

Combining Methods in Organizational Culture Analysis

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The purpose of this paper is to address certain methodological problems in an empirical study of organizational culture. The paper bases on a study which focused on underlying or deep structures of a health care organization. The study emphasized the cognitive structures of professional groups.

The empirical cultural analysis of organizations is always a demanding methodological issue. A researcher can choose pure fieldwork techniques and interpretative approaches on one hand or clearly quantitative methods on the other. Researchers in the field, however, know that "qualitative" and "quantitative" methods are not sharply inconsistent and both have advantages and disadvantages. There are no better-worse-rules. It depends on overall chosen research form, topic and emphasis which kind of methodological set is consistent and optimal.

In this paper the certain combinations of the methodological alternatives are discussed. The combination of interviews, participant observation, document analysis and questionnaires based on the view that large organizations are truly multidimensional entities. For the members organizational reality includes formal structures and environmental relations, internal competition and conflicts of power, and shared cognitive and emotional phenomena. This conceptualization of organizations leads to questions, how we could gather valid data of it in an empirical study. The methodological alternatives described here are not comprehensive answers to the question but present one effort to handle the organizational complexity in the organizational study.

1 AN INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to address the methodological problems in an empirical study of organizational culture. I have a perception that the organizational culture research closely relates to the broader methodological considerations in social sciences. The pictures, images, and metaphors that scholars and academics, who are involved in the cultural perspective have created about organizations would be impossible without expanding interpretative approaches. The interpretative approaches which include many different traditions have replaced the dominating status of positivistic approaches in the organizational research especially late 70's and 80's.

If a researcher takes the positivistic methods of social sciences as the rule, the demand for exact measurement, quantitative data, and the laws of hypothetical explanation exclude many cultural structures and events in an organizational analysis. This is simply because the certain cultural phenomena of organizations exists on the intellectual and emotional levels of human beings and it becomes apparent in the social interactions of organization members and in meanings of informal and formal social structures. The cultural analysis in an organization can focus on phenomena like basic assumptions, shared preference systems, social norms, ideologies, language, psychodynamic processes or symbolic meaning systems (Pettigrew 1979, Smircich 1983, Allaire & Firsirotu 1984, Schein 1985, Alvesson & Berg 1988). The cultural analysis as a perspective, thus, could not be conducted without interpretative paradigms (Burrell & Morgan 1979, Van Maanen 1979, 1988, Gubrium 1988, Noblit & Hare 1988). As John Van Maanen (1979, 520) puts it: "... such contextual understandings and emphatic objectives are unlikely to be achieved without direct, firsthand and more or less intimate knowledge of a research setting..."

The distinguished methodological (the term methodological here has narrowed epistemological meaning) orientations have been a basis for the broader theoretical/paradigmatic debate concerning the culture and symbolic meanings of organizations. On one side, there are researchers who emphasize the "hard" phenomena of organizations, like formal structures and efficiency of material resources, and the "rational" investigation including concrete development activities. Some of these researchers tend to introduce the cultural concepts in their analysis according to the logic derived from positivism. They define a culture as one isolateable factor of an organization.

On the other side are the researchers emphasizing the human side of organizations, including the above-mentioned cultural and symbolic structures and events and, for example, their relations to the performance of a corporation. These organizational researchers prefer the "soft" analysis of organizations, called interpretative, qualitative, ethnographic or phenomenological approaches. To them, an organization does not have the culture, but it is a holistic metaphor about organizations (Morgan 1986, Calas & Smircich 1987, Barley et al. 1988).

These alternative methodological orientations have their keen, sometimes rather fanatic, defenders. Within the organizational researchers involved cultural and symbolic approaches the methodological and theoretical borderlines have generally stated between practitioners and academics (Barley et al. 1988.) In real (science) life, however, the studies conducted on this specific research area present more or less mixed methodological solutions between the above separate entities. Researchers in the field generally share the knowledge that "quantitative" and "qualitative" methodological orientations are not sharply inconsistent (Jick 1979, Van Maanen 1979, Hofstede et al 1990) and both have advantages and disadvantages (Downey & Ireland 1979, Nikkila 1984). It depends absolutely on the overall chosen research form, topic and emphasis stated by scientific questions which kind of methodological set is consistent and optimal.

