

Co-operative identity interpretations and their correspondence with the original cooperative mission

Puusa Anu, UEF Business School, University of Eastern Finland & Davis, Peter, Leicester University/University of Eastern Finland

Abstract

Pellervo is an interest group and a service organization for over 300 Finnish co-operatives. The empirical aspects of this study are based on data collected from Pellervo delegation members with an aim to examine, the extent co-operative values as a social ideology is interpreted among a group that consists of key people in co-operative organizations. Data is interesting from a co-operative perspective because it is taken from a sample of a Pellervo delegation. Pellervo represents the majority of Finnish co-operative organizations. In terms of penetration, Co-operative market share is around 50% of all consumer turnover in Finland. By using qualitative text analysis method we studied how the 27 members of the delegation construct the meaning of co-operative movement and co-operative organization. The aim was to understand how co-operative identity was interpreted and if the interpretations demonstrated consistencies or were largely fragmented and purely personal. Based on the analysis we conclude that the interpretations regarding co-operative identity, its central, distinctive and enduring features, were interpreted with a high degree of uniformity. Since the empirical study is based on the premises of interpretative research paradigm, we believe co-operative identity at a collective level is an evolving phenomenon constructed by individual interpretations converging towards an external measure of the common good. The theoretical and historical material suggest that co-operative ideology should be promoted actively and with high quality in all areas of life in order to create and maintain the identity of co-operative ideology in society.

As to how this can be achieved, our approach, given the controversy around governance and identity considered in our literature review, suggests two lines of enquiry. First an exploration of co-operative leadership and membership; second, an extended dialogue with practitioners and academics who share co-operative values from various disciplines in a joint effort to re-emphasize co-operative education as a cultural, developmental and ideological as well as vocational and technical enterprise.

Keywords: Co-operation, co-operative culture, co-operative movement, ideological identity, leadership, management, organizational identity

1. Introduction

This paper examines co-operative identity construct at an ideological level. The viewpoint is relevant because a coherent ideological identity for co-operation is needed to better manifest co-operation and increase its profile in society. However, there is very little research on this area so far even though identity has been widely studied at individual (Mead, 1934; Albert 1998), group (Tajfel 1982) and organizational levels (Albert & Whetten 1985), and thus our subject has novelty value both theoretically and empirically. To study ideology in the co-operative context is interesting because of the long history and well-established principles of the co-operative movement. In recent times however, one could argue that the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) has faced troubling demutualization's and economic and instrumental cultures appearing in the co-operative movement where sector based silos are often more apparent than inter-sector solidarity. The international leaderships' response was to redefine and re-emphasize co-operative identity. (Book 1992; Macpherson 1995) Book (1992) in particular recognized that the lack of co-operative identity at the societal level was making

it easier for government regimes to interfere with and distort co-operative autonomy. (Book, 1992, p107-109) The proposition that co-operation can be more than a set of alternative businesses models but rather a movement to achieve the vision of its founders and leaders inevitably embraces the societal level, as Nehru in a speech at an international seminar on co-operative leadership in South-East Asia envisioned,

“...to make the cooperative approach the common thinking of India...”

(<https://www.jagranjosh.com/general-knowledge/cooperative-movement-and-cooperative-societies-in-india-1511436454-1>)

What the ICA approach to a degree lacked is recognition that identity needs to be ‘owned’ rather than merely defined. Studies show that the overall awareness of cooperatives and cooperative movement is low (see Tuominen, Jussila, & Rantanen, 2010; Puusa et al., 2013), and people cannot identify with something they do not acknowledge or understand and relate to. The confusion in people’s minds is exacerbated by co-operatives whose management culture reflect that of a for profit business culture. Ideology is not simply a definitional statement it becomes as Nehru put it ‘the common thinking’. Davis (1995) was implicitly taking up this point in his insistence that the ICA Identity Statement needed a definition of *co-operative management* in terms of a servant leadership model. Goedhart (1928; 1995) in his reflection on the importance of co-operation as a philosophical and ethical system was saying this explicitly, and Book, more cautiously, made the same point (1992, 51-52). Gill makes it very clear (2006, pp28-30) that *underlying an external statement of principles and mission there has to be beliefs, attitudes and values within individuals in management and leadership positions and in membership as a whole to reinforce co-operative behavior within co-operative organizations and society.*

The theoretical framework for the empirical research in this paper examines identity as a phenomenon and use the concept of organizational identity (Albert & Whetten 1985; Whetten & Godfrey 1998; Hatch & Schultz 2004) as our starting point and working hypothesis because identity research at an ideological level is almost non-existent. There are exceptions such as Garnet R.G. (1966). Thus, our paper contributes to the identity theory in the field of business studies and to developing discussion of what co-operation needs to be in the contemporary world. But its main significance is raising for discussion fundamental issues of strategic importance concerning whether there is any relevance for ‘co-operation’ as an ideology driving co-operative management and organization towards a relevant co-operative strategy for the movement as a whole rather than in their organizational institutional and business silos.

