

**Sofia Congress SIETAR Europa 2007**

**Selected Papers**

**Editor: Juliana Roth**

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## Editorial

This special issue features nine articles that relate to various research issues in the intercultural field. They represent a selection of contributions to the SIETAR Europa Congress that was held in Sofia, Bulgaria, in April 2007. Its title, “East, West, North and South. Culture’s Influence on Economy, Politics, Ecology, and Religion”, attracted a wide range of papers, most of them addressing the practice of intercultural education and training. In that sense the Sofia Congress stayed in the tradition of previous SIETAR congresses, but at the same time it displayed a new feature: the number of presentations that discussed theoretical issues, be it in the form of their further development or be it in the form of criticism of extant theories was significantly higher than usual. Some of the presenters were willing to turn their oral presentations into publishable papers, and I want to thank them explicitly for their effort and for the energy they have invested in this additional work.

To some members of SIETAR Europa, particularly the younger ones, the focus on theory that is evident in this issue may come as a surprise. It has to be pointed out, though, that the name SIETAR refers equally to the three fields of intercultural work, namely education, training, and research, and that the founding fathers and mothers of our organisation once designed it to function as a synergetic interplay and mutual inspiration of all three fields. For a number of reasons SIETAR abandoned this initial idea, a fact that has already been discussed in greater detail and profoundness elsewhere<sup>1</sup>.

Globalization and the all-encompassing changes it causes have brought numerous challenges for interculturalists. The growing complexity of the globalised world and of human relations in it have made it more and more important, and at the same time more difficult, to address the problem of cultural diversity. The conditions and standards of intercultural work both for practitioners and theoreticians have changed dramatically. European interculturalists in particular are today required to practice in new environments of cultural diversity that are characterized by increased migration, failed policies of ethnic integration, and a palpable hostility towards the cultural “others”. In order to meet these challenges they are in need of additional, variegated, and finely tuned approaches and instruments. A restored balance between intercultural theory and practice will allow theoreticians and practitioners to profit from each other: without being backed by practice researchers risk to lose their credibility, and without the support of up-to-date theory trainers risk being criticised as relying on simplified theories and stereotyped knowledge about culture.

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<sup>1</sup> Landis, Dan: IJIR and SIETAR: One Door Closes and Another Opens. In: International Journal of Intercultural Relations 21,3 (1997) 291-297.

The common denominator of the following articles is the attempt to bridge the gap between intercultural theory and practice. With one exception, all authors depart from intercultural theories and present serious intellectual responses to topical research problems; their research is always based on empirical data, and their findings can serve practical purposes. Four of the papers focus on Eastern Europe. Tsvetan Davidkov and Plamen Makariev as well as Tanya Chavdarova depart from Hofstede's approach which they broaden conceptually and use for the analysis of Bulgarian data. Wim Swaan is concerned with the methodology of intercultural trainings; he advocates an approach that takes into consideration the cultural specifics of all parties involved, in his case the special relationship between East and West in Europe. Swaan's concept is supported by Marjeta Novak's practical experiences as intercultural trainer for Slovenian audiences. Dine Brinkman and Marjan Wink employ aspects of intercultural competence theory for the development of a new instrument for the assessment of Dutch and international students at a Dutch university; their study lays open the one-dimensional nature of the intercultural competence construct. Jasmin Mahadevan and Ingemar Torbiörn both stress in their articles the need for theoretical sophistication in the training field and elaborate on knowledge inputs from their respective disciplines, cultural anthropology and psychology. Judit Hidasi's paper on cultural change in Japan under the pressure of globalization is the only one in this volume that deals with a non-European society. Finally, my own article addresses a topic that is still new to interculturalists, the ethical dimensions of intercultural education and training. The growing diversity of the training field makes it imperative for trainers to relate to moral issues and to reflect on the political and economic environment of their work – an environment that differs greatly from that of the early years of the intercultural field in the 1960s.

I hope that the initiative of this publication will influence European SIETARians to strive for a balanced relationship between intercultural theory and practice, and to develop new synergies for the advancement of our professional field.

Munich - Sofia, August 2009

Juliana Roth

## **How to Assess the Intercultural Competence of Students?**

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### **Abstract**

The article relates to the concept of intercultural competence and the methods of its assessment. The authors depart from the need for an instrument that is less extensive and expensive and will fit their target group, Dutch and international master students at their university. The assessment results are meant to help adjusting the content of the training course on intercultural communication skills taught to these students to their real needs and also to measure changes in their intercultural competence upon completion of the course.

After a brief review of definitions of intercultural competence and inventories of assessment methods the process of the development of the instrument is described. A positive feature of the project is the inclusion of students into the research procedure. The final version of the instrument includes a general part of biographic data, a questionnaire with 27 statements and 8 intercultural episodes, the latter partly stemming from the reflective journals of students who had passed the training course earlier. All items are checked for language, ethnocentricity and social desirability. The assessment form was tested with 34 pre-course and 25 after-course students and the findings showed that students can be trained in intercultural competence or at least in acquiring cultural awareness and sensitivity. It also provided information about the effectiveness of the course on intercultural communication skills. A very interesting finding concerned the one-dimensionality of the intercultural communication construct: the criterion "building relationships" proved to be as reliable as the whole scale of items. The authors finally list open research issues, among them the important question of the Western nature of methods that presuppose the readiness for self-disclosure and reflection, but that are known to be stumbling blocks for communication in most parts of the world.

### **1. Introduction**

New technology and information systems, migration and the growing internationalisation of many economic sectors are some of the issues that nowadays put us into contact with people whose cultural background is different from our own. People at work need to be able to communicate in this 'new world' of diverse colleagues, clients and customers. Numerous people have to work in multicultural teams or engage in cross border negotiations or execute projects in foreign countries. Students therefore more and more need to develop competencies to operate in an intercultural context. This not only asks for education programs that respond to this

need, but it is also necessary to formulate the components of this intercultural competence and develop assessment methods to measure it.

Wageningen University, which has a long history of hosting international students, offers an optional training course in intercultural communication skills to Dutch and international students. This is in line with the trend in Europe, where “many universities have begun to integrate mandatory courses on international and intercultural issues in their international programmes too, regardless of the disciplinary focus of the academic program” (Otten 2003: 18).

Although a number of instruments for assessing intercultural competence already exist, we felt a need for developing our own instrument. Existing instruments often are very expensive, require registration and are quite extensive, in the sense that they consist of more than 50 items. So it takes a lot of time from students to fill up. Moreover we wanted an instrument that would fit our specific target group and training course. This implies among others that the instrument should be culture neutral, because we work with a very diverse target group of students from Asia, Africa, Latin America, Arab countries and Europe. In this paper we describe our quest for a method to quickly assess the intercultural competence of master students at our university, in order to adjust our training course “Intercultural Communication Skills” to their entrance level. We also wanted to find out if it is possible to measure any change in their intercultural competence due to participating in the training course.

First the results are presented of a literature study on the concept of intercultural competence and the assessment methods that already have been developed. Following is a description of the design process and the preliminary results of the instrument we used in two groups at Wageningen University. Finally the findings are discussed as well as the remaining questions and issues.

## **2. Definitions of intercultural competence**

Reading through the massive amount of articles and books that have been published on intercultural communication and intercultural competence one is confronted with the wide variety of definitions of the concepts. To start with, “intercultural competence” also sometimes is referred to as “intercultural communication competence” (Arasaratnam 2005; Byram 1997; Parmenter 2003) or “global competence”, “cross-cultural competence” or “intercultural sensitivity” (Greenholz 2005), “intercultural effectiveness” (Stone 2006) or “transnational competence” (Koehn 2002). Various authors offer overviews of the elements that intercultural competence or effectiveness should contain (Stone 2006: 343; Daerdorff 2006: 249, 250; Koehn 2002: 110; Arasaratnem 2005: 140). The number of elements range from 3 to 27, whereby the elements of flexibility, adaptability, empathy, respect and communication skills are most frequently mentioned.