I will not go further into a general discussion about qualitative and quantitative methods and their limitations or usefulness in organizational study (Van Maanen et al. 1982, Siehl & Martin 1988). Instead, I will turn to the methodological problems of an empirical cultural analysis

of organizations. I will describe briefly the research methods used in a case study in which the culture of a large Finnish primary health care organization was analyzed (Kinnunen 1990). The study mainly focused on the cultural structures and processes of the professional groups of the organization, on management and administrative decision making, and less on the client-related work cultures (Goffman 1961, Menzies 1960, Gubrium & Buckholdt 1982, Peterson 1988).

The health center, publicly funded and administrated, provides primary health care services for approximately 80 000 inhabitants of the Kuopio city. The personnel include over 700 professionals and supporting workers. The functions or services of the organization can be divided into six categories: 1) preventive care, 2) doctor visits, 3) dental care, 4) out-patient home care, 5) in-patient care for elderly and 6) environmental health.

The study of the health care organization emphasized the methodological and theoretical problems of cultural analysis of an organization. However, some interesting empirical results were also discussed in terms of developing practical policies of health centers in Finland. Before I will delve into the details of the methods used in the analysis, it might be helpful to clarify a general schema for the methodological description. The schema will be presented first briefly and then specifically from the point of view of the case.¹

2 THE SYMMETRY OR ASYMMETRY OF METHODS IN AN ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURAL STUDY

Each researcher needs to think carefully of the balance between an empirical research object, a leading theoretical framework and used methods, when he or she designs a study. The task is difficult and complicate and, thus, a researcher need the advice and guidance of senior scholars . There are, indeed, several methodological forms and strategies to design a given study.

Researchers' basic function is to make a certain piece of real world better understandable. In many cases they have also explicit or implicit intentions to participate in a organization. This practical affair might be, to them, the number one criteria. The researchers, especially those in the practice related research fields like

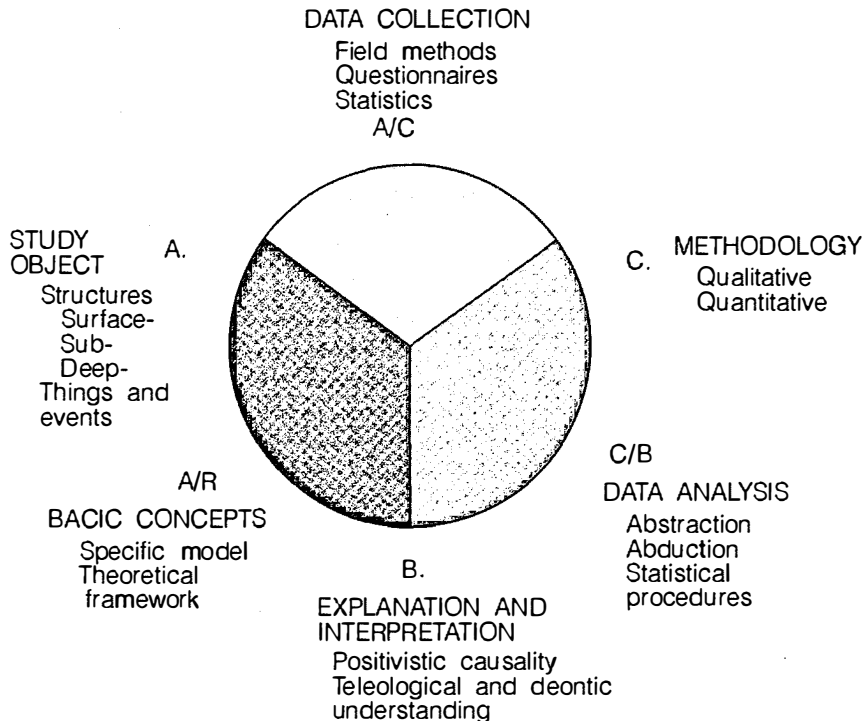


Figure 1. The balance between empirical study object, theoretical framework in a empirical cultural analysis of organizations.

health management, occasionally make emphatic efforts to become involved in the organization and make it "bigger and better" in the American way. Researchers' consciousness of this is very important, because the clinician's role, in Edgar Schein's (1987b) terms, has several consequences for data collection, researcher-organization-relationships and report writing.