The empirical data was collected from Pellervo Coop Center’s delegation members. Pellervo is a Finnish apex organization, an interest group and a service organization for about 300 Finnish cooperatives operating in various fields such as agriculture, consumer, banking, dairy, forest, mutual insurance and worker co-op sectors. We chose our target group for two reasons: Firstly, they represent very broadly the key people (administrative and operative management) in co-operatives in Finland. They represent different industries, co-operative types, sizes and organizations that operate geographically in all parts of Finland. Secondly, we argue that they are the only group where ideological identity can be studied without a particular organizational /sector identity excessively biasing the sample. The study context and the target group is relevant also because in relative terms Finland is said to be the most co-operative country in the world, with 81% of its population having a membership with a co-operative. (Co-op4Dev Report, Finland, 2020, 4).

The aim of the article is to explore the perceptions of the people working in key positions of trust and management in various co-operative organizations regarding the cooperative form of business and the cooperative movement and thus increase the understanding of the identity of cooperative movement. The research questions are the following: What kinds of meanings are associated with the co-operative form of business and the cooperative movement? Does a collective understanding regarding the specific features of co-operation exist or are the interpretations fragmented and personal?

The structure of the paper is the following: Next we'll briefly discuss how the concept of identity has been studied in different (individual, group, organization and industry) levels in the contemporary academic literature (see e.g. Puusa 2006; Gioia 1998; Erickson 1964; Tajfel 1982; Barraquier 2013; Steiner 2003). We also discuss the expression of identity, relating to the profound question of a single meta-identity or the construction of multiple identities (see e.g. Pratt and Rafeli 1997; Pratt & Foreman 2000; Foreman & Whetten 2002; Pratt 2016) and their manifestation in practice (see e.g. Puusa 2019; Puusa, Kuittinen & Kuusela 2013).

2. Theoretical views on multilevel identity construct and manifested in co-operative history

There have been fierce ideological conflicts across the history of co-operative development. These tensions have been portrayed in ideological terms, (Backstrom, P 1974, Davis 1996, 2012), but more generally in terms of conflicts within the governance process, Basterretxea, I.; Cornforth, C.; Heras-Saizarbitoria, I. (2020), Birchall, (1997, 2000, 2013), Davis P, (2014), Novkovic, Sonja and Miner, Karen Ed. (2015). We return to this in section 3 below.

The concept of collective organizational identity has its roots in the exploration of identity in an individual level that are based mainly in the theories of James Cooley, George. H. Mead, and Erving Goffman, on the theme of social identity (see Albert & Whetten, 1985). Identity has been extensively studied as a group phenomenon. One of the first who explored identity at the group level was Erickson (1964).

“Erickson (1964) made the important observation that identity not only constitutes a way of seeing or classifying myself that distinguishes me from other people, but it also simultaneously allows me to see myself as similar to a class of individuals with whom I would like to be associated. There is a bit of fine balancing act contained in individuals' wishes to have it both ways, to be both distinctive and non-distinctive, to be a member of a class of people, but set off from those people. Maintaining the balance between similarity and difference is one of the most challenging and interesting issues for the understanding of individual identity as it is for understanding organizational identity” (Gioia 1998, 19-20).

According to Tajfel (1982) a group identity is preserved mainly by intergroup comparisons. In addition groups strive to underline their own positive sides by comparing them to other groups. *“Tajfel's work provides a strong hint that identity constructs have an apparent robustness about them and suggests a good basis for building bridges from individual to organizational conceptualizations of identity.”* (Gioia 1998, 19)

In a more recent study Barraquier (2013, 58) makes an interesting argument that *“group identity is more relevant than organizational identity to understand the organizations' relations with its stakeholders, and consequently, their influence on the organizational identity.”* This is particularly interesting from the standpoint of our discussion as membership solidarity is crucial both for commercial and social objectives. As the former Director of the ICA (1951)

and rapporteur to the ICA Commission on Co-operative Principles (1965-1966) Will Watkins put it; 'for Co-operatives Unity is more important than Democracy'. (Watkins, 1986; 1990, 19). Watkins saw unity as being based on more than a purely economist appeal to self-interest. On the principle of equity Watkins saw co-operators as being concerned not only with the practical issues of an equitable distribution of their organizations surpluses to members but also with the wider question of equity across society as a whole although he rightly qualifies the later with the words 'early co-operators' implying perhaps that this dimension had been diluted or ignored by many of his contemporaries in the consumer movement (ibid, p 73). As the translator of Ernest Poisson's *The Co-operative Republic* there cannot be much doubt about where Will Watkins stood in the ideological struggle for the soul of the co-operative system in terms of 'who do we want to be'?

