

Organizational and leadership cultures within university departments

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ABSTRACT

Cultural analysis in higher education is currently of greatest importance, since after decades of steady growth, Finnish higher education system is experiencing hard external pressures in the form of budget cuts. We have to understand academic cultures in order to understand their current ways of working, as well as their ability to change. In this paper, I will discuss the phenomena of culture at the level of academic departments, illustrated by three case studies. Although less studied, individual departments do often develop strong and unique cultures, which can have a strong influence on issues such as organizational climate and discussions, productivity and supervision as well as the issues concerning academic leadership. Consequently, the development work within the academic departments should start with the analysis of the cultures of departments.

1. INTRODUCTION

The term *culture* has become fashionable in organization research during the 1980s and 1990s. Even before the surge of interest in the subject during 1980's it has been proposed fairly frequently that organizations as such have cultures (Allaire & Firsirotu 1984, 194). Cultural analysis has been increasingly applied also to higher education. The notion that *science* is a form of culture has become common in the field of the sociology of science (Pinch 1990). However, at the late 1980s Tierney (1988) noted the lack of organizational culture research in higher education (Juha Kinnunen, one of the pioneers of organizational culture studies in Finland, has pointed out that research on organizational cultures has been *in general* rather limited in numbers in our country; see Kinnunen 1990; Kinnunen & Harisalo 1991). More recently, Stephen McNair concluded in his summary speech at the

EHE conference (Edinburgh, November 1993): "We still have rather poor maps of the many cultures of higher education, of where shared values cluster and conflicting ones separate" (McNair 1993, 6). However, cultural analysis in higher education is currently of greatest importance, since after decades of steady growth, Finnish higher education system is experiencing hard external pressures in the form of budget cuts. We have to understand academic cultures in order to understand their current ways of working, as well as their resistance and ability to change.

Cultures of individual *departments* seem to be far less studied than the other cultural levels of higher education system. The cultures of disciplines, faculties, institutions, national systems and academic professions have been discussed more often (see Clark & Neave 1992; Clark 1983a). For example, research on disciplinary cultures has received more attention during the late 1980s (Becher & Huber 1990, 236). However, my experience is that also individual departments do often develop strong and *unique* cultures, which can have a strong influence on issues such as organizational climate and discussions (Kekäle 1991), productivity and supervision (Kekäle 1993a) as well as the issues concerning academic leadership (Kekäle 1994a). In this paper, I will discuss the phenomena of culture within the higher education, concentrating on the level of academic departments or – to use the term suggested by Becher and Kogan (1980) – *basic units*. Next, I will discuss the concept of culture and the formation of organizational cultures of the departments through Scheins (1985) theory, illustrated by three case studies.

2. THE CONCEPT OF CULTURE

The concept *culture* has numerous meanings. As Aaltio-Marjosola (1991) points out, Kroeber and Kluckhorn have already in 1952 identified 164 different definitions of culture. Many attempts have been made to simplify this multiplicity of

meanings (see for example Smircich 1983 and Gagliardi 1986). One example is Gagliardi (1986, 126) who claims that the term culture is used in the field of organizational culture research, often indiscriminately, in two different meanings: first, it refers to the coherent system of assumptions and basic values distinguishing a group and directing its choices, and, second, to a group's distinct set of features or traits, which does not only mean its basic values but its beliefs, models of behaviour, technology, symbols, and artifacts, too. These two definitions, one being much broader than the other, might cause some confusion.

Many anthropologists, organizational culture and disciplinary culture researchers use the term culture in its broader (second) sense. Disciplinary culture researcher Ludwig Huber (1990, 241), for example, notes that the term culture has offered "a concept sufficiently wide and complex to cover all the relevant traits from everyday life to cognitive and social structures in the disciplines". Gagliardi's (1986, 127) view is that even if we want to use the term culture in its broader sense, we have to distinguish carefully between the basic cultural elements which tend to be enduring (assumptions and basic values), and secondary cultural elements changing more easily. This distinction has seldom been made in the field of disciplinary culture research even though many organizational culture researchers have included similar distinctions in their models of culture by separating the levels of culture (for example Schein 1985; Rousseau 1990).