Many academics are more interested in theoretical and methodological issues. The empirical object of analysis, if even needed, is not similarly significant for them. They "utilize" a given organization as a laboratory or a playground in positive sense of these terms. After all, the methodological setting, the theoretical framework, and the empirical study object should be in symmetry and carefully harmonized. The symmetry here means that the theoretical framework of a study really define as completely as possible the empirical phenomena and the methods applied in data collection and analysis fits to produce correct information. Success or failure in this phase of study design will impact the rest of the whole

study process. The symmetry will be one of the major criterion used in the evaluation of the scientific competence of the study. This fact should not be underestimated, especially by students and faculty members.

The basic alternatives of the methodological choices are elaborated in the figure 1.²

Conducting a cultural study can be said to be like navigating a ship, with the researcher at the "helm". The helm does not only turn to one direction, instead, a researcher turns it constantly during the "navigation" of the study apparatus toward the purposes and goals of the project. The movements a researcher does depend on given contextual factors, on one side, and his or her skills and capacities, on the other. In real life, again, colorful differences appears in both sets of factors determining the style and performance of navigation.

In the case of a typical empirical research process, the first concern is mostly on an empirical study object (A). At the very beginning the researcher selects, even tentatively, the main purposes and topic of his or her study interests. For example, does the study centralize

on the formal surface-structure, or on the factors related to the competition, power and control mechanisms (sub-structure)? As presumed here, the focus of analysis might be on the cultural and symbolic aspects of organizational actions and behavior (deep-structure). At this step, the most difficult task for the beginner is: How can this incompletely specified empirical phenomena be formulated into scientifically relevant questions? This brings the researcher to face the difficulties in distinguishing a) issues belonging to real organizations from b) the theoretical conceptions. The latter are intentional cognitive processes and illustrate the very nature of scientific thinking.

After the more or less successful formulation of the study questions, a single researcher ordinarily goes back to the theories and to broader scientific thinking (B). What kind of paradigm and specific theory is consistent and comprehensive with the phenomena? What can we learn from previous research concerned with the main issues of this study? Is it possible to follow certain theoretical frames? Again, a researcher must choose some directions due to limitations of the available resources. At this phase a researcher adopts the principles of given broader scientific tradition or metaparadigm. In terms of this, the influence of the faculty and research group is remarkable. The paradigmatic orientation of researchers base more on the socialization of research culture of the faculty than on the intentional choices.

The next concern will be the specific methods (C). Which methodological techniques would produce valid and reliable data and information about the phenomena, stated by theoretical analysis? Are there already tested measurement tools available? Could quantitative methods, like questionnaires or official statistical data be used in data collection (A/C)? Is it necessary to use qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews, participant observation and picture or written document analysis?

This all is included, in one form or in other, in the ordinary study plan. In reality, the different elements of a study, separated in one way here for analytical purposes, are very closed and overlapping with each other. A researcher continuously rethinks the symmetry of these elements during the "navigation" process — specifying and checking. Sometimes it is harmless for beginners to follow given well-tested methodological guidelines. We can also say that certain paradigmatic or theoretical selec-

tions necessarily limit and determine both the empirical and the methodological possibilities. For example, if a researcher chooses the interpretative metaparadigm and their formulations in sociology as main stream of a study, it is clear that the survey methods have certain limitations.

After this demanding thought process, a researcher can let the study "go out there". She or he can enter to the organization(s) and start concrete data collection: field work, questionnaire mailing, analysis of statistics (A/C). The methodological handbooks and original study reports in social sciences declare wide variation in how certain techniques should be conducted. This is why I am passing over the details here. However, the navigation continues step by step to the data analysis (C/B).

On the basis of achieved results, a researcher is able to describe, interpret or explain the analyzed empirical phenomena in relevant theoretical terms. The success with earlier stages of the study process determines the methodological validity and theoretical consistence of the conclusions about the analyzed empirical phenomena. The whole process will, usually, be published either as a paper in a journal or an original monography — research report — subject to public criticism.

The principles of a study process, simplified here, does not always run to a beautiful end without constraints. Sometimes the whole process fails, or certain parts of it. It is worth to remember the following: There are a few studies finished according to plan and theory, however, not even the studies which we have learned to respect as the classics of organizational research run without problems.