Daerdorff (2006) tried to determine a definition and appropriate assessment methods of intercultural competence in her study, based on the opinions of a panel of 23 internationally known intercultural scholars and validated by 24 higher education administrators, representing a variety of institutions from across the

United States. The most preferred definition, out of a choice of nine definitions derived from literature, was the definition of Byram (Byram 1997: 34): “Knowledge of others; knowledge of self; skills to interpret and relate; skills to discover and/or to interact; valuing others’ values, beliefs, and behaviours; and relativizing one’s self. Linguistic competence plays a key role” (Daerdorff 2006: 247).

One of the main conclusions of Daerdorff however is that, although she assumed that specific components of intercultural competence needed to be alienated for institutions in order to better be able to assess students’ intercultural competence, the findings run contrary to this assumption. Both administrators and intercultural scholars preferred more general conceptions of intercultural competence and the researcher concludes that “further research is needed to delve more deeply into the terminology used in the actual definition of intercultural competence” (Daerdorff 2006: 253). She constructed a pyramid model of intercultural competence in which the desired external outcome is described as: behaving and communicating effectively and appropriately to achieve one’s goals to some degree. And the components of the desired internal outcome are: adaptability, flexibility, ethno-relative view and empathy. The importance of attitude is emphasized by several authors, specifically the attitudes of openness, respect (valuing all cultures), and curiosity and discovery (tolerating ambiguity) are viewed as fundamental to intercultural competence.

In our work we prefer the definition as formulated by the INCA project: intercultural competence enables you to interact both effectively and in a way that is acceptable to others when you are working in a group whose members have different cultural backgrounds (INCA, 2007).

### **3. Assessment instruments**

Daerdorff (2006) made an inventory of assessment methods used in 24 U.S. post-secondary institutions, representing a wide variety of institutions, from community colleges to large research universities. Top assessment methods currently being used include student interviews, followed by student papers and presentations, student portfolios, observations of students by others/host culture, professor evaluations (in courses) and pre-tests and post-tests (Daerdorff 2006: 248). In our training course we use student presentations and students’ reflective journals as assessment. In the reflective journals they have to describe their personal intercultural experiences as critical incidents and in their analysis they describe their feelings and opinions, but also have to apply the frameworks to analyse cultures which are offered during the course. Next to these methods we were interested in a more objective, standardized instrument to measure the students’ intercultural competence and the progress they made.

Focussing on pre-test and post-test instruments, we found several widely used and well known questionnaires in the literature and we present an short overview below.

- *Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI)*, developed by Mitchell Hammer and Milton Bennett (ICI , 2007). This assessment instrument is a psychometrically normed and validated 50-item questionnaire based on M. Bennett’s Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (1993). The IDI measures cognitive structure rather than attitudes. It has several scales measuring worldviews that vary from more ethnocentric to more ethnorelative. According to Bennett’s model more ethnorelative worldviews have more potential to generate the attitudes, knowledge and behaviour that constitute intercultural competence.
- The *Intercultural Readiness Check (IRC)* is a 60-item questionnaire assessing four key aspects of intercultural competence: intercultural sensitivity, intercultural communication, building commitment and preference for certainty (IBI, 2007). The IRC has scales for intercultural sensitivity, intercultural communication, intercultural relationship building, conflict management, leadership and tolerance for ambiguity. The instrument has been developed and tested over a period of more than three years (Van der Zee, Brinkmann 2004)
- The *Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ)* is a personality questionnaire that measures multicultural effectiveness, with scales on cultural empathy, open-mindedness, social initiative, emotional stability and flexibility (Van Oudenhoven, Van der Zee 2002).
- The *Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory (CCAI)* is a “training instrument designed to provide information to an individual about his or her potential for cross-cultural effectiveness” (Kelley, Meyers 1995: 1 in Williams 2005: 360). The CCAI covers four dimensions: emotional resilience, flexibility and openness, perceptual acuity and personal autonomy and as the name of the instrument indicates it measures the degree of cross-cultural adaptability (Williams 2005).
- The *Intercultural Sensitivity Index (ISI)* was “designed by Olson and Kroeger (2001) to measure the global competencies and intercultural sensitivity of individuals and their relationship on individuals’ effectiveness and experience abroad” (Williams 2005: 361). The components of this instrument are substantial knowledge, perceptual understanding and intercultural communication.
- The INCA project has the *Intercultural Profile*, which is a questionnaire containing 21 statements on intercultural situations. It measures tolerance for ambiguity, behavioural flexibility, communicative awareness, knowledge discovery, respect for otherness and empathy (INCA, 2007).

#### **4. The context: training course Intercultural Communication Skills**

We offer an optional training course for Dutch and international students of a wide variety of nationalities, although students from Eastern European countries and Asia are relatively predominant. Each course has 15 to 25 students per group, the course is offered 4 times a year for students in Environmental Sciences as part of the Academic Master Cluster. This is a series of short courses in which academic skills are trained.

The training course Intercultural Communication Skills consists of three sessions of 3,5 hours each and individual and group (home) assignments.

	First session	Second session	Third session
Focus	creating cultural self-awareness and becoming aware of the frame of references of others and the role in intercultural communication	influence of culture on teaching, learning and classroom behaviour and building relationships with others; experiencing culture shock	emotional reactions and coping strategies in response to intercultural stress; becoming aware of culturally defined values and norms
Theoretical concepts	culture, onion model, dimensions of Hofstede, frameworks Trompenaars, Hall, Huijser, culture shock	dimensions of Hofstede in relation to teaching and learning; frame of reference, intercultural competence	coping strategies; symbols, heroes, rituals and values and norms
Methods	icebreaker assignments, interactive lecture	assignment and plenary presentation; simulation game Thirdia (Oomkes 1992)	simulation game Barnga (Thiagarajan, Steinwachs 1990); poster presentation of group assignment Exploring Cultures

Figure 1. overview of training course Intercultural Communication Skills

## 5. Developing the assessment instrument: the process

### 5.1 Introduction

The work of Michael Byram and others on developing a framework for intercultural competence, analogous to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEF) was inspiring us to two years ago to work with a group of Belgian and Dutch intercultural trainers on formulating the key elements of intercultural competence of students at our respective universities and colleges (Byram 2003; Catteuw, Coutuer 2005). The search for an intake assessment of these students went hand in hand with this process. One aim of this intake assessment was to make

students aware of their attitudes and knowledge regarding intercultural communication and another aim was to use the results of the assessment for adapting our educational activities to the students' needs. We therefore were interested in an objective, standardized instrument.

## **5.2 First version**

The first version of the assessment was developed by a student as a practical assignment and consisted of three sections:

- a general part (My intercultural background) with questions about age, nationality, religion, travel and work experiences in foreign countries, social contacts and problems encountered when coming to the Netherlands.
- a questionnaire of 47 statements (My intercultural competence) to which they can answer on a 5 item scale, ranging from never to always
- 9 cases of intercultural situations (Confrontation with reality) with 3 optional answers.

The statements were based on the INCA questionnaire for intercultural profile (INCA, 2007) and other relevant literature. The cases were based on examples from Warman (2005) and on cases described by previous students of the training course in their reflective journals. The statements in the questionnaire were grouped according to four dimensions:

- self-monitoring, adaptability and flexibility
- valuing people from different cultures
- building relationships with others
- managing stress, listening, observation skills.

The dimensions were inspired by the six INCA dimensions, but we re-grouped and reduced the number and formulated dimensions that correspond to the training activities in our course.