In this paper I use the term culture in its broader sense. By the term (leadership) culture I will refer to a group's distinct set of (leadership) patterns, features and traditions as well as the values and assumptions that these patterns have possibly been based on. I do, however, agree with Gagliardi (1986) and Schein (1985) in that some cultural elements tend to be more enduring and profound than the others. This argument can also be supported by empirical research evidence (e.g. Schein 1985; Rossman, Corbett and Firestone 1988; Kekäle 1994a). Referring to that kind of deeper cultural elements, namely basic assumptions Schein (1986, 96) states that "culture can't be manipulated like other matters under the control of managers. Culture controls the manager – more than the manager controls the culture – through the automatic filters that bias the manager's perceptions, thoughts and feelings. As culture arises and gains strength, it becomes pervasive and includes everything the

manager does, even his own thinking and feeling." But how do these deeper cultural levels evolve? I will seek a theoretical understanding of the formation of cultures of the departments in Schein's theory on organizational cultures and leadership.

3. THE FORMATION OF CULTURE AND THE LEVELS OF CULTURE

Edgar Schein (1985; 1991) has often been regarded as a central theorist in the field of organizational culture studies (Hofstede 1986; Gagliardi 1986; Schafriz & Ott 1987; Frost et. al. 1991). His distinction between the levels of culture is useful when attempting to understand the dynamics of culture: How do the intentions of leaders become a shared, consensually validated set of definitions of reality; why do some people commit themselves to some values and assumptions much stronger than to other values? In Schein's (1991, 252) model the levels of culture are, from the surface to the deep levels or the essence of culture, the following: 1) artifacts, 2) values and 3) basic assumptions. *Artifacts* are visible organizational structures and processes. *Values* are the espoused justification for action and behaviour: strategies, goals and philosophies, while *basic assumptions* are unconscious, taken for granted beliefs, habits of perception, thought and feeling. We can loosely speak about 1) culture in broad sense, referring to all these levels, and 2) culture in narrow sense, referring to deep structures, a coherent system of basic assumptions¹ (cf. Gagliardi 1986).

Common, shared experiences and stable membership are essential in the formation of basic assumptions; it is through shared problem solving and experiences that people develop shared meanings and, possibly, basic assumptions. Culture is socially constructed by the members of an organization by 'negotiating' – often also in an indirect and an unintended way (see Schein 1985, 167) – a series of agreements on important organizational issues, such as leadership and working habits. In these 'negotiations' leaders have usually more power than the others. The process itself is not necessarily an easy one; in many cases it involves compromise, conflict, or

¹ It should be noted that only artifacts, values, and behavior based on shared basic assumptions and prior group learning are cultural in a strictly scheinian sense (Schein 1985; 1991).

even a fractionation of the group since some members will leave (Schein 1985, 222). But if the beliefs or values of the leaders of the group seem to work from one time to another, and thus become validated and accepted, they may experience a cognitive transformation and become basic assumptions taken for granted by the members of the group: they do not need to be discussed any longer. The group may even forget that some of the members were at first suspicious of leader's ideas. Alternative views are not visible any more and other premises or behaviour based on them can be considered inconceivable by the group (Schein 1985, 18). In a mature organization, which has developed a strong culture, the culture then, to a great degree, defines what is, for example, to be thought of as 'leadership' or how authority and power are allocated and managed² (Schein 1985, 321).

It should be noted that groups in organizations do not necessarily hold shared values and assumptions, and there may also exist several conflicting cultural units within any organization³. Visible behaviour is not necessarily based on

group learning, internalized and shared values, assumptions and worldviews, but the level of commitment to different traditions of the departments may vary – for example rough use of power hardly produces commitment in knowledge organizations. The formation of culture can be seen as a (learning) process; the 'outcome' of this process is open-ended and hard to predict, potentially in the state of change – at least in the long run. Because organizations are open systems, also pressures and factors external to the organization influence both the construction of the culture, and the interpretations and negotiations of the members of the organization. The possibly unique culture can be seen as a complex result of social interaction, internal potentials and expectations, external pressures, disciplinary and academic traditions, and possibly reactions to change factors which are very difficult to predict from a knowledge of either environment or the members (see Schein 1985, 83). People often also misunderstand each other, which adds to the complexity of the process. But can we apply Schein's theory to complex academic organizations, such as universities? Välimaa (1992, 73) has stated that the Scheinian "approach is rather problematic when we are dealing with the complex organizations, such as higher education institutions: Who are the leaders of higher education institutions? What are the groups like in higher education institutions? What kind of organizations are the higher education institutions?". I will discuss these questions here in short, to the extent they are relevant to our analysis of cultures of academic departments.