Many researchers of organizational identity build on the idea that identity is a relative construct formed in interaction with others (see e.g. Albert & Whetten 1985; Ashforth & Mael 1989; Dutton & Dukerich 1991). The concept of organizational identity, which was originally introduced by Albert and Whetten in 1985, embodies the characteristics of an organization, that its members perceive to be central, distinctive, and enduring (or continuing) when past, present and the future is taken into account. (Albert & Whetten 1985; Ravasi & Phillips 2011; Brilliant & Young, 2004; Gioia et al., 2000; Hatch & Schultz, 2002; Whetten 2006; Puusa & Kekäle 2015). Organizational identity answers the questions of "who are we as an organization?" or "who do we want to be?" (Albert & Whetten, 2004; Zamparini & Lurati 2016). Multiple identity manifests itself in practice as multiple answers to the organizational identity question, "Who are we as an organization?" (Albert & Whetten 1985; Ashforth & Mael, 1996; Pratt & Foreman 2000).

Puusa (2009) discussed the manifestation of the identity features and classified different kind of identity interpretations as reflecting a shallow or profound identity conception. In addition, Puusa, Kuittinen & Kuusela (2013) further discuss how the features of identity and its manifestation are described and how identity is expressed in practice. They ask, can a feature that is related in the organization and its operations be regarded as central if it is not 'believed in', and nothing is based on it in practice? They continue; the question concerns whether the dimension of centrality is defined by its description, its manifestation in practice or by the belief in its importance. Thus, they suggest that a dimension of belief or emotions might be essential in the attempts to understand the concept of identity and the nature of the social phenomenon it represents and hence in understanding the gap between Co-operative identity statements and Co-operative practice that prompted the revision by the ICA in the 1990s (see also Winkler 2018) .

According to Puusa (2009, 17), the applicability of the identity concept at multiple levels of analysis and its capacity for integrating analytical insights at the micro-, meso, and macro-levels underscores its cohering potential. For example, a concept of industry identity emerges when a set of same kind of organizations "*become understood as being organizations of the same kind in the sense that they do same thing and share important characteristics*" (Rajwani et al. 2015, 228). Carol and Swaminathan (2000) have studied identity in microbrewery industry, Steiner (2003) in real estate industry, Rao et al. (2003) in catering business and Lounsbury (2007) in financial sector of mutual funds. Podnar (2004) calls industry identity with a term 'branch identity', which, in his opinion can be seen as a preliminary condition for building organizational identity. However, we feel it is self-evident that Co-operative activists have always seen themselves as part of a values based social movement that requires an ideological understanding. We suggest that the principle of Co-operative Education has always

meant to go beyond mere technical and governance training. In general ideology often is key to self-identity and loyalty to the state and or particular religions and a broader agenda justifying capitalist ideology is clearly articulated in much of the brand-based advertising that saturates our media.

3. The historical record on Co-operation as an ideological vision for future society

Another preliminary condition for building organizational identity is how it manifests in the life and example of founders and leaders of institutions and organizations. The emphasis on co-operative democratic governance tends to distract academic attention away from the importance of leadership in the co-operative context. The work by Jack Shaffer (1999) is littered with co-operative leaders who had profound personal commitment to co-operation as a social philosophy and who gave their lives over to promoting co-operative ideology. Father Jose Maria Arizmendi is one obvious example of a Charismatic leader whose personal simplicity and commitment to co-operative organization was a light to the Basque peoples throughout the dark night of Fascism in Spain. Robert Owen, Vansittart Neal, Henry Hall (UK), Raiffeissen (Germany) Norah Herlihy in Ireland, (Power et al, 2011) H.S. Liang (founder to the Chinese Industrial Co-operatives), Vaikunth Mehta (India) Desjardins, Coady, Laidlaw, (Canada), Gerbard, Hannes (Finland), Lufti, Omar (Egypt) are all examples of leaders with a profound commitment to Co-operative solutions and many to a wider co-operative ideology. Max Weber's approach was to categorize leadership types on the basis of their source of Legitimation. Davis (2018) developed this Weberian concept of ideal type leaders defined by their source of Legitimation but in this case Legitimation and typology is grounded in commitment to co-operative values principles and purpose.