The students filled up the assessment form via e-mail, a week before starting the training course. After completing the course they received the second and third section again and fill these up again. Both times it is stressed that the answers to the assessment will in no way influence the mark they receive for the course; that it only serves the scientific research.

## **5.3 Revision of first version**

We scrutinized and reviewed the first version, after a first try-out in 2006, because we found the number of items too large and we were not satisfied with how the dimensions fitted to the content of the training course. Three raters independently reviewed all items. They were checked on (1) ethnocentrism; (2) language; and (3) social desirability. Items that were classified as being one of these three things, were discussed and either deleted or reworded. The following section will explain what was meant by ethnocentrism, language and social desirability.

### *Ethnocentricity*

The statement “I get confused when there are no reliable transport timetables in a country where I spend my holiday” is based on the assumption that you travel to another country or place for holidays, but in some countries the days-off are spent to travel to the home town to visit relatives. The concept of “holiday” is very much culture-bound.

The statement “When other people behave in a way that I don’t understand, I ask them why they are doing this”, assumes that direct asking is a good way to handle this situation. In the Netherlands this directness is appreciated, in other countries it might not be appreciated. We therefore changed the statement in: “When other people behave in a way that I don’t understand, I try to find out why they are doing this”.

The statement “When a stranger from abroad behaves in a way that annoys me, I will tell him/her” has been left out for the same reason.

The statement “when colleagues from other cultures in my work group come to work later and/or take longer breaks, I adopt their work habits” also has been skipped, because this is based on a negative view of people from other cultures (they always come late) and one can wonder what is supposed to be the correct answer, when measuring intercultural competence.

Ethnocentricity with regard to assessing intercultural competence is linked to the different values and norms that the assessor and the assessee might have, but also to different meanings of the concept used in the instruments or methods. The concept of culture can have different meanings, but also the concept of self. Parmenter (2003) elaborates on this issue and states: “All communication is premised on assumptions of how people see themselves and others, and the relationship between self and others. Although these assumptions are to some extent shared in East Asia and Europe, the following East Asian concepts may not be immediately familiar to Europeans: no-self and fluid identities, relational identities and group identities.” (Parmenter 2003: 124). She gives the example of three types of Japanese self: interactional, inner and boundless and also refers to the Confucian tradition where “identities are recognised in terms of relationships. Furthermore, as four of the five Confucian basic human relationships are hierarchical, participants within relationships usually have a duty towards the other as superior or inferior” (Parmenter 2003: 127). This is not in line with our western equalitarian values that might be expressed in the intercultural competence assessments.

The cases about intercultural encounters in different countries may be even more sensitive to ethnocentrism. They measure mainly the knowledge about the particular country, but how these national habits or values are perceived can be very much dependent on the nationality or cultural background of the respondent. We came across one characteristic example of this, when processing the data of the cases. A student from Czech Republic had added an extra answering option to the case about Russia: “Russians are weird”. Relations between neighbouring countries can be sensitive. This often is expressed in jokes, expressing false stereotypes of the neighbouring population.

### *Language*

In processing the data we discovered that language problems might play a role in filling up this assessment form. We know that some of the Asian students do not master the English language very well and are confronted with that during class and when they hand in their written final assignment. When a Chinese student then fills in “never” for 5 subsequent statements, which does not seem logical, you start wondering how much he understands of the meaning of the statements. This is in line with one of the conclusions of Daerdorff’s research that the role and importance of language in intercultural competence is still a controversial item (Daerdorff 2006: 259).

Other more specific research seems to prove that indeed the role of language, together with cultural bias is a factor that can play an important role in interpreting the results of intercultural competence assessments. Greenholz (2005) researched the validity of the IDI and concluded that there are strong doubts about the cross-cultural transferability of version one of the IDI and that there are “some questions about the DMIS as a model for understanding worldviews with respect to difference, in cultures other than US American” (Greenholz 2005: 88). For example the translation of a statement including “being a member of one’s own culture as juxtaposed with people from other cultures” from English to Japanese, caused confusion. As one translator put it, “I don’t think Japanese people distinguish people by culture, but by country or nationality” (Greenholz 2005: 87). Asaratnam et al. (2005) in their research tried to generate a culture general definition and description of intercultural communication competence (ICC), using semantic network analysis, thus focussing on which words the 37 participants from 15 different countries used in their answers. They as well emphasize the important role of language and the linkage between language and culture: “Finally, this study relies heavily on participants’ competence in communicating in English. Even if non-native English speakers are fluent in English as a second language and are able to articulate their ideas of ICC well, a similar study conducted in a different language, in a different culture (...) produce different results because of the differences in how ideas are articulated in a particular language and the cultural context in which ICC is observed” (Arasaratnam et al. 2005: 161).

#### *Social desirability*

Social desirability is hard to handle, we took out some statements that might have a bigger chance than others to give positive answers, like “ I can put into perspective all the values, norms and traditions of my own culture” and “I understand when people behave differently than I do”. As Hammer et al (2003) remarked: ‘tests of intercultural competence are often casually criticized as being “transparent”’ (Hammer 2003: 439) and this questionnaire might “suffer” from the same feature.

We also discovered that one Ghanese student filled in “yes” and “no” while a cross or bullet is expected. This means we will have to be more precise in the instructions.

#### **5.4 Second version**

The second version of the assessment questionnaire consisted of 27 statements and 8 cases. We deleted 20 statements from the first version. All three reviewers classified the remaining items again in the pre-defined dimensions of intercultural competence. While doing this, we discovered that for many statements it was hard to determine which dimension they exactly measured. For example the statement “While talking to people from other countries, I pay attention to their personal space”, can be an indicator of flexibility or adaptability. Because a positive answer means that you probably adapt the distance between you and the other to what seems to be comfortable to the other. But it is also an indicator of observation skills, because, while talking, you observe non-verbal clues to what can be a comfortable personal space. The skills and attitudes relating to the dimensions highly correspond. For the dimension Building relationships with others, an open, welcoming attitude is required, but also flexibility and adaptability.

In the end, we decided to split up the dimension “Self-monitoring, adaptability and flexibility” in “Self-monitoring and self awareness” and “Managing stress: adaptability and flexibility”. The other three dimensions are: “Valuing people from different cultures” and “Building relationships with others” and “Listening and observation skills”. However, the exercise of critically reviewing and discussing the statements of the questionnaire again with three reviewers made us wonder whether it is possible to divide intercultural competence into several dimensions. Or whether all the components of intercultural competence are so interrelated that the construct of intercultural competence is actually one-dimensional. However, this study will explore whether the developed questionnaire is able to measure different dimensions of intercultural competence or whether it seems to be an one-dimensional construct.

The assessment form (see Annex 1) has been filled up by two groups and the total number of respondents for the intake assessment is 34 and 25 students also filled up the post assessment.

## **6. Analysis**

The data were analyzed using SPSS. To examine the reliability of our assessment and to test the multi- or one-dimensionality of the intercultural competence construct, internal consistencies were calculated for the questionnaire as a whole and the five separate dimensional subscales, using Cronbach’s alpha. Cronbach’s alpha measures how well a set of items (or variables) measures a single one-dimensional latent construct. Cronbach’s alpha is not a statistical test - it is a coefficient of reliability (or consistency). As the average inter-item correlation increases, Cronbach’s alpha increases as well. This makes sense intuitively - if the inter-item correlations are high, then there is evidence that the items are measuring the same underlying construct. This is really what is meant when someone says they have “high” or “good” reliability. They are referring to how well their items measure a single one-dimensional latent construct. When Cronbach’s alpha exceeds .6, the scale is perceived to have satisfactory consistency.