First, there is an issue of *leadership*⁴. At the level of basic units, the formal leaders are heads of departments and professors. The *heads of departments* have usually had administrative power. Recently, more power has been assigned to individual academic leaders: rectors, deans and department heads (Hölttä & Pulliainen 1992, 9). *Professors* have been traditionally very powerful persons at the level of basic units. In fact, *the departments of the Finnish universities have been originally built around single chairs and professorships* (Järvi, Kivinen & Rinne 1990). Though researchers are often quite independent, professors do often have power over such issues

² The relationship between 'culture' and its 'outcomes' (such as organizational effectiveness) should not be seen in terms of *simple one way linear causality* (see Alvesson 1991). Culture forms in a learning and negotiation process. In the course of this process people more or less try to pursue (and also find and reshape) their goals and values; in organizations choices and decisions has to be made and on the other hand people learn from their experiences. If members of an organization find ideas, solutions and practices that seem to work and give them a sense of purpose and meaning – are in line with, or reinforce, their current interests, values and worldviews – they will probably stick with these patterns (at least) as long as there is no need for change. Cultural learning is based on social interaction and it is *two-way* or *circular* process: assumptions, interests and values in part guide the action and the 'positive outcome' of action may strengthen the values and assumptions, make them self-evident and even 'holier'. The stronger the commitment to these socially constructed rituals, manners and values are – the 'holier' they have become – the less likely they are to change in the short run (examples can be found from religious and political groups, among others). This kind of emotional and cognitive commitment can be a very strong unifying and sustaining force, which may penetrate organizational life in its totality. *In this sense* self-evident cultural assumptions guide, influence and sustain organizational behaviour, but it is difficult to separate culture and its 'outcomes' from each other as a logical categories because of their circular, process-like interaction (cf. Alvesson 1991).

³ Admitting this, Schein's approach unites integration, differentiation, and fragmentation perspectives on organizational culture research (see Frost et al. 1991; Kekäle 1993b).

⁴ A conceptual distinction is often made by separating *management* (orientation towards tasks, systems and results) and *leadership* (orientation towards human relations and organizing people). In this paper I will use the term *leadership* in a very broad sense, in both these meanings.

as what kind of research will be conducted within their department. Academic leaders can hinder or help the pursuit of scholarly activities of the researchers in many ways (Moses 1985, 338). But according to Hogan et. al. (1994, 493) leadership is persuasion, not domination: leadership can only occur when others willingly adopt the goals of a group of their own for a period of time. In practice, professors and department heads are often *expected* to encourage, support, supervise and lead the staff (Moses 1985; Kekäle 1994a), although individual leaders do often use different kind of leadership styles when they are dealing with the challenges of leadership. Thus, professors and department heads are the formal leaders, and there may also be informal leaders, such as competent researchers, who are able to create (sub)cultures. But when we are studying particular organizational cultures, we can not – and need not – identify the leaders and their influence on culture *before* the empirical analysis. Rather, that kind of conclusions had to be drawn after the qualitative analysis of the culture and its historical background. I will illustrate the relationship between leadership and cultures of departments later on the basis of my case studies (see section 4c, also Kekäle 1994a).

Välilmaa (1992, 73) raised a question what the groups in higher education institutions are like and also what kind of organizations the higher education institutions are? The complex and fragmented nature of the university organization has been expressed by many writers (for example Cannon 1983; Clark 1983; Van Vught 1989; Birnbaum 1988). Organizations and groups are *in general* difficult to define in time and space, since they are *open systems* in constant interaction with their many environments, and since they may consist of many subgroups, units and layers (Schein 1985, 7). This open nature of groups and organizations has not prevented anthropologists, sociologists and organization researchers from studying cultures by (inevitably) limiting their analysis to some historical period and a certain set of people (which may be called a group). In our country, university departments have usually had for decades quite permanent core members of the personnel. The departments are open systems, since within higher education influences may spread through departmental, institutional, or disciplinary channels. The intradisciplinary contacts are, however, likely to deal only with research matters of the given academic field, not with issues such as leadership, management, or social relationships, which are to be discussed

and solved within each individual and rather independent department. Also the interaction between different departments of universities are often limited as a result of the loosely coupled nature of university organization (Clark 1983b; Birnbaum 1988, Hölttä & Halonen 1994).