The very idea of co-operation as a social moment has always been premised on a critique of side effects of excess capitalism and an external measure of the good that has always been distilled into a common statement of co-operative identity. Catherine Webb traces the original statements of co-operative principles to the third Co-operative Congress of Delegates from Great Britain and Ireland held in London in 1832 (Webb, Catherine, 1910, p58) Evidence that this identity or ideology operates at a foundational level within the human experience of the good, transcending cultural identity whether experienced in social, political or religious terms, can be seen in the above list of Co-operative leaders from all over the world. At the institutional level (where organizational culture articulates members ideological values) further evidence of the foundational appeal of co-operation as a universal value set that can underpin behaviors in organizations can be found in the work of Co-operative Historian Rita Rhodes (1995), who documents the maintenance of unity within the membership of the International Co-operative Alliance between 1910 and 1950 across political divides that shattered other working class international organizations she noted that in ICA leadership and structures;

“Allied to the question of the lack of nationalism was the obvious presence of fraternity and toleration within the organization. These emanated from co-operative ideology but their practice played a significant role, particularly during the Cold War. It seems likely that, throughout the period, they helped to sustain the ‘co-operative spirit’ that was always prominent in the Alliance.” (Rhodes, 1995, p368)

Understanding how existing leaders in co-operatives perceive and identify with co-operative ideology is critical both for governance as well as for the promotion of co-operative ideology beyond its immediate structural and associational boundaries. (Davis, P 1995, 2004, 2014) The ideological controversies within the co-operative literature are not so much about values and

principles but about how governance can be effectively implemented within the organization. What is less clearly understood or agreed upon, is how the business model of a co-operative is expected to operate in terms of its impact on society and economy. (Davis, P 2004)

It may be that by promoting co-operative ideology people with co-operatively leaning attitudes and values will be attracted to emulate an ideal type co-operative leader and provide the foundation for establishing an ethical agency contract between the CEO and the Co-operative (Neto, 2012, 29) Whilst the advantage and need for such a co-operative ethical agency contract may be argued to be self-evident its existence cannot be assumed. On the contrary it is the underlying assumption of this paper that the widespread existence of a co-operative management ethical agency contract is quite problematic. The focus of our qualitative study was not to find such co-operative ethical agency contracts but rather to identify how the respondents saw the socio-ethical basis for *their* ethical contract with their own co-operative.

Thus, this research is a small first step in taking forward to a new level the work done so far in establishing and *implementing* a statement of co-operative identity as an external measure of the good and its translation into a *practiced alternative co-operative ideology*. The question is do these personal sources of loyalty to co-operation reveal a deeper level of attitudinal orientations towards co-operation as a concrete goal (possibly towards a Co-operative Commonwealth) and as an ideological statement by which to measure behavior recognized as such by all its stakeholders?

4. Methodology

The methodological and thereby epistemological choices of this study are premised on the assumptions of interpretative research paradigm (see Guba & Lincoln 1994). From the point of view of the research process, the central concepts are experiences, conceptions, interpretation, understanding and the hermeneutical circle. The social world is a subjective construction of individuals who, using language and interactions are able to create and sustain a social world of intersubjective-shared meaning (Flick 2009; Guba & Lincoln 1994). It is also our starting point that the identity at organizational and ideological level are constructed in different groups and different contexts (Brown, Humphreys, & Gurney, 2005; Hatch & Schultz 2002) and are affected by time, social interaction, and interpretations and reinterpretations by different parties. Therefore, identity by nature is complex, social, and changing with time. Similarly, also the cooperative ideology can be seen as a social construction, a set of ideas and principles, often times constructed via dilemmatic arguing (Billig, 1991). Based on this broad frame of reference a research report should also be regarded as only one construction of reality (Steier, 1997).

We used a methods triangulation in data collection. The data collection was conducted in three stages and with different qualitative methods. At first, we asked the respondents to write ‘My co-operative story’, which was a written, free-form story of the respondents’ history with co-operatives. This data was used as a main source of data and analysis in this paper. The request was sent to 49 persons (board of directors 8, delegation members 25, and personnel of Pellervo 16). The request was prefaced as follows: “We invite you to take part in our study. We request you to think about the essence and significance of co-operatives to you and others. Please write down freely and reflectively what thoughts and images co-operatives bring to your mind. What is your co-operative story? We do not want to limit the length of your story. We also do not care about formalities, such as grammar. We will handle all responses with absolute

confidentiality and anonymously.” We received 27 responses. In the second stage of the data collection process, we requested the respondents to write down their thoughts freely with the following questions: 1. In your opinion, what key aspects/keywords best describe co-operative activities? 2. How is the idea of co-operatives reflected in your own activities/work? 3. What are the key factors that you see as most central for the success of the co-operative you represent (or co-operatives in Finland in general, if you do not currently work in a co-operative)? 4. How is the nature of co-operatives manifested in the day-to-day operations and decision-making of the co-operative you represent? 5. How would you describe the role of a co-operative member in the co-operative you represent? 6. Do you feel that the governing bodies and board of directors of your co-operative have internalized the values and principles of co-operatives? If your answer was yes, please describe how this is present in their actions, speech etc. ¹ These questions were sent to 33 persons (board of directors 8, delegation members 25) and we received 14 responses. In the third stage, we interviewed 6 board members individually. The data collected in these stages was used as a secondary data, namely to enhance the validity of the research results. In other words, to check if our interpretations based on the written, narrative stories was consistent and valid.