To find out whether our intercultural competence training positively influenced students’ intercultural competence, two analyses were conducted. First, student

scores on the reliable (sub)scales of pre-test and the post-test were compared using paired *t*-tests. Second, student answers on the cases were analysed. The intercultural competence training would be effective if more students were able to answer the cases correctly after having followed the training.

## 7. Results so far

The total scale was reliable, in the pre test as well as the post test ( $\alpha$  is 0.87 in pre test and 0.86 in post test). The statements for Building relationships with others (10 items) appeared to be the most consistent ( $\alpha = .84$  on the pre-test;  $\alpha = .82$  on the post-test), and the scale for Listening and observation skills (4 items) also reached the reliability level ( $\alpha = .62$  on the pre-test;  $\alpha = .60$  on the post-test). The dimensions ‘Self-monitoring and self awareness’ (2 items), ‘Managing stress: adaptability and flexibility’ (8 items) and ‘valuing people of different cultures’ (4 items) were not consistent ( $\alpha < .6$ ), meaning that these scales were not adequate to reliably measure the constructs that they intended to measure.

Student scores on the reliable scales showed that on the total scale as well as on the subscales ‘building relationships’ and ‘listening and observation skills’ the post-test scores were higher than the pre-test scales (see Table 1). However, only the difference on the subscale “building relationships” reached the significance level ( $t(23) = 1.82, p = .04$ ). These data allow for the preliminary conclusion that the training course has a positive effect on the intercultural competence of the students, at least on their competence in building relationships with others.

*Table 1. scores on reliable scales of students who handed in both the pre-test and the post-test (N = 24)*

	Pre-test (M / SD)	Post-test (M / SD)	<i>t</i> -score	Significance
Scores on total scale	3.73 (.35)	3.82 (.41)	1.37	.09
Scores on the sub-scale “building relationships”	3.62 (.55)	3.78 (.56)	1.82	.04*
Scores on the sub-scale “listening and observation skills”	3.58 (.54)	3.72 (.54)	1.36	.0

\*  $p < .05$  (one-tailed)

The cases mainly measured knowledge of country or region linked cultures and cultural habits and partly the degree in which students could identify themselves with the situations described. Table 2. shows the scores on the cases in both the pre- and the post-test.

Table 2. Scores on the cases in the pre-test and the post-test

	Pre-test	% correct on pre-test	Post-test scores	% correct on post-test
Case 1	22, 1, 2*	88	25, 0, 0*	100
Case 2	15, 9, 3	60	19, 6, 0	76
Case 3	18, 5, 2	72	24, 1, 0	96
Case 4	8, 13, 4	32	14, 11, 0	56
Case 5	17, 6, 2	68	22, 3, 0	88
Case 6	17, 5, 3	68	20, 5, 0	80
Case 7	20, 3, 2	80	18, 7, 0	72
Case 8	18, 5, 2	72	19, 6, 0	76

\* these three scores indicate: number of correct answers, number of wrong answers, number of non-respondents respectively.

The results showed that more students answered all cases correctly in the post-test, except for case 7 which gets more incorrect answers in the post-test. Case 4 seemed to be the most problematic case: only 32% of the students answered this case correctly in pre-test and 56% in the post-test. In addition, in the pre-test even more students answered this case incorrectly than correctly. This is a case about interviewing a man from Afghanistan by a group of students. Two of the students are female and the Afghani man only makes eye-contact with the men and not with the women. Another finding shown in table 3 is that in the pre-test all cases showed 2 to 4 missing answers, meaning that 2 to 4 students did not answer the questions. In the post-test, all students answered all eight cases (i.e., there were no non-respondents). This might indicate that while students in the pre-test did not know what to answer and therefore chose not to answer, they had an opinion after having done the training.

The student scores on the cases corroborate the preliminary conclusion that the training had a positive effect on the intercultural competence, or at least on the intercultural awareness, of the students.

## 8. Conclusions

Only preliminary conclusions are possible based on the found results of this pilot study, because of the small sample size. However, the findings suggest that it is possible to train the intercultural competence of students, or at least to make them more aware of intercultural issues. This conclusion is based on the findings that student scores on the reliable scales of the questionnaire increased after the training, that more students were able to select the correct answer in the cases and *all* students had a (correct) opinion concerning the issues raised in the cases, while in the pre-test

several students refrained from answering the cases. In conclusion, it seems that the questionnaire used in this study was able to give us important information concerning the effectiveness of our intercultural competence training.

The reliability analyses were inconclusive about the one-dimensionality or multi-dimensionality of the intercultural competence construct. The scale 'building relationships with other' (10 items) was almost as reliable as the whole scale (27 items). This might imply that the sub-scale 'building relationships' says it all (i.e., this is what intercultural competence is all about) and that the other dimensions do not add to the intercultural competence of students. If this were true, then this would support the idea of one-dimensionality of the intercultural competence construct. However, it is more likely that this means that either it is very difficult (if not impossible) to assess different dimensions of intercultural competence using a closed-questionnaire or that our questionnaire was not yet adequate enough to assess different aspects of intercultural competence. This remains to be studied in follow-ups of this pilot study.

## **9. Remaining questions and issues**

Many questions and issues are still to be explored. This paper mainly describes our process of developing a suitable instrument for the Intercultural Communication Skills training course at our university, so in our specific context. The number of respondents (25) so far is too small to generate valid conclusions.

We agree with Van der Zee and Brinkmann that "the issue of social desirability may also be further examined, considering the relatively high scale means" (Van der Zee, Brinkmann 2004: 289).

Some other questions that still remain are: does it make a difference whether the course is compulsory or optional? Compulsory students who fill up the questionnaire might take it not very serious.

With regard to the more technical aspects of the questionnaire: What would be the difference if we reduce the answering option to 4 instead of 5? Respondents cannot choose the easy middle category of "sometimes". Would it be wise to add an extra answering option for the case-studies: "I don't know"?

A more general question that remains is: could the self-assessment questionnaire be an informative element of a multiple methods assessment of intercultural competence? And how can you make the assessment more than only the self-assessment of the students. Many researchers stress the importance of multiple assessment methods in measuring competencies also intercultural competence, and also the need to measure the development throughout time (Segers, Dochy, Cascallar 2003; Straetmans et al. 2004), One important aspect of assessing competencies is involvement of fellow students, study advisors, tutors, or to use 360 degree assessments. One of the issues we come across in our educational practice is the reluctant attitude of for example Asian students towards giving direct feedback. If you ask students to assess their fellow-students, this cultural aspect will play an important role.

Another possibility to broaden the assessment of intercultural competence is to let students build up a portfolio. Portfolios allow for including multiple assessments, involving multiple assessors (e.g. self, peer, teacher, etc). This might be more a fruitful approach for gaining insight into the *multiple dimensions* of a students' intercultural competence compared to using only a self-assessment questionnaire with multiple sub-scales. In addition, a portfolio can give insight in the development of a student. However, using portfolios requires not only mainstreaming in the curriculum of the university courses, but portfolios have their own dynamics and problems with regard to assessment (Jacobson et al. 1999).

As a final remark we would like to quote Arasaratnam et al. when she concluded: "the dynamic and heterogeneous nature of intercultural communication should not dissuade researchers from looking for the much needed comprehensive understanding of intercultural communication competence (ICC). A well-designed, well-tested, culture-general instrument of ICC will be invaluable to intercultural trainers and practitioners in the academic as well as corporate world" (Arasaratnam et al. 2005: 161).

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**Annex**

**Questionnaire Intercultural Competence  
Module: Intercultural Communication Skills**

**Section one: My intercultural background**

Cultural background

Are you religious?  
If yes; what is your religion?

Have you been raised according to that religion?  
If not: at what age did you turn to that religion?

Travel to other countries (short term visits) for holiday

Time spent living abroad (long term stay)

Have you been to school abroad?  
If yes; for how long?