Thus, the questions raised by Välilmaa deal with complex and problematic issues. They are also to a great extent empirical questions, where answers also depend on our definitions and concepts, but these questions do not as such make Schein's approach problematic (which was the point of Välilmaa's argument). Schein (1985, 8) remarks that the word "culture" can be applied to "*any size of social unit that has had the opportunity to learn and stabilize its view of itself and the environment around it – its basic assumptions*". Therefore, any set of people with some common history and shared experiences, including most *university departments* (at least the permanent staff), as well as broader research communities and their work – the construction and deconstruction of knowledge, worldviews, and assumptions – can be seen from a cultural point of view, too⁵. In fact, also scientific action and scientific schools are often seen to be based on some sort of presuppositions which might also have been taken for granted. These presuppositions and background assumptions have been analyzed by McGregor (1960), Kuhn (1970), Hanson (1979) and Burrell and Morgan (1985), to mention a few. According to Birnbaum (1989, 75) cultural differences among colleges and universities derive from basic assumptions and beliefs, not from superficial differences in administrative structures. Dill (1982, 303) claims that academic institutions may best be understood as value-rational organizations grounded in strong cultures, which can be described as ideologies and belief systems.

4. THREE STUDIES ON CULTURES OF DEPARTMENTS

After this theoretical and conceptual orientation to the subject, I will shortly illustrate the cultural phenomena at the level of basic units on the basis of three individual studies. My experience based on developing university teaching is

⁵ I share Becher's (1990, 334) view that we may, depending on our purpose, perspective, and level of analysis, legitimately discuss knowledge and academic cultures at a very general level, disciplinary level or at the level of different sub-units.

that *individual departments* do often have strong and *unique* cultures, which should be taken into account when we are co-operating with academic departments (Kekäle & Kuittinen 1992). These cultures do often colour the expectations concerning development projects within universities. The cultures of the departments can also direct many practical issues in departments, as the following studies demonstrate.

a) Organizational Climate and Discussions

The first study (Kekäle 1991) dealt with climates of discussion within three different fields of study at the university of Joensuu. Three departments were chosen to represent humanities, social sciences and natural sciences according to C.P. Snow's famous thesis of three broad academic cultures. The main focus was on the question how much and in which manner students discuss the issues concerning scientific questions of their own field of study and how the social aspects of the department – the culture and the climate – affect this discussion. The intention was to try to understand, why there seems to be great differences in the climates and manners of discussion within these departments (Häyrynen et.al 1992). The research methods were group interviews and non-active role-playing method. Primarily those students who had already studied three or more years answered the role-playing instructions ($n = 59$) and participated in group interviews ($n = 16$; see Kekäle 1991; 1992).

The students of natural sciences discussed most often the questions concerning their own field of study. The students of the humanities discussed least, while the students of the social sciences located in-between these two extremes. The interviews also gave support to view of the fragmentation and privatization of the broader student groupings (Aittola 1989). When these differences in manners of discussion were interpreted, it occurred that the department of the natural sciences had a strong culture (strongly held common values and assumptions), which also enables the students to interact and discuss with ease. The discussions of the students were often dealing with the environmental questions and so called 'green values'. Well in line with these issues, the strongly held background assumptions of these students seemed to be 1) humanity is part of the nature and should not try to rule it and 2) their own "fact knowledge" versus "theories and opinions" of the students of

other fields of study – including forestry and physics – who, according to these students, don't care about the environmental issues and are sticking to their "humanistic" and "unscientific" worldviews. The students of humanities had cultural ambiguities and conflicts. Discussions were interrupted because of deep disagreements at the basic assumptions -level. For example the students constantly ended up arguing about whether they should study individually or together (the nature of human relationships; see Schein 1985), but consensus was not found (see Kekäle 1991).

My intention was not to criticize these assumptions per se. The point is that the cultural differences of the student groups help us to understand the differences in their manners of discussion. The cultural features may in part be typical to these disciplines, although on the basis of interviews there seems to be also variation depending on the department, subgroups and individual (see also Häyrynen et.al. 1992). After studying the first department for several years, it seems to me that the climate is excellent among the staff as well. Many of the researchers share the 'green values', but they are much more critical towards their own thinking than these students were. One might say that the researchers seem to share consciously held and preferred *values*, while some of the students held taken for granted *basic assumptions* (see Schein 1985).

b) Organizational Cultures of a University Department

The second research (Kekäle 1993a) is a case study dealing with organizational cultures of a university department. The aim was to understand the history of the department and also the leadership, practices, social relationships and -processes within the studied department. The small department studied has two separate subjects or main lines of study, here described as *courses a* and *b*. The study started with interviews with three teachers and a group interview with four students. According to Schein (1985), the study of a culture should be carried out in co-operation with a motivated insider. Consequently, one teacher who was motivated to discuss the history of the personnel was interviewed twice more after the first interviews. In addition to this participant observation during group discussions, written documents and annual reports on the department were analyzed. Two teachers commented on the final analysis of the culture.