After transcribing the interviews, all data underwent content analysis. First, we identified over 20 themes. The relationships between them were not organized at this stage. In the next round of analysis, connections between identified themes were organized more clearly, and some themes merged into consistent categories. As the analysis progressed, we specified 5 themes and we analyzed the material in accordance with the theoretical framework – organisation identity debate – with the goal of organizing the material (already organized in an inductive way) according to the theory-based identity attributes (significance and standing out from the rest).

During the analysis process, in regard to each theme, the interpretation of it was tested as if with a working hypothesis. This was done throughout the overall stories of the individual respondents and compared to other written data and interviews. The purpose was to evaluate whether the theme appeared randomly in a single instance, and whether the interpretation endured a review not only in regard to the entire material but also for single parts of it. If this was not the case, a new way of interpreting was considered, and an interpreting hypothesis was always presented regarding the material. In this way, the process of interpreting gradually progressed to its current form, which will be discussed in more detail next. In order to provide a more vivid picture of the data and interpretations, we will present some quotations from the data gathered in this study.

5. Empirical data analysis

Key questions included: What qualities of the co-operative business model do they find appealing? From where have they gained their knowledge on co-operative activities? What kinds of meanings are associated with the co-operative movement? Thus, this study aims to answer the following questions: How do the members of Pellervo see the identity of co-operatives? How does this identity manifest itself and show? Are the images people have of cooperatives similar? What kinds of messages are conveyed to stakeholders? What aspects of

¹ The questions deal with a broad range of subject areas out of which all are not that relevant for this particular study. The data will be used for several research and teaching purposes.

co-operatives are seen as significant for internalizing the core idea of the co-operative movement and in making it meaningful for individuals?

The dimension of time is related to establishing an identity conception at all levels, i.e. on the level of the individual, group, organisation, industry and ideology. In the data of this study, too, identity was interpreted to manifest itself differently at different times. Examples of descriptions by individuals on their early conceptions of cooperatives were for example like the following:

Cooperatives were present in many ways in our family when I was a child: we bought goods from a cooperative store. We sold milk to a cooperative dairy, and grain and beef to cooperatives. We sold forest property to Metsäliitto. This is a typical example of the Finnish countryside in the 1960s and 1970s, and it is justified to say that at least here, in Finland proper, our living environment was filled with cooperatives.

It can be interpreted that cooperatives previously had a well-defined need and a clear service mission. Cooperatives were a natural part of society and the daily lives of many people. In many cases, cooperatives were an integral part of obtaining a livelihood and were thus connected to the incomes of individuals and families.

5.1 Central characteristics of cooperatives

This theme was identified several times when we processed the overall stories. Originally we identified more than 20 characteristics in the data. We combined the themes and categorized them into five cooperative attributes: 1. Unique mission. 2. Community and solidarity. 3. Reciprocity. 4. Influence. 5. Long-term approach. The characterizations are not separate from each other. To the contrary, they are closely connected to each other, which mean that the categorization could also be done in other ways. The category/class, which describes each attribute, is described in more detail next.

5.1.1 Form of company based on unique mission and values

Generally speaking, cooperatives were considered to have characteristic attributes that distinguish them from other forms of business and are connected to the cooperatives' mission. This is considered to be powerful and is implemented through their dual role. This category is a kind of an umbrella for the other attributes of cooperatives and their categorization.

Based on the data, it can be said that cooperatives are founded and they exist for their members, and that the purpose is to provide the members with a range of financial and social benefits on the basis of their participation, i.e. member ownership. This refers to the still topical idea of the operational purpose, which has prevailed since the first cooperatives were founded. Mission-related responses closely involved the dual role of cooperatives and their strong value basis; equality, in particular, appeals to the respondents as a starting point for operations. Our interpretation is that due to the dual role and the characteristic purpose of operations that underlines humane values, the respondents considered cooperatives to typically personify an idea of man that is not only based on equality, but also on showing other people respect and prioritizing human worth over financial gain. It also seems that this is one of the key differences between cooperatives and other forms of business.

The idea that describes the dual role in the material was that a cooperative is a practical organisation model that has proven its functionality and also involves an ideology. The material included a large number of views on the balance of this dual role. Some respondents underlined commercial efficiency, a competitive business angle and individual financial gain, whereas others put more emphasis on the member community role and value basis than financial gain. We further divided the views on financial gain so that it could not only refer to the direct monetary gain obtained by individuals or communities, but also to enabling operations and securing their continuity.

The respondents shared the view of cooperatives being “more than a form of business”, that is, they understood that there were a larger set of guiding principles behind the operations. Consequently, it can also be interpreted that the respondents considered ideology to be part of the cooperatives. The stories generally underlined cooperatives’ community spirit, participation and the power of cooperation, as well as the democracy principle and equality, which lay the foundation for joint action. This is how an executive of a cooperative describes his understanding of cooperatives:

The thing that appeals to me in cooperatives is that people become full members of society through them. They are not at the whim or under the yoke of others, but they also take care of personal finance in a grown-up, conscious and participation-oriented way. The cooperative is a company and business model that extensively builds society. The farther you travel from Finland, the idea that there are cooperatives in Finland, which intertwine business to people and regions, seems to be more and more essential. The cooperative value basis deals with mankind and is appealing and instructive.