3 THE PURPOSES AND GOALS OF THE CASE STUDY

My case study (Kinnunen 1990) started in 1987 and was aimed toward doctoral dissertation. It took place at the University of Kuopio at the Department of Nursing and Health Administration. The purpose of the study was to analyze the underlying or deep structure of a organization according to cultural perspective, which meant in this study I would analyze artifacts, norms, values and basic assumptions of the organization. (see Schein 1985, 1987a, Lundberg 1985).

The study emphasized the cognitive struc-

tures of professional groups. The professional groups were the units of analysis. The study had four general aims: 1) To obtain theoretically consistent knowledge about the hidden social relationships of the organization. 2) To compare the cultural scene, the basic assumptions of the professional subcultures of physicians, nurses and managers of the organization. 3) To analyze the meaning of the organizational culture and its connections to the use of knowledge in decision-making concerning administrative issues. 4) To combine qualitative and quantitative research methods as well as interpretative and explanatory approaches in order to understand more fully the multidimensional characteristics of a large health care organization.

The guiding methodological principle in the study was a intention to integrate explanatory and interpretative perspectives in the same study (Jick 1979). Behind the methodological integration efforts were four general premises. First of all, I was aware of the critics of the current positivistic orientation in organizational and administrative research. Second, in many qualitative studies conducted on the research field in Finland, the results were lists of original data, as described by informants, or results presented as the quantifications of the original qualitative data. In many cases, the "interpretation process of a qualitative analysis" in its true meaning (Spradley 1979, Nobilt & Hare 1988) was missing, at least, it was incompletely reported.

The third premise involved the theory of organizational culture. I was dissatisfied with previous research, that I had seen so far, how the cognitive processes, emotional elements and social interactions — i.e. cultural structures and events — were connected to the other dimension of an organization. The fourth point was the fact that organizational culture analyses, reported until 1987 and which were commonly known in Europe, were lacking empirical analysis. Mats Alvesson and Per-Olof Berg (1988) mention in their review of studies involving organizational culture, that only approximately one third of them included empirical data at all. This is not the whole truth, however, a great deal of the empirical cultural analysis of organizations is published in, especially American, the "substantial" journals (Barley et. al. 1988) and were not always titled as "cultural" analysis.

Consequently, the leading overview in the

study was that the cultural, social and material elements of organizations were closely overlapping in the real organizations. As a result of this, I tried to prevent a trap in which selected methodological and paradigmatic principles would reduce the holistic phenomena about organizational reality.

4 THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE CASE STUDY

Let's go back to the "navigation" schema. To me, the empirical reality (A) forms a cluster of multidimensional relationships between three elements; 1) the formal purposes and strategies of the organization, hierarchies, decision making bodies and division of tasks and overall material resources; 2) the informal social interactions and internal competition with limited resources and with informal status within professional groups and between individuals; 3) cultural phenomena, like shared basic assumptions, values and preferences of subgroups, shared social norms and behavioral and symbolic artifacts.

This tentative view about organizational reality got me in the theoretical discussion (B) about integration of explanatory and interpretative approaches (von Wright 1971, 1977 Jick 1979, Apel 1984, Warnke 1984, Fielding & Fielding 1986, Hofstede et. al. 1990). The problem is not specific in organizational research, but very general in the all social sciences. The integration of the explanatory and interpretative approaches in one study is both a philosophical and a practical question which makes possible methodological challenges and, probably, relative confusion.

The next decision in my navigation concerned the specific conceptual framework of the study (A/B). I accepted the perspective of Fombrun (1986) that different elements of organization exist all the time in a given organization. It is merely a question of theoretical and methodological tools to take them properly into account in an analysis.

In order to understand the significance of cultural or deep structures and events for other organizational structures and processes, I choose the "cognitive" organizational culture perspective. The basic analytical tools of my analysis were modified from Schein's model (Van Maanen & Schein 1979, Schein 1985), but the study highlighted and narrowed more to cognitive

structures and processes, such as use of knowledge and information in the professional groups.