Do you have work experience abroad?  
If yes; in what country or countries and for how long?

How many different countries have you visited?

Do you have social contacts, friends abroad?  
If yes; from which countries?

If you are not from the Netherlands, did you have specific communication problems  
in the beginning when you came here?  
If yes; can you give an/some example/s?

*For example: The teachers in Holland ask the students to react during the lessons  
and students give their opinion to what the teacher says, but I wasn't used to that.*

Other factors that have helped me function well in other cultures:

**Section two: My intercultural competence**

## Statements about intercultural situations

You have probably experienced more than one situation where you had contact with people from other cultures. Perhaps as a student, in your country or in other countries you visited. Below you will find twenty-seven statements that are related to intercultural situations. Please pick the answer that best matches your experiences.

It's possible that some of these statements describe situations that you have not experienced. Please try to imagine such a situation and pick the answer that corresponds best to your possible behaviour and reaction.

	Never	Almost never	Sometimes	Often	Always
1. I am willing to adapt to the social manners (for example with respect to greeting, clothing, etc.) of the country I am visiting, although I might not agree with these.					
2. When the transport system differs from the one in my home country, I have problems dealing with it.					
3. When I am with people from abroad, I think it's a good thing to discuss each other's cultural habits.					
4. When talking to other people, I watch their body language.					
5. When I am abroad I try to find out what is appropriate behaviour in specific situations in that country.					
6. While talking to people in other countries, I pay attention to their personal space.					
7. When a meeting with people from different cultures failed, I try to find out why it failed.					
8. I try to speak the local language, even when I don't master it.					
9. When someone tells me he/she is experiencing a culture-shock, I try to help.					
10. While working in groups I prefer to work with people of my own culture, because cultural differences provoke problems.					
11. When I am a newcomer in a group with people from a different country, I try to find out the rules in this group by observing their behaviour.					
12. When the behaviour of people from other cultures alienates me, I avoid making contact with them.					
13. As a newcomer in a country I start conversations with the local people.					

14. When talking to my fellow students from abroad, I like to discuss the cultural differences in their ways of thinking.					
15. I eat dishes with ingredients that I am not familiar with.					
16. When there are fellow students in my area who constitute an ethnic minority, I try to involve them in the majority group.					
17. When other people don't feel comfortable in my presence, I notice it.					
18. When I am abroad I pay attention to my behaviour in combination with the status that some people might have.					
19. I am willing to change my behaviour when I am abroad.					
20. When other people behave in a way that I don't understand, I try to find out why they are doing this.					
21. I want to invest in co-operating with fellow students from other cultures.					
22. I start to panic when I am in a country where people solve problems totally differently than I am used to.					
23. When talking to students from other countries, I take into account how they are feeling.					
24. In conversations with speakers of other languages I avoid unclear or ambiguous words.					
25. I seek contact with other people in order to learn as much as possible about their culture.					
26. I can accept that people from other cultures can experience problems with values / norms of my own culture.					
27. When having a conversation about cultural differences with people from abroad, I try to learn something from the people from another culture.					

### Section three: Confrontation with reality

Below you will find some descriptions of intercultural situations; these are situations that you might be confronted with in another culture. For every case you can choose one answer out of three. For this section the following also applies: It's possible that you will find some situations that you have not experienced. Please try to imagine such a situation and pick the answer that best matches your opinion and ideas. And again; you won't get judged on this questionnaire.

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1. At college a student disagrees with something that the teacher says. The student insists on giving his point of view and is challenging the teacher. What do you think is going on?
  - I think the student is angry at this teacher, perhaps because the teacher was unpleasant to the student in the past
  - I think this is a critical student who disagrees with this teacher
  - The student is probably making a mistake. The things that a teacher says are always right
  
2. For a report you have to work in a mixed group of students from abroad. You organize meetings and design the report. But two students, both from the same culture, never disagree with the rest of the group. These two students are doing the work their own way. They keep on doing it this way, despite of the hints you give them. The rest of the group feels frustrated. Why do you think the two students act this way?
  - I think they don't like the group
  - I think it's their way of communication
  - I think the two students are probably not that interested in the report
  
3. You are invited to the birthday of a fellow student from South America. He invited you to come to his place at 2 p.m. When you arrive at 1.55 p.m. your South American friend is not there. While you wait for your friend, other friends start arriving at the birthday party too. At 2:30 your friend finally arrives with bags with food. He doesn't apologize for being late but smiles and says 'hi'. What do you think is going on?
  - It's the time that Latinos and Spanish people have their 'siesta', so that is why he was late
  - My South American friend probably forgot the time
  - For South Americans it's normal to be flexible with time
  
4. For a report you have to interview an Afghani man with some other students. Of the interviewers, two of you are female. The Afghani man only makes eye contact with the men and never with the women. I think this is because:
  - He is nervous around women
  - He is showing respect to the women
  - He is showing disrespect to the women, because they shouldn't do an interview with a man
  
5. You ask a Japanese student a question. He/she looks down and answers the question. Why do you think he/she is looking down? He/she:
  - Has something to hide

- Is paying you respect
  - Is concentrating to find the right answer
6. You've graduated and you are in Korea for your new job, visiting a new client. When you leave, you present a gift to the new client to thank him for his hospitality and to cement your business relationship. He refuses to accept the gift. You should:
- Apologise for offending him
  - Apologise for offending him and explain this is a Dutch habit
  - Insists he takes it until it is accepted
  - Offer it to someone else from his company
7. You are enjoying a day off with a friend from Russia. You two go shopping, to the cinema and end your day by eating in a restaurant. The strange thing is that your Russian friend doesn't seem to like the way you treat unfamiliar people. You think you're acting normal. You just say 'hi' to salespeople in shops, waitresses and in the elevator when you enter and leave again. Your friend is giving you angry looks. What is going on?
- She is very shy to strange people and feels like you are putting you two in the spotlights by treating strangers like that
  - In Russia you don't greet strangers you meet for such a short period of time. You will embarrass those unfamiliar people
  - She thinks you're acting like you want to be too popular. In Russia you don't want to look popular
8. You have an appointment at a company in Italy. Your host picks you up at the reception. Climbing the stairs, your host kindly asks you to hold the banister. He also wants you to take your visitor's badge out of your breast pocket and wear it visibly, although he does not leave you alone for one minute. You feel treated like a child. What is going on?
- Your host follows the company rules quite disciplined, and does not expect you to find this extraordinary
  - This company underestimates you and your own responsibility
  - This company is afraid you will file a claim against them if you hurt yourself

## **From Cultural Differences to Status and Labour Market Inequalities: The Generations in the Bulgarian Banking Business**

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### **Abstract**

There is much debate about whether the cohabitation of “Eastern” and “Western” socio-economic cultures within the European Union will lead to their convergence or to a further differentiation and subsequent cultural clashes. The article examines this issue in the light of the need for insights into the nature and the dynamics of the process of culture change in the post-socialist societies. It is based on an empirical study of the attitudes of Austrian and Bulgarian managers working together in a formerly Bulgarian bank that was taken over by an Austrian bank and subsequently newly staffed. The research was part of a larger project funded by the European Commission that was aimed at identifying the nature of the cultural encounters between local and expat workforce in eight of the newly accessed member-countries. The research hypothesis was that the communication between Easterners and Westerners will produce a variety of hybrid cultural phenomena that will contradict the simplistic dichotomy of “strong Western” and “weak Eastern” economic cultures, and also the popularly assumed “clash of cultures”. The study reveals that the observed cultural encounters were determined by two socio-cultural distinctions, but that the politically and historically founded opposition between East and West was of lesser importance than the generational differences within the Bulgarian staff. The findings show that there are new features of the labour markets of the newly accessed countries, and suggests that international companies moving into Eastern Europe will need to reflect on their recruitment policy and the social consequences of their decisions.