On the basis of the data I formed an interpretation concerning the organizational cultures of the department during the late eighties. The cultural differences of the courses seemed to be connected to different leadership styles of the courses. The culture of *course a* was individualistic. Teachers were not very motivated to supervise students. The background assumption seemed to be that everyone should take care of himself; your success depends only on yourself. The students of the course pointed out that they are expected to work on their master's thesis on their own, which had also been explicitly expressed by the supervising teachers sometimes. The professor had clearly orientated himself to tasks outside the department. Historically, it has been quite common in Finnish academic culture to stress the importance of academic freedom and the importance of the individual's own work and talents when dealing with success (see Häyrynen et al. 1992, 17–18). In contrast to the teachers of the course a, the teachers of the *course b* had taken their teaching tasks much more seriously and they also stressed the importance of social support and supervision. The teachers of the course valued both teaching and research tasks of the department. They tended to have much closer interaction with each other and with the students than the teachers of the course a. The teachers of the course b seemed to operate on the basis of the assumption that students are basically perfectible, but they should be helped during their studies. About fifteen years ago, the course b got a new leader who criticized the traditionally individualistic nature of academic studies and stressed the importance of the effective supervision of the master's thesis as well as postgraduate studies. Since then, the students in the course b have been encouraged to consult the teachers any time during the day with their problems. These changes proved to be successful. According to the teachers the more effective supervision has contributed remarkably to the growth of the numbers of the annually graduated students. Statistics show that course b produced annually 1,5–4 times more graduates than course a during a period of several years. Later, there have been changes in key personnel and the whole situation is about to change.

c) Leadership Cultures in Different Departments

The third research is a preliminary study (Kekäle 1994a) which deals with academic lead-

ership in different disciplinary and departmental contexts. During the spring 1994, I interviewed altogether thirty (30) researchers in eight departments. Each interview lasted approximately 1½ – 2½ hours. These lengthy interactive interviews were organized on the basis of Schein's (1985), Becher's (1989) and Tierney's (1988) theoretical frameworks. Audiotapes were then typed by a professional typist in WordPerfect form. When typed, the interviews equalled to 515 pages of written text (for details, see Kekäle 1994a). The department to be studied were chosen to represent different disciplinary cultures on the basis of Tony Becher's (1989) study 'Academic Tribes and Territories'. So I chose the departments of **physics, biology, history** and **sociology** at two Finnish universities. The aim was to identify leadership cultures that have worked well and are considered as good and valid by the researchers of the given department. On the basis of the interviews different types of such leadership cultures emerged. The leadership cultures were quite different in the departments of physics (in the other leading groups are favoured, while the other has a culture based on individual leadership) as well as in the departments of biology (important decisions made in leader groups or on the basis of discussions open to the whole staff). Along with these different leadership cultures, some more general values and features of the academic culture were also identified since they influence leadership in academic settings: the valuation of academic freedom and research work and the undervaluation of the task of the head of department (for details, see Kekäle 1994a; 1994b).

Closest to the leadership culture labelled as **individual leadership** and decision making is one of the departments of physics. Nearly all decisions are made by the head of department who is also considered to be a very competent researcher. The influence of the collegial councils over the decisions concerning the department has been reduced to the minimum. In fact, the head of the department viewed that his task is similar to the task of a project manager in a company: he assembles research groups, provides funding, gives the group its research tasks and inspects that the tasks will be conducted in time. According to some of his subordinate staff and himself, his style of leadership is much more direct, effective, and initiative than that of the previous head of department – especially in issues connected to the management of the department. Depending on the person, the previous leader-

ship culture was considered as a *laissez faire* leadership, or democratic leadership, which gave the researchers much freedom and valued philosophy and civilization, too.