I have to stress again that there are many other theoretical conceptions, but I applied the cognitive approach about organizational culture as a consequence of the nature of health care organizations. The work processes in primary health care and the qualifications of professional skills emphasize intellectual thinking, problem solving and use of rational, value, and practical knowledge (Dougherty 1985, Pihlanto 1988, Venkula 1988, Sarvimaki 1988). The knowledge-intensive nature of health care organizations is poorly studied and hidden behind technical caring activities. In my study, the professional group of physicians, nurses, and managers were the analytical units of the organization. To some extent the groups represented separate and competing subcultures.

Then the next complicated theoretical problem appeared: how would it be possible to bind together elements belonging to surface, sub and deep structures? Is it at all possible to do? In order to clarify these relations, I used the concepts of decision-making as an additional theoretical element (Golembiewsky 1965, Simon 1979, Nutt 1984, Bate 1984, Bettenhausen & Murnighan 1985). The theoretical ideas of group decision-making (Hirokawa & Scherhoorn 1986) were very useful to generate the theoretical construction for empirical understanding of how the formal administrative decisions actually are created as a result of intensive group process, for example, in the top-management group. The formal "rational" planning and decision making is actually influenced or determined by the shared cognitive assumptions of members of the top management group. Decision making is worth studying as clear cultural phenomena. Afterwards, I was convinced that formal decision making bodies, strategies, rules and schedules give only a loose framework. The real content of the decisions and decision making processes are mostly cultural events. The ethnographic modeling of group decisions is a very interesting direction in terms of this perspective. For example, Christina Gladwin (1989) presents a method called "ethnographic decision tree modeling". The tree model uses fieldwork techniques to elicit decision criteria from decision makers themselves. These individual criteria are then combined in "expert systems" or "flowchart" which can be programmed on the computer.

In sum, the analysis of the organization based on cultural perspective of organization is specified by the ideas of social cognitive epistemology (Rorty 1979, Goldman 1986). In order to analyze the influence of the cultural factors of different sub groups to the other factors of the organization, the decision-making and especially filtration and use of information as a basis of the decisions, were highlighted. I was surprised at how strongly the managers of the organization believed in "rationality" of the decisions they made, because I had certain doubts about the rationality of the decisions and the use of information in organizations (see Feldman & March 1981).

5 THE SELECTED METHODS FOR DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The conceptual framework described briefly above has significant consequences in terms of research methods (C in figure 1.). How could I get comprehensive information about multidimensional events and structures in the organization? What does triangulation mean in real study process? I began the data collection by an ordinary field method: interviews. The sample included 25 persons (some of them interviewed twice or more) presenting different professional groups at all hierarchical levels of the organization. The interviews were taped and analyzed preliminarily according to Spradley's (1979) methods. This was done before the second data collection phase of participant observation.

I worked at the organization as "management consultant" for three months. My "duty" was related to a development process in the organization called "personal doctor system," (family doctor system) which meant a remarkable reform in terms of the task delivery structures of physicians and nurses. During this time period I had permission to move all around the organization. I discussed with different workers the ongoing changes in their work context, and took part in several formal and informal meetings. The top manager, the chief physician, was the only person who knew precisely my intentions of "consultation". However, the relations between researcher and members of organization were based on trust during and after the project.

The third data collection method was the content analysis of formal written documents:

the minutes of top management team (total 120 meetings from 1977—), official documents of the local health board (1972—1988), official annual reports (1972—1988) and official planning documents (1972—1988).

The results of the study will be skipped over here, because they are reported originally in Kinnunen (1990). Instead, I want to pay attention to a few methodological problems during the data analysis. The "qualitative data analysis" (Bogdan & Taylor 1973, Miles & Huberman 1984, Noblit & Hare 1988) concerning interviews, written documents and participant observation started by the Spradleys' (1979) method. In the analysis I used a sophisticated computer based (Vax-search options) string search and sorting programs (see Pfaffenberger 1988).

I failed to continue to the end by the Spradlian data analyses, because of the nature of my data. The method was very useful to define the semantic relations of the basic "cover and included terms". It also helped to specify and check the basic concept at second interview. The method worked well in the case of relatively narrowed set of information, but I met problems in comparing and tighten separate domains and categories.