### **I. Theoretical and Methodological Notes**

The Eastern Enlargement of the European Union is causing researchers engaged in cross-cultural research to reconsider the notion of “cultural identity” (cf. Schöpflin 2000, Wintle 2000, Field 2007, Kuus 2007). Would the cohabitation of “Eastern” and “Western” socio-economic cultures in the enlarged EU lead to their convergence? This was the strategic focus of the eight-country research project “*DIOSCURI - Eastern Enlargement - Western Enlargement. Cultural Encounters in the European Economy and Society after the Accession*”.<sup>2</sup> Its primary objective is to

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<sup>2</sup> The project (accomplished in 2005-2007 under the 7th EU Priority: Citizens and Governance in Knowledge-based Society) is co-ordinated by V. Zentai (CPS at the CEU,

explore the dynamics of cultural exchange between “East” and “West” in the European economy. It also identifies the main types of cultural encounters between the two halves of Europe during and after the Enlargement, maps the major cultural gaps and strategies to bridge them, and describes the fields in which the new entrants can contribute to the rejuvenation of economic cultures in the Union. *Economic culture* is perceived here as a body of typical norms, values and behaviour modes as revealed in the economic activities (cf. Tompson et al. 1990, Di Maggio 1994, Granato et al. 1996, Berger 1998, Harrison, Huntington 2000). No prior theoretical scheme of economic culture was adopted. Rather, an “inductive” approach was deliberately chosen with the purpose to make ex-post generalizations concerning the nature of economic culture of the Eastern and Western actors. As the project title suggests, the accent was put on the opposition: *Eastern-Western* economic cultures which was to be theoretically explored through a series of case studies of the encounters between various *national* economic cultures.

According to the leading research hypothesis, the cultural encounters will produce a great variety of lasting cultural hybrids in economic and social behaviour that are far away from a simplistic scheme, in which the “strong Western” culture devours the “weak Eastern” one. The cultural encounters between West and East will result in the emergence of certain new hybrid forms of economic culture. They could be interpreted as a response to the need of adjustment of each counterpart to the new socio-economic environment. Under these circumstances, there will not be a single “winner” or “loser” but rather both “win-win” and “lose-lose” situations. Cultural encounters undermine the widespread beliefs about the “strong” Western and the “weak” Eastern business cultures and suggest the idea of a “strong” and a “weak” cultural mix in business.

Drawing on DIOSCURI research, this paper examines the current cultural encounters between Bulgarian and Austrian managers in a Bulgarian bank privatized by an Austrian bank.<sup>3</sup> The main research questions concerned: (1) the typical *perceptions* of one’s own and the foreign culture in the everyday business practices; (2) the *surprises* of the counterparts in their working together; (3) the process of *mutual learning* that may take place; and (4) the *outcomes* - in terms of cultural change – who and what is changing, and whether some new hybrid cultural forms are emerging? These areas of interest structured the in-depth interviews which were carried out in the case study frame.

Following the DIOSCURI basic hypothesis, the implicit assumption was that the case study would reveal an encounter of *national* cultural characteristics in business which could be later on interpreted under the umbrella terms *East* and *West*. The

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Budapest), and supported by the Principal Researcher, J. M. Kovacs (IWM, Vienna). The research is carried out in four East-Central European countries (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovenia) and in four countries of South-Eastern Europe (Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania and Serbia/Montenegro). DIOSCURI project focuses on three research fields: entrepreneurship, governance and economic knowledge. For further details see: [www.dioscuriproject.net](http://www.dioscuriproject.net).

<sup>3</sup> The bank case was an integral part of the field “Entrepreneurship”. In the frame of the Bulgarian team, the author was responsible for the research in this field.

Bulgarian bank case, however, revealed that the *generational* differences between the Bulgarian managers are of such great importance that they practically “split” the Bulgarian economic culture (in its more concrete form of managerial culture). As a matter of fact, there are two cultural encounters: between young and older Bulgarian managers on the one hand, and between each of them and the Austrian managers on the other hand. The aim of this paper is to describe those two cultural encounters and to discuss their preconditions and labour market consequences. The thesis to be defended here is that the market orientated economic culture which is of Western origin turns out to be a strategic competitive advantage of the Bulgarian labour market in the banking sector, thus causing labour market segmentation in two aspects: (1) between the young and the older generations of managers, the latter being socialised in the socialist period, and (2) between the young Bulgarian professionals socialised in the West or in Bulgaria. The processes of cultural encounters may develop inequalities at the firm level, as well as at the labour market level.

## **II. *The Austrian Bank as a Case Study Object***

The bank which was chosen as a case study is one of the biggest, one of the oldest, and probably the one which has undergone and is still undergoing the deepest transformation among all Bulgarian banks.<sup>4</sup> It was created during late socialism as an investment bank to serve a large scale agro-industrial complex and has undergone a wave of consolidations since then. Its privatization by an Austrian bank was finalized in 2002. The Austrian Bank, on the other hand is owned by a German Bank. As a result, one of the largest Bulgarian banks was acquired by a German bank through its Austrian affiliate responsible for operations in Central and Eastern Europe. In the same year the Austrian bank merged with the much smaller Bulgarian branch of the respective German Bank. Thus in fact the initial Bulgarian bank was simultaneously undergoing a process of profound changes in its organization and culture carried out by the Austrian owner, and a merger with the local affiliate of the German group leader. Hardly was the process of initial post-privatization restructuring and merging finalized, when in 2004 the Austrian Bank strategy for expansion in Central and Eastern Europe led to the acquisition of another recently privatized Bulgarian bank. The deal was closed in the spring of 2005, and until the commencement of the field work in June/July 2005 the banking crew was engaged with the merging of the two banks.

Probably the most important organizational change in terms of cultural specifics involved the introduction of explicit and detailed written rules of interaction and job descriptions. They serve as an objective criterion in the assessment of performance and contribution, thus restructuring the incentives for actual behaviour. All official documents of the bank put a special accent on creativeness within the specified obligations of the employees. In addition, a collective labour contract has been

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<sup>4</sup> The presentation of bank history briefly follows the chapter “Institutional Development” written by G. Ganev in the survey report (cf. Chavdarova, Ganev 2006).

signed between the bank and the trade unions, which specifies not only the usual elements, but also the manner in which the bank will recruit, train, and qualify its employees and will develop their careers. Not least in this respect is the adoption in 2004 of “Rules of professional ethics” in the bank. They define the standards of ethical treatment, clarify and describe the procedures with respect to dealing with conflicts of interest, and aim at ensuring confidentiality in the system of the bank. All these measures were intended to change the perspective in which the employees see their roles in the organization and enter into interactions.

The Austrian Bank is organized in line with the Bulgarian legal requirements for banking governance. It is a joint stock company with a two-tier governance structure consisting of a supervisory council and a governing council (board of directors), and several levels of activity below them. The organizational structure is a mix of hierarchy and horizontal teams<sup>5</sup> where managers of 1<sup>st</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> level cooperate. Some of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> level managers are on direct report to the board members in the bank’s organizational structure. In this perspective, all the participants at the first three levels are key actors in cultural encounters. That is why, while choosing the respondents, the aim was to cover the first three management levels<sup>6</sup> (see table 1). All in all, the case study data basis consists of 17 semi-structured in-depth interviews with representatives of the bank management.<sup>7</sup>

	Total	Bulgarians	Austrians
Number of interviews	17	9	8
<b>Status of the respondent:</b>			
Level one (Board)	5	2	3
Level two:	5	1	4
Level three:	5	4	1
Level four:	2	2	-
<b>Gender:</b>			
Male	9	2	7
Female	8	7	1
<b>Age:</b>			
31-35	3	3	
36-40	3	1	2
41-45	-		
46-50	6	4	2
Over 51	5	1	4

<sup>5</sup> The horizontal teams are created in relation to specific tasks such as: developing new products, carrying out the merger process, introducing novelties in terms of the internal organization of procedures, document flows, etc.

