthodox conclusions and organization still being something characterized by fixity. The paper has tried to go further than Tsoukas & Chia by relating the becoming perspective to Stacey's (2000) radical theories and our own concept of re-construction.

Taking culture to be a continuous stream of re-construction is one way of making sense of organizational culture in relation to a becoming perspective. On the other hand, the whole paper can be interpreted as an enactment of our becoming perspective on culture as continuous re-construction, as well. This goes to show that the two hands are very difficult to distinguish from one another, since it turns out to be a difficult task to separate retrospective sensemaking and enactment in a becoming perspective, where everything is in motion, constantly being re-constructed, and where change is essential.

## References

- Alvesson, Mats (2002): *Understanding Organizational Culture*. Sage Publications, London, 2002.
- Berger, Peter L. og Thomas Luckmann (1963): *Den samfundsskabte virkelighed*. 2. udgave, 2. oplag. Lindhart og Ringhof, 1996.
- Chia, Robert (1996): The Problem of Reflexivity in Organizational Research: Towards a Postmodern Science of Organization. *Organization*, Volume 3(1): 31-59.
- Chia, Robert (1997): *Essai: Thirty Years On: From Organizational Structures to the Organization of Thought*. *Organization Studies* 1997, 18/4: 685-707.
- Christensen, Jens Bøgetoft (2002): *Livsverden og Kultur, ansatser til en fænomenologisk baseret organisationsforståelse*. Odense Universitetsforlag, 2002
- Collins, James C. & Jerry I. Porras (1991): Organizational vision and visionary organizations. *California Management Review*, Fall 1991, pp. 30-52.
- Darmer, Per (1992): *Organisationer som kulturer (Bind 1+2)*. Samfundslitteratur, Fredriksberg 1992.
- Darmer, Per & Jens Bøgetoft Christensen (2002): *Emerging Cultures in Small Enterprises*. Paper presented at the 3<sup>rd</sup> LOK Research Conference, Kolding, Denmark, 2-3 December, 2002.
- Gergen, Kenneth J. (1994): *Realities and Relationships. Soundings in social construction*. Harvard University Press 1994.
- Kvale, Steinar (1995): Themes of postmodernity, in Anderson, Walter Truett (editor), *The truth about the truth. De-confusing and Re-constructing the postmodern world*. Tarcher/Putnam, 1995.
- Martin, Joanne (2002): *Organizational Culture – Mapping the Terrain*. Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, Calif., 2002
- Martin, Joanne og Peter Frost (1996): The Organizational Culture War Games: a Struggle for Intellectual Dominance, in Clegg, R. Stewae, Cynthia Hardy and Walter R. Nord: *Handbook of Organization Studies al Dynamics*. Sage Publications 1996.
- Meyerson, Debra (1991): "Normal" ambiguity? A glimpse of an occupational culture. In Frost et.al (eds): *Reframing Organizational Culture*. Sage Publications, Newbury Park, Calif., 1991, pp. 131-144.
- Parker, Martin (2000): *Organizational Culture and Identity*. Sage Publications, London, 2000.
- Schutz, Alfred (1975): *Hverdagslivets Sociologi*. Hans Reitzel, 1975
- Smircich, Linda (1983): Concepts of culture and organizational analysis. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 28 (1983) s. 339 - 358.
- Stacey, Ralph D. (1996): *Strategic Management & Organizational Dynamics*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Pitman Publishing, London, 1996.
- Stacey, Ralph D. (2000): *Strategic Management and Organisational Dynamics*. 3<sup>rd</sup>. ed. Pearson, Harlow, England, 2000.

Tsoukas H. & R. Chia (2002) On organizational becoming: rethinking organizational change. *Organization Science*, 13: 5, Sep.-Oct., 2002, pp. 567-582.

Weick, Karl. E. (1979): *The Social Psychology of Organizing*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., McGraw-Hill Inc., New York, 1979

Weick, Karl E (1995): *Sensemaking in Organizations*. Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, Calif., 1995.

---