Another executive describes:

The ideology is part of cooperatives; I have not lost my idealism and still consider cooperatives to be an excellent way of organizing joint financial activity.

Regarding individual values, equality was highlighted the most frequently. The concept involved democratic decision-making and profit sharing principles. These ideas were also connected to an idea of mankind that is more humane than that of other forms of business.

In regard to cooperatives, I am intrigued perhaps the most by the concept of democratic decision-making and profit-sharing. At least in principle, the profit gained by the community does not end up in the bank account of a single owner, but is shared between the cooperative member/owners.

This is an era of a massive transition, pessimism and inequality. I still consider these to be more than ideal conditions for cooperatives. To an increasing extent, people exactly want what is enabled by cooperatives: joint decision-making and influence, transparency, cooperation and a dialogue that gives room for different views.

In some responses, the value basis of cooperatives, the strength derived from it, and the long-term success of the form of business are connected to different eras and, first of all, to the idea that that inequality increases in financially tough times, which means that society also needs humane, egalitarian operating methods for securing the position of those worse off. Furthermore, it was considered that financially difficult times pave the way for the promotion of inequality, greed and other by-products of capitalism.

5.1.2 Communalism and solidarity

Cooperatives are based on people joining forces to work together, which results in cooperation and a sense of community and participation. Community spirit was extensively connected to the cooperative concept and considered from the viewpoints of individuals and communities, as well as more widely – from the regional and national viewpoints. Examples of descriptions:

Cooperatives established and maintained operations and livelihoods in the village. At least in my childhood and youth, community spirit and assuming responsibility for everyone's well-being and income improvement were the things that distinguished cooperatives from other operators. Exactly this kind of caring for people, promotion of participation and prioritizing the common good over individual interests are the backbone of cooperatives. The well-being of the community was more important than maximizing the well-being of a single member, and moderation was appreciated.

The appeal of cooperatives to me is the community spirit and taking care of each other. The cooperative mind-set is very similar to the Nordic society model. Taking care of those who are at risk of being excluded from the welfare state for some reason. Here, I also see the biggest challenges for cooperatives to tackle are how to be successful when the entire European financial system intentionally challenges them and other forms of business lobby against cooperatives. Finnish society and its development has relied very heavily on cooperatives. Cooperative principles have taken our society in a good direction. Civilized society is currently facing a large number of threats. My view is that these can be avoided by maintaining excellent cooperatives.

The power of co-operation was also interpreted as an explanation for the positive impact of co-operatives. In co-operatives, people joining forces and the sense of community and belonging based on this are combined with cooperation and joint responsibility in concrete terms. This can be described as a form of solidarity, which is one of the basic cooperative values according to the International Co-operative Alliance, too. Co-operation and its power were highlighted many times in the material. In other words, cooperatives are extensively connected to the idea of achieving more together than what the best individual could achieve alone. This idea appears in the following descriptions, for example:

I am particularly intrigued by cooperatives' history, collective force and achievements. Cooperatives have an impressive history. At the beginning, they had no capital or very little capital, but extensive growth has been achieved through willpower and doing things together. As individuals, we are close to nothing, but together we constitute a huge force for change. At first, there was only the ambition to change the prevailing situation, but then a good tool – cooperatives – were invented. In addition to that, hard work and confidence in what you do were needed.

5.1.3 Reciprocity

The operations of cooperatives are based on active participation and customer/ownership. Reciprocity deals closely with the cooperative's mission and business concept based on participation. In an interesting way, the aforementioned aspects not only appear in mission

descriptions, but also in responses that connect cooperative mission success with member operations. These formed the idea of reciprocity, and mutual, often long-term commitment was connected to this, as well as interdependency, and the mutually beneficial roles of the cooperative and its members. In addition, some responses connect trust to reciprocity.

In regard to cooperatives, I am fascinated by the fact that you can personally have an impact on your cooperative's success, that is, if a cooperative dairy, slaughterhouse, store or bank are successful, your finances are promoted, too, and this enables an extensive network of services, competitive prices or higher producer prices.

... I learned [refers to childhood] that cooperatives are natural partners for farms, but that you also need to work to promote their interests.

Particularly during the era of small-scale cooperatives, the members were absolutely necessary for the cooperative – and vice versa. The operations only focused on benefiting the members.