<sup>6</sup> Yet, for the purposes of comparison two four-level managers were interviewed though they have a very sporadic communication with the Austrian management.

<sup>7</sup> Most of them (15) were carried out in June and July 2005 by G. Ganev and the author, and another two (with the former CEO and another board member) – in 2003. Before starting the interviews, we also have studied the available economic and statistical information on the bank activities and have carried out a desk research on written banking rules and regulations.

Table 1: Description of the respondents

The frequency of cultural encounters was the only criterion for choosing our respondents. The gender and age distribution was not controlled. As a result, it turned out that the gender distribution was quite uneven in the Austrian and Bulgarian group of respondents. Whereas women predominate in the Bulgarian group, men prevail in the Austrian one, which, actually, adequately reflect the real gender division in the bank.

The age structure of the interviewed managers shows that the Austrian managers are older (over 46) than their Bulgarian counterparts. Their professional path is commonly characterized by: (1) long years of work for the same bank, normally 10-15 years; (2) previous work experience in other Balkans countries; (3) two thirds of them are learning or already speak Bulgarian language and this seems to be the norm wherever they go to work, even for 6-9 months.

The Bulgarian management has developmental paths which allow for two generational groups to be distinguished: less than 38 years and over 46 years. The group of the interviewed young managers (aged 32-38) has the following common characteristics: (1) they all have graduated from a high school specialised in foreign languages and speak both English and German fluently; (2) most of them have studied abroad or in the American University in Bulgaria; (3) they have never worked in the state sector and have previous experience in the private sector in Bulgaria. The group of the older Bulgarian managers (aged 46-55) is characterized by: (1) their long experience in the former structures of the bank (and, of course, in the state sector during the socialist period); (2) some of them have graduated from a high school with foreign languages specialisation, others have learned the language on the move; (3) nobody with one exception has worked in the West.

The age structure of the interviewed Bulgarians reveals the lack of managers aged between 38 and 46. In the course of the field work we were told that this gap is not accidental; it is typical not just for the management but for the bank staff in general, where, however, the missing scope is broader: 35-50-year-old employees are hardly present. We learned that most of the newcomers were quite young, normally aged about 25 who had grown up in the transition period. During the hard times of the bank's post-privatisation restructuring and the ensuing two mergers some of the bank employees had lost their jobs; these turned out to be mostly representatives of the middle age group.

### **III. Young and older managerial generations: cultural differences and positioning in the bank**

#### **1. Recruitment mode of young managers and employees in the bank**

Was the observed disequilibrium in the generational structure of the Bulgarian management an unintended result of the complicated situation created by the privatisation and mergers or was it a deliberate board strategy? The first approximation to the answer of this question was the belief of the Austrian top level

managers that *the communist socialization* is the main reason for the missing middle age stratum in the bank. According to the Austrian understanding, this represents a serious problem in itself:

“What you can see is that the full management generation is hardly missing because you see a lot of very young people, well educated with international training to be in very high functions. Senior guys are 28-29 because the guys or the people aged 35-55, who were somehow grown up in a communist type of environment, have now lost the jobs. We have really very old guys who were acting as advisors or very high senior guys - they were heads and very young guys and what you need is this middle age guys experience because if you would like to run this business you need some experience. University in my understanding is not sufficient. The longer the country is after this change, of course, this problem is reduced because the people get more experienced” (A13<sup>8</sup>).

The interviews with the Austrian *board members* have proved that their strategy on this highly competitive market<sup>9</sup> is to employ well educated young people at all levels in the bank. Whole working teams are composed by quite young employees. What concerns the top management level in particular is the bank strategy to look for young professionals who have received their higher education at Western universities and who already have international working experience.

“We are looking for well educated, sale orientated staff. 37% are academics in our staff here. The average age is 39 coming down from 42 in the course of the last years. ... The Bulgarian managers are all international. The board members were all working internationally. And the Bulgarians are coming back [from abroad], partly young guys, this is a good sign. I have two board members ... who came back, who had quite good jobs in [the West] and came back, 34-33 years old” (A13).

The demand for young professionals educated in the West on the Bulgarian banking market seems to be quite intensive. It is worth noting that by 2006 all the banks in Bulgaria with very few exceptions were owned by foreign, mostly Western companies. Western diploma and international training could naturally be prerequisites only of the young generation who after 1989 got the chance to choose where to study.

The fact that the majority of the young Bulgarian respondents had graduated from Western universities, strengthens the suggestion that in the Austrian

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<sup>8</sup> Legend: A – representative of the Austrian management; BG – representative of the Bulgarian management; the interview number follows.

<sup>9</sup> There is a hot competition on the banking market for highly qualified professionals to occupy top positions in the banking management. In this regard, one of the strategies used by this bank is the head hunting - a fact recognised both by the Austrian and the Bulgarian management.

management's perception holding a Western diploma is of crucial importance. The empirical material certifies that the reason for this is neither the better education allegedly provided in the West, nor the better foreign language knowledge. Both of these are, no doubt, a must<sup>10</sup>, although they are not perceived by the Austrian managers as stemming from the Western diploma. The Austrians quite categorically expressed satisfaction (which triggered immense positive surprises) with the level of professional education received in Bulgaria: *Education at university level is very high, above average* (A8) and with the general level of foreign language knowledge in the country: *They speak foreign languages that are in higher level than in the Western countries. Here so many people speak two even three foreign languages, very good level of education* (A10). Thus, it is not the Western diploma *per se*, which is highly valued, but it is *the Western socialisation* which includes international training, possessing of market oriented work values and behaviour, and fluency in foreign languages. When the Austrian top managers share their impressions from the young Bulgarian managers they stress exactly the market oriented economic culture distinguished by entrepreneurial spirit and devotion to work.

“What surprised me with my own team [is] the professionalism and the initiative, and the engagement. This is quite a young team – average age less than 25 years. Everybody speaks English and German which is an additional benefit for communicating with Vienna” (A7).

The possession of market oriented economic culture turned out to be a crucial selection criterion not just for the managers but for all bank employees. They are normally recruited after a trial period during which their attitudes towards work are most carefully observed and evaluated. Contrary to the statement of the board members that the recruitment of predominantly young employees is a bank *strategy*, both the lower level Austrian and Bulgarian managers interpret this fact as an *unintended result*. The Austrian managers report that employing young people just happens as a result of the selection process where the criteria first of all involve flexibility, initiative, hard work, and language knowledge.

“40 years [is the] young and old [managers and employees] demarcation line in the bank. This just happened – you screen people when you look for a new position and see how people react. There is no strategy, it just happened. ... They [the young] are really flexible, they speak languages, are those long workers, they want better personal life, while the elderly ones are not flexible: “We have been doing like this the last 20 years” (A8).

The same opinion is also shared by the young second level Bulgarian managers. They see the process of recruiting young employees in the bank as reflecting some

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<sup>10</sup> The good education and foreign language knowledge are valid criteria also for recruiting the older Bulgarian managers and employees: *Some of the old team members were selected by me or [Mr. X]. They are from the German language school.* (A12)

basic requirements such as the already mentioned flexibility, hard work, strive for learning and improvement, and language knowledge. In addition, the ability to be a team player is highly valued.