On the other hand, many of the interviewed post-doctorate researchers of the department seem to work quite independently and freely on their own projects. According to them, the leadership styles of the previous and current heads of departments are not remarkably different, nor had they heard much expressions on visions or strategies of survival by the leaders. While the post-graduate level researchers saw the increased effectiveness of the department as a result of the new leadership culture, many of them attributed it more to the pressures of the changing environment such as budget cuts and competition on reduced resources, which had started well before the change of leader. According to them, the current head of department had, however, supported the changes. Compared to the previous leader, he also raises more expectations when the productivity or the effectiveness of the projects is concerned.

Why are the opinions of the doctors and younger researchers different? One possible interpretation is the following: the position of these groups of researchers in relation to the head of department seems to be different. For the older researchers the head of department is mostly a colleague in the position of trust. For the younger researchers he is – in this case – a supervisor and the leader of the research project. Thus, also the leadership style when dealing with these groups should be different. As Hersey & Blanchard (1988) point out, direct guidance, support, and leading should diminish when the abilities and competence of subordinates increases to the expert level.

All in all, no great criticism was expressed by the staff. The main problem was seen to deal with the flow of information. Changes in leadership style had been well in line with the expectations and hopes of at least some members of the staff. They considered the new leadership style to be better than the previous, since the expectations were clearer and the performance of the department had increased remarkably in recent years. Also most of the doctors credit the head of the department for his contribution, where there is no reason for major complaints. It is possible that in the future the developing leadership culture may change as a result of the appointments of new key personnel.

In the department of physics (and biology) at

the other university the important decisions are made by **leading groups** which consists of professors and the leaders of the research projects, totalling about ten persons. On some major issues, the proposal of the leading group is further discussed by the whole personnel at the collegial council, but no major changes are usually made. According to the current head of department, the tradition of collegial decision making based on discussions in the leading group originates from the initiative of a nowadays retired emeritus professor. The choice of speciality within physics has been to a great extent his idea, too, as well as the change of the head of the department in periods of (nowadays) two to four years. It is the task of the head of the department to call together the leading group, when important issues are to be discussed. According to the interviewed researchers – as well the members of the staff of the other department in which where a similar practice is used – their leadership culture is considered to be good and work well as it minimizes conflicts and provides more information for the needs of decision making. In fact, the leadership culture is so strong that the individual leaders or heads of departments can not make important decisions on their own. The departure from the tradition would cause objections and complaints, and such decisions would not be considered to be good and valid. However, in the other, previously discussed department of physics, individual decision making seems to be considered as a normal manner and to raise no objections.

In the other of the studied departments of biology, **decisions are made on the basis of discussions by virtually the whole staff**. The interaction among the staff seems to work on a daily and a very open basis, during meetings and coffee breaks. In everyday communication status hierarchies are not stressed or respected. The leadership of the long time professor and other important members of the staff has been democratic and broadminded all the time. It seems that a strong leadership culture has been constructed by the core members of the staff, many of which have been working in the department for decades. This kind of leadership can be described as follows: it is not direct but leadership from the background, it values people and academic freedom, and emphasizes human relations and necessary work conditions, not much administration.

When discussing leadership the professors did stress somewhat more the importance of assert-

iveness and ability to make decisions *when needed*, but, generally speaking, no major differences in opinions were found. The researchers interviewed presented quite unanimous opinions on the leadership culture of the department, in their respect for academic freedom, as well as on the valuation of the leadership and decision making based on discussions open to whole staff. The members of the staff stressed that strong individual leader would not be successful in their department because of the existing leadership culture: that kind of leader would spoil the climate, which has so far been considered as excellent by both the staff and the students. Decision making by professors in *leading groups* would *not* be accepted, either. In some cases it had been tested, but some members of the staff were in interviews clearly against: it would violate the central values of democracy and open participation⁶.

On the basis of these interviews the case seems to be that leadership cultures do indeed differ in different departments, even within a given disciplinary context. The leadership pattern used and considered as good in one department would not necessarily work – or may even lead to disaster – in the other⁷. Some leadership cultures also seem to differ in the ways they stress human relations or task oriented behaviour. According to various studies, the leaders often tend to prefer or stress one of these at the expense of the other, although they could, and should, complement each other (Lönnqvist 1985, 10). How can we evaluate these leadership cultures? On the basis of previous research, Hogan et. al (1994) claim that the best way of evaluating leaders is on the basis of *the performance of the team and the ratings of the subordinates, peers or supervisors*. Empirical literature suggests that these sources are correlated. There are also problems connected with this kind of evaluation. To be a realist, the data needed to make the first kind of evaluation are often difficult to obtain or