The data produced by interviews, participant observation, and document analysis included too large variation of information to create appropriate and compact categories by Spradlian method. As a result of this, I went back to basic theoretical framework and took the basic categories of cultural assumptions as analytical tools, formulated by Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck (1961) which Edgar Schein (1985) has elaborated further. According to the matrix techniques set by Miles & Huberman (1984), I proceeded to formulate reasonable and acceptable patterns of data describing cultural phenomena of the organization and its relations to use of knowledge in the decision making. This transformation in data analysis from open-ended interpretation toward more formulated interpretation was an intentional choice. It meant that I lost segments of information and specificity, but I achieved a more holistic view at the same time. As a result of this, I could interpret and summarize the basic cognitive assumptions of the professional groups of the organization.

I was methodologically dissatisfied with this original report. Consistent with my theoretical and methodological views, I tried to go further on with the methodological formulations. The methodological principle in the whole project

was to start by qualitative field techniques and to attach step by step elements of causal explanation and quantitative techniques. Accordingly, I formulated a questionnaire based on categories of qualitative analysis. It was not only a question of verification of achieved results, but it had also theoretical arguments. The qualitative analysis focused on basic assumptions and cognitive processes of individuals and given groups. The questionnaire, instead, focused on social norms and actions of individuals and groups, logically following the discovered basic assumptions. This based on conceptual thinking that the shared basic assumptions of a group are "products" of conscious and unconscious socialization (Van Maanen 1979, Nikkila; 1984), presenting preconscious practical knowledge, necessary for work-related decision making. The basic assumptions include both rational knowledge (scientific causality) and value knowledge (deontological preferences). If the shared basic assumptions of the health care organization, invented by qualitative field methods are true, they should be truly manifested also on actions of group members. This is why the items of the questionnaire were formulated on behavioral events and in familiar practical terms to the members of the organization.

The information produced by questionnaires in cultural analysis also have limitations. The analysis easily returns to common attitudes of the members of the organization. This leads a researcher out of the deeper meanings of organizational culture.

6 DISCUSSION

The purpose of this paper was to discuss briefly the common methodological problems in empirical analysis of organizational culture. This is a narrowed description of certain methodological solutions applied in one case study. I hope I have succeeded in illustrating a few common "navigation" dilemmas met in any empirical study concerning organizational culture.

In general terms, the development of interpretative approaches, ethnographic methodology and qualitative research methods, including a huge range of varying techniques, has promoted remarkable ways for us to understand about organizational realities. For example, the development activities in Finnish health care

organizations have poorly taken account anything else but formal structures. However, limitations of empirical methods in organizational research prevents the testing and confirmation of the most sophisticated theoretical models in the reality.

I found the ethnographic field methods exciting and absolutely necessary to understanding empirical reality of the primary health care organization, but in some ways they are also clumsy to use. The characteristics of field methods, like limitations of samples, time consuming, high costs, low replicability, theoretical sample and demand for close and intimate relations between researcher and informants, constitute serious practical limitations. This was a reason for efforts of methodological integration in the case study, keeping clearly in mind the limitations of quantitative methods too.

The methodological integration in further studies has also theoretical arguments. As briefly described in this paper, the organizational reality includes, to me, cognitive, emotional, social, and material entities. The real organizations are bottomless wells of "soft" and "hard" data. The problem in a study is how to methodologically touch and handle these overlapping phenomena. The case presented here was not successful in this sense, but experiences were encouraging to try elaborate multimethods further. Many other researchers, a few mentioned in this paper, have also adopted a similar orientation. Nevertheless, the development of methodological integration in an organizational study has serious problems to meet and a lot of work must be done, not the least on the attitudinal level of researchers. I think that combined multimethods are a reasonable alternative in cultural analysis of organizations.

The task is worth doing for clinicians as well as ethnographers of organizations. Otherwise we might be like the medical doctor, who can not a) listen and understand his or her patient, and b) use physical examination techniques. Without either skill he or she will never find the right symptoms of a patient and will fail to specify a correct diagnosis. I think that the risks of "navigators" are similar to the risks of doctors.

FOOTNOTE

1 I wrote this paper mostly on the basis of my own research experiences. The paper is partly based

upon lessons I have learned as a teacher in a graduate program at the University of Kuopio. I have learned a lot by sharing the pain and frustration of the students caused by the difficulties in creating a proper theoretical and methodological construction for their theses. I must say that I have also shared students' fantastic feelings of accomplishment.

2 I need to thank professor Risto Tainio at Business School of Helsinki, who informally presented the basic idea for the figure.

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