5.1.4 Influence

The influence of cooperatives is proven by their long history in addition to their mission and basic concept, which still remain topical. In regard to culture and society, the influence of cooperatives in a welfare state like Finland demonstrates that the principles of democracy and equality mainly prevail in our society at large, and show a willingness to take care of those worse off. In the responses, the influence of cooperatives is extensively connected to the regional and local aspect and is also considered to have major national importance through Finnish anchor ownership and successful cooperatives contributing to the balance of the economy. The responses underline that cooperatives are based on Finnish ownership, which means that the profits and decision-making remain in Finland.

Different respondents lent different significance to the regional and local aspects. The respondents connected them also to assuming responsibility for providing jobs and securing services elsewhere than growth centers in the sparsely inhabited parts of Finland. The regional and local aspects were also connected to generally maintaining the vitality of the regions.

Responses that describe the influence of cooperatives in the time perspective:

In addition to legislation, I would say that cooperatives have been the next most important means of improving the living conditions of those who lived in the countryside and constituted the majority of the population in Finland. Cooperative stores, banks, dairies, slaughterhouses, etc. have contributed substantially to the financial activity and well-being of the Finnish countryside, and to building Finnish society at large.

The respondents also described the significance and influence of cooperatives as follows:

In the scope it has achieved, the owner/customer-based cooperative approach in Finland is a prime example of the power and effectiveness of this form of business.

I consider cooperatives to bring balance to society and the financial sector.

5.1.5 Long-term approach

The tendency of cooperatives to consider things in the long term provides a significant explanation for their long lasting influence. The long-term approach is explained by the dual nature of cooperatives, which requires that the impact of decisions is also evaluated from other perspectives than a purely financial one. In the data, the long-term view was combined with 1) the long history of cooperatives, 2) decision-making that not only accounts for the existing situation and near future but also operations in the long term, and 3) mutual, long-term commitment connected to ownership and cooperative membership. The aforementioned aspects are described by the respondents as follows:

However, my view is that cooperatives can take more gradual, moderate and long-term steps to affect profit seeking and profits than listed companies often implement in the quarter-based economy.

[cooperatives are described by] *Long-term partnership and trust. Together through good and tough times.*

5.2 Distinctive cooperatives

We did not separately ask the respondents for their views on cooperative attributes compared to other companies, or the differences between cooperatives and other companies. However, many respondents expressly described their conceptions and experiences of cooperatives by making comparisons. Therefore, we formed a separate category for this. This helps in answering the question of how cooperatives differ from other forms of business.

Based on the data, significant differences included equal, democratic decision-making where extensive discussion is allowed and required, and where the interests of different parties are considered. Respondents considered the sharing of benefits obtained from the business to be another key difference. In other words, respondents appreciated the fact that cooperatives achieved results together and equally benefitted everyone, instead of benefitting a small group, which is the case in investor-owned companies (IOFs).

Respondents also considered the time span (the long-term approach), and the long-term evaluation of operational impact as a difference to joint stock and listed companies in the quarter-based economy. According to some respondents, one of the ways this shows is that since the main mission of investor-owned companies is to achieve maximum profits, they are more likely to withdraw from regions people move away from, or for other reasons when profitability is not clear in the short term. Respondents consider cooperatives to have a more benevolent perspective. This is reflected in how customers are treated, how co-workers treat each other, and how the cooperatives treat their employees. In general, it was interpreted that cooperatives have a different mission, characterized by their dual nature, values and principles. Descriptions of the aforementioned aspects:

Democracy appeals to me the most in regard to cooperatives, and that cooperatives are not money-spinners for investors. Cooperatives' financial performance directly benefits the members who use the services.

Compared to joint-stock companies, it is more natural to consider the staff of a cooperative to be a family, in a humane way.

When I worked in the private sector, I noticed how much harsher the attitudes towards customers were, and the climate at work between co-workers was tougher, too. Each co-worker was also a competitor in regard to the future. When I again joined X, I was happy to see the wonderful team spirit there, and also among my subordinates, too.

Some respondents identified and highlighted the difference between cooperatives and other forms of business, but approached the matter in a neutral manner; from the perspective that they are different, but one is not better than the other is, all kinds of options are needed, and it is a good thing that options are available.

I consider cooperatives to bring balance to society and the financial sector. They are an alternative way of engaging in cooperation and business. Alternatives are always needed. It takes more than one party in politics, too.

...That said this is a long path to tread, where cooperatives often are “a good runner-up” or “an alternative”. Sometimes, an unfortunately forgotten marginal group which is unknown or which is considered strange.

6. Challenges facing Co-operative Identity and Ideology

The problems of the weakness of implementation of co-operative principles and identity both in large co-operative enterprises and its marginal and fragile impact on popular imagination and culture remain. The often asserted dualism in co-operative practice between commercial and social goals has been identified as one part of the explanation (Davis, 1995). It has been argued that only when co-operative values inform management practices will the co-operative advantage become fully operational (Davis, 1995, Davis and Donaldson, 1998, Davis, 1999 and 2004).