badly contaminated by other factors (Hogan, Curphy & Hogan 1994, 496). It was noted by many departmental heads that the performance of a department is basically based on the work of the researchers. In universities, where the duties are not clear, the problem is how to measure performance? (Birnbbaum 1989, 11). However, it was thought that these rough indicators tell something about the performance of the departments and the leaders, and are thus enough for the purposes of the preliminary research. All the departments discussed above can be considered to be productive on the basis of the official performance indicators and statistics: they are higher than the (at least local) average when the years of professorships are compared to the number of postgraduates. The leadership patterns were also, generally speaking, considered to be good and productive by the subordinates. There seems to be many different ways to accomplish good leadership. Leadership and management issues are not universally valid, but they are always connected with a given period, branch or culture within which they have been produced (Lahti-Kotilainen 1992, 29; Smith & Peterson 1988; Juuti 1989, 196).

But why are these leadership cultures different? The following views emphasize the importance of the psychological and sociopsychological processes in the formation of the leadership cultures of a department. There is no obligatory and formal training for the departmental level academic leaders in Finnish universities; the researchers of the departments studied are, by their training, experts in their own field of study, not in management or leadership issues⁸. Traditional academic freedom and the lack of general leadership training gives each academic leader and department an opportunity to follow their own ideas, visions, and assumptions about 'good' and 'proper' leadership (compare to Schein 1985, section 3). As argued above, unique leadership patterns are probably further strengthened by the relative autonomy and independency of each department. At Finnish universities the financial management has been extensively decentralized recently, and the heads of the departments are now in charge of the use of the funds of their department. This process further stresses the in-

⁶ In the departments of biology and sociology the democratic leadership was valued per se. In the opinion of some assistants, however, routine decisions which do not have relevance for the researchers, could be made by the head of the department alone, which would save the time of the rest of the staff.

⁷ Birnbbaum (1989, 203) reaches a basically similar conclusion when discussing leadership in academic institutions. This is also my interpretation, although — generally speaking — democratic leadership is often considered as the best alternative, when the 'subordinates' are experts, well capable and willing to participate in making decisions (Juuti 1989).

⁸ In my opinion the interviewed researchers did have many very good insights and ideas dealing with leadership in academic settings. In many cases their views were different from each other, but their ideas were logical and had often proved to be successful and work well in the context of their own department.

dependency of the departments: now conflicts and difficult problems have to be solved within the basic units, not at the level of the faculty or the university (Hölttä 1993). Because of these reasons it is probable that academic departments in general have produced unique leadership- and organizational cultures, at least in the quite stable circumstances of the past. Nowadays the departments do experience hard external pressures in the form of radical budget cuts and the decentralization of management (Hölttä 1993; Hölttä & Halonen 1994). However, in order to understand how the existing leadership cultures can change, it is important to understand better what these leadership cultures are like and how they have been constructed in the first place. In that work theoretical tools and models such as Schein's (1985) theory can be very helpful.

5. DISCUSSION; LEADERSHIP AND THE DYNAMICS OF CULTURE

Leadership and cultures as well as organizations can be interpreted from many different theoretical frames of reference or standpoints (Morgan 1986; Frost et.al. 1992; Birnbaum 1989). Also universities and departments may be too complex to be grasped 'as such'; we have to take some kind of theoretical perspective(s) and limit our view only to some relevant points. As Becher (1989, 4) puts it: "any piece of research which does not aspire to be encyclopedic and all-embracing must start from a particular perspective". In this paper, I have viewed academic departments from the perspective of organizational culture research, stressing the integration perspective of organizational culture research (see Kekäle 1993b). It was argued and illustrated by three different studies that individual departments do often have strong and unique cultures, which may have a sustaining influence on numerous everyday affairs of the departments. My approach emphasized the existing cultures of the departments, but it is of course impossible to capture the whole richness and dynamics of these cultures in short written descriptions.

I believe that *by the means of research* it is often much easier to understand and describe these cultures than to change them from outside by adopting a critical perspective. As argued above, academic freedom and the traditionally independent status of the professors, researchers and the departments tend to stress the *internal* factors in the formation and change of cul-

tures of academic departments. Academic leaders such as professors do often have more power in the formation of traditions and habits of thought in university departments, but leadership is not the only important aspect affecting the cultures of the departments. Also intentions, interests and values of the other members of the organization, as well as external, disciplinary and random factors may influence developing culture. However, in a mature organization the *culture* may define what is, for example, to be thought of as 'leadership' or how authority and power are allocated and managed (Schein 1985, 321).