Another underlying unresolved issue is the prevailing cultural hegemony of the capitalist media and culture industry that dominates popular culture. For managers of co-operatives the dominance of the business school MBA philosophy reflected in a curriculum that privileges the neoclassical myth of the market and the organizational form of the Joint Stock Company is keeping most co-operative managers and CEOs blind to the co-operative possibilities and wary of their elected boards. The ICA acceptance of this dualism in Co-operative Governance has created a civil service model that has led in the post war period to a catastrophic contraction of the oldest co-operative movement in the world. (Davis, Peter, 2014) Alternative stakeholder models and worker collectivist models of governance have not so far been able to demonstrate a tangible commitment to translate organizational identity as separateness into an ideological level identity of connectivity and recognition at the societal level. As size increases the critical ideological commitment to Co-operation of the CEOs of the biggest co-operatives may well determine the future of the movement as a whole.

Yet the communal spirit across society often does take co-operative forms reacting to the needs of marginalized groups and ‘market failures’ within capitalism. These grass-roots co-operative initiatives can be readily demonstrated and rightly celebrated but we should not overlook their marginal impact and general fragility. (Berge, Simon, Caldwell Wayne, and Mount, Phil.,

2016, p4) These small and medium sized co-operatives too need the support of a firmer ideological awareness of the importance of co-operation at the societal level.

In responding to this challenge the authors expect that research may need to extend into forms of collaboration beyond the social sciences to explore the contribution that Arts, Humanities and other disciplines can make to development and adoption of a popular co-operative ideology. We can see in sharp contrast with co-operative attitudes towards community, solidarity and distributive justice a dominant popular culture characterized by digitized communication based on ‘selfies’ and a sort of personal PR. The realities of personal anxiety, exclusion, and poverty are ignored or perhaps drowned out by a flood of misinformation and a culture trivializing life and society. Overshadowing the apparent freedom and spontaneity is an almost Orwellian system of digital surveillance increasingly manipulating opinion and elections. The success of the neoliberal culture is in no small measure, so the authors of this paper believe, down to a failure to promote the alternative ideology of co-operation in cultural as much as in social and economic terms.

Individual managers, board members and members of co-operatives are all open to the messages of capitalism and their behaviors’ can be expected to be influenced by it. Understanding what are the attitudes, values and experiences that lead individuals to counter and reject the capitalist model is of great importance for the development of a co-operative alternative.

7. Conclusions

The historical record demonstrates the characteristics of unique co-operative mission. The record also shows that such a vision is far from universally accepted in practice. In terms of our qualitative research, the benevolent perspective distinguishing co-operatives from other company forms is clearly acknowledged in the responses. The respondents clearly identified co-operative values, for example equality and democracy, and co-ops social nature. We conclude that among the respondents, there prevails a strong and deep receptivity to values that is an important foundation for a cooperative ideology. Despite the very heterogeneous sample, the respondents assigned central and distinguishing attributes to cooperatives in a collective way (Albert & Whetten 1985; Pratt & Foreman 2000). The interpretations were based on reflections on both the co-operative ideology and the operations of cooperatives. Respondents considered the co-operative to be more than a form of business. Thus, we argue that a significant number of the responses explicitly or implicitly identify a social and non-commercial element beyond their economic justification for co-operative organization.

For example,

‘I consider cooperatives to bring balance to society and the financial sector.’

‘In the scope it has achieved, the owner/customer-based cooperative approach in Finland is a prime example of the power and effectiveness of this form of business.’

‘I am particularly intrigued by cooperatives’ history, collective force and achievements.’

We do not suggest this *proves* co-operation as a distinctive ideology for socio economic transformation exists within its management and leadership but our research does suggest that

the basis for the adoption of such an ideology *may* be present. We concede the evidence is far from conclusive and that more studies are required. In the business schools, Culture Management and Generic Brand Management are important elements in their curriculum. Perhaps if we refocused our research to ask how do these mainstream business school ideas translate into a co-operative context our research might appear less threatening or less ‘political’ in some quarters, that is at least until the results were published? The Global advocacy for co-operation sees it as a means to fix pretty well any specific problem arising in the global system (see ICA website). The issue we must address today is that whilst co-operation provides an alternative form of business can such an alternative business become the basis for an alternative economy and society? An alternative system? Our claim is this requires an ideological approach as much as a commercial one and the line for further research is whether co-operative leadership, membership and the people as a whole have any sense that this is an appropriate goal for co-operative civil society activism and engagement. It has been from the outset a fundamental assumption by the authors that systemic change is occurring but the kind of change we are witnessing is undermining rather than encouraging co-operative values and ability to survive let alone prevail. Another assumption underpinning the authors search for co-operative ideology is that without it co-operation between co-operatives will remain piecemeal and reactive rather than strategic and vision based.

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