Should the academic leaders, then, try to build up coherent and strong cultures? Whether or not it is their intention, people usually learn and construct culture when they interact and deal with common problems they are facing. If a leader doesn't want to 'lead', one possible lesson learned by 'subordinates' may be that everyone may do as he pleases, which may turn into a tradition in the long run. Anyway, people in organizations (and also in academic departments) usually try more or less to organize their work and arrange their ways of co-operation in order to feel comfortable and to get their work done. Also different scientific schools can be considered as cultures which may try to pursue different goals, view research problems from different angles and lay stress on different aspects of the phenomena under study. These schools often evolve around some leading researchers, and different schools may be in doctrinal controversy with each other. The controversies between different cultural units also indicate that shared cultural meanings form, at least to some extent, a necessary basis for mutual understanding and co-operation. This importance of shared understandings and meanings in social settings has been stressed by classical sociologists such as Durkheim, Weber and Parsons (Habermas 1984), and also by philosophers such as Gadamer, Arendt, Rorty, and Habermas (Bernstein 1985, 225–226). Many central officers and academic leaders follow this line of thinking and "seek to be rational and consistent and to offer stability and happiness" (Clark 1983, 275).

But if we follow different traditions of thought, we might end up stressing *disorder* and *change* over consistency and stability⁹. Clark (1983, 273)

⁹ The idea of social structures and a steady culture has been problematized and questioned in post-structuralist thinking (see, for example, Sturrock 1979; Burrell 1988) and later by researchers repre-

points out some of the pragmatic advantages of disorder and ambiguity in higher education systems. Strict laws, traditions, steady structures and cultures may diminish the future flexibility: *"If a system avoids the zigs and zags of change in order to be consistent, its need for change builds up and its capacity to accept change weakens. The drift is then toward the revolutionary situation, the day when changes can no longer be held off but the old regime has lost the capacity to adapt (Clark 1983, 273)"*. In universities, where freedom of thought is considered as a necessary condition of creative work, fixed premises, strong cultures and sanctions may prevent innovations and new insights. Consequently, the ideal decision making considering theoretical issues and the subject matters of a research comes close to an ideal speech situation (Habermas 1984) in which power and position are not the means for the legitimization of arguments. Rather, conclusions and decisions are reached in an open discussion, in which only the empirical evidence and the power of arguments counts and the best argument wins (see Kekäle 1994a). But it is also possible that the rapidly changing environment makes it necessary for the departments to change their culture somehow in the future. The more ideal we consider the culture, the longer and the more successfully the ideas, assumptions, and values dealing with them have been working – and thus become part of the deeper levels of culture – the more difficult these changes might prove to be (see Schein 1985; Gagliardi 1986). However, mature academic systems may also know something about adaptation and evolution that new systems have to learn (Clark 1983b); it all depends on the cultural ability to learn and stay flexible. Recent emphasis on organizational learning reflects this kind of thinking.

Thus, in the case of cultures the two sides of the coin seem to be that a strong culture – shared values and assumptions – may give security, mobilize and unify, but also cause stagnation, censor 'deviant' and creative thinking, and hinder the organizations from changing. It was argued that organizational and social structures – such as norms, values, and basic assumptions – as well as behaviour constructing them can be considered as processes, potentially changing and

evolving, but some of these structures tend to be more enduring than others. However, each and every department has, at least in broad sense, some kind of cultural features, which may differ in time and place (e.g. how consistent, ambivalent or fragmented they are). What these cultures are like, and at what level the commitment of the staff to them might be – these are to a great extent empirical questions to be considered and discussed after a deep qualitative study with the insiders of the group in question (Schein 1985; 1991). In new and challenging situations it is important to find solutions valid just for the given department and its culture, since different departments do often face challenges in different ways and they do also have different kind of strengths and problems. The practice used and considered as good in one department or academic field would not necessarily work – or may even lead to disaster – in the other. Consequently, the development work within the academic departments should be carried out in co-operation with the academic staff who are experts in their own field of study, starting with the analysis of the cultures of the departments.

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senting the fragmentation perspective of the organizational culture research (see Frost et al. 1991). It is not possible to discuss this central but complex issue here in more detail (see Kekäle 1993a; 1993b).

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