“The bank strives towards employing people, who would work in its standard, who have the potential to learn, to self-develop – this is my logical conclusion but I have not heard this to be a deliberate banking policy. ... In a competitive market one has to select very carefully his/her people and to qualify them in order to be able to pursue ones objectives. ... In my perceptions of the corporative culture, it is obligatory in this case, that one has to work a lot ... in terms of quantity and time, under stress... to be a person who can work in a team. In the corporative business, in particular, reaching the individual objectives is almost impossible if the team objectives have not been reached. If he/she did his/her best, he/she would be treated as a very successful person. I look not to take on person who keeps himself aside from the team and who is not ready to share his experience. He/she has to be ready to learn, this is very important because they all are academics, but until you would not get into this specific environment, you could not learn these things. ...He/she needs to know language, if he/she knows two, even better” (BG9).

It is quite instructive that the young Bulgarian managers themselves have undergone the same process of recruitment and learning under the supervision of the Austrian management and have been promoted quite quickly to top positions. More specifically, in two cases in which an Austrian manager had come from the head office to Sofia either to establish a certain new unit or to reorganize an old one, he/she recruited a young Bulgarian manager (30-35 years old, a Western university graduate) and afterwards she was appointed head of those particular units.

Thus, recruitment of young people in the bank appears to be both a strategy and a follow-up result of a previous recruitment mode of young Bulgarian managers. The latter subsequently recruit even younger employees following the same value criteria they have internalized. Of utmost importance among them is the demonstrated market oriented work values and behaviour: hard work, entrepreneurial spirit and ambition, initiative, team work and strive toward learning and mastering. These are most often possessed by representatives of the young generation who has grown up in the period of transition from socialism to capitalism. The market oriented cultural values which are at the core of the Western economic culture turned out to serve as an extremely important competitive advantage on the banking market in Bulgaria. In this sense, the Western socialisation (most often proven by the Western diploma) with the attached to it foreign language knowledge is a factor which lays segmentation at *firm* level between young and older managers. To the extend to which the cultivation of Western economic culture could be applied as a recruitment criterion on a broader, *labour market* level, a segmentation among young professionals with and without Western diploma could also be expected.

## 2. The Bulgarian young and older management: basic differences in the cultural encounters with the Austrian management

How does the generational split in the Bulgarian management affect the nature of cultural encounters with the Austrian counterparts? If the Western type of market oriented culture matters, we should expect to observe two different types of cultural encounters with the Austrian management. And indeed, it turned out that the cultural encounters are *substantially different* for the two outlined age groups. The young managers perceive themselves as and are in fact part of the Western management in a cultural sense, since they have quite the same type of cultural encounter with the older Bulgarian generation as the Austrian management has. No one of the Bulgarian managers aged up to 35 has reported having whatever problem with their Austrian counterparts. They expressed their surprise and claimed *that there are really no such drastic cultural clashes, indeed* (BG9); they also said that they took pleasure in working for this company which is another way of confirming their affiliation to the Western style of doing business.

The core of the tension between young and older managers and, respectively, between the Austrian management and the older Bulgarian managers is constituted by *activism* as work attitude and actual behaviour at the work place. The active individuals follow the key principle of intervention, according to Münch, they are characterised by a disposition to active transformation of the existing world following certain cultural ideas (Münch 1993: 26); they set purposes and take risks.

Activism in the case with this bank is most closely related to three further dimensions of the management culture: the *understanding of power and hierarchy, of risk and security, and of division of public and private at the work place*. The cultural differences between the young and the older managers in the above mentioned aspects are confirmed both by them themselves and by the observations of the Austrian managers.

The case study results confirm the findings of some other scholars about the great difference between Bulgaria and Austria concerning the perception of power relations. The only source of direct nationally representative comparison between the two economic cultures is the research of Hofstede (1984) whose theoretical scheme<sup>11</sup> and research instruments have most recently been adapted and applied in Bulgaria by Genov and Karabeljova (2002). According to Hofstede's cross-cultural surveys, Austria is ranking first among 50 countries having the smallest power distance (index=11, having values from 1[small] to 100 [large]) (Hofstede 1997). The comparative nationally representative data of the Bulgarian scholars estimate

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<sup>11</sup> When sorting out cultural dimensions in his theoretical model, Hofstede takes Parsons and Shils's "pattern variables" (1951: 77) as a starting point and elaborates on four dimensions of culture: *power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism vs. collectivism, and masculinity vs. femininity*. (cf. Hofstede 1984: 152) Hofstede's *power distance* indicates the extent to which society accepts the fact that power in institutions and organizations is distributed unequally among individuals (*small - large power distance*); the extent to which inequality among people is perceived as existential or as "just a roles' inequality, established for a greater convenience" (Hofstede 2001: 47-48).

index=55 for Bulgaria which means that one should expect great controversies between the two cultures in terms of perception of power.

The main contributor to the Austrian negative surprises and the chief source of tensions is the strong hierarchical relation to power, demonstrated by the older Bulgarian managers and employees, their fear of making ones own decisions and the resulting lack of initiative. Even though there are so many written instructions about managers' rights and responsibilities at each hierarchical level, the decision-making process is a great source of crossings since it is a matter of different interpretation. The traditional Bulgarian interpretation of the instruction is: "What is not explicitly allowed is forbidden" while the Austrian way of thinking is quite the opposite: "What is not explicitly forbidden is allowed." These interpretations stem from the different understanding of power relations in an organization and also from the great strive of the Bulgarian managers towards securing their positions – especially in the privatization, merger and acquisition times.

"Everybody is afraid to take their own decisions, not everybody but many, generally speaking. Everything had to go to the management board. I am a second level manager, I can easily take decision but many people don't dare to take decisions and they delegate them to the management board. There is difference between Austria and Bulgaria. In Austria there is clear structure who can decide and what; if it is in my responsibility, I decide and I stand for it. Here everybody wants to be doubly and triply secured that the decision taken is really covered by my boss. It is a very centralized structure" (A8).

The Austrian counterparts clearly point out that there is a difference between their young and older Bulgarian colleagues in the way of thinking; the young ones quickly learn and adapt to the Austrian business style.

"I did not expect it, but I experienced difficulties. One major reason for this - it depends on the age. The former system was a strictly hierarchical one; it was a culture – to try to be on the safe side, not to make mistakes. Your country is at speed, a pioneer style is required. ... What I am trying to tell my colleagues is that if we work, especially under pressure, mistakes will be made. ... We have to deal with these mistakes, to solve the problems and not to think about who was responsible for those mistakes. ... It is not easy to convince all of them; it is easier to convince the young colleagues who may not have bad experience" (A4).

"This is still the behaviour: "If my boss says: 'It is good', so it is good." ... It is working more and more. They are learning that there is no penalty if I am going to be active. ... There is a huge difference between young and old - in thinking, in being open-minded" (A15).

The Austrian opinion that the fear of authority is closely linked to the age, serves as a basis for a strategy to mix the staff during the merger of the two banks, so that the young colleagues could help bettering the general spirit of openness and activism.

“I like to have a discussion very much, an open discussion. I see here quite frequently [at the] extended board meetings that [the Bulgarian managers] do not discuss. They are listening to what the chairman is telling them and that’s it... It is different in [the smaller bank which is merging]: the people are much younger, internationally oriented, studied in London but here I have very much seen that they are waiting for what the bosses say. ... When I mixed the staff between [smaller and bigger bank] it started to change” (A13).

The young Bulgarian managers, on the other hand, admire the open style of communication and the small power distance which characterizes the relationships with their bosses.

“The Austrians are pretty open for the opinion of other people though they may have a very tough position. ... It is very easy to communicate with [my boss]; he is pretty open; he says the things he thinks. ... After [particular events] I always try to give him feedback. Only few people dare to comment what he says; he reacts to my efforts very positively” (BG6).

Even though some young Bulgarian managers believe that free expression of opinion is not always to the Austrian managers’ taste, they are not afraid of expressing openly their opinion and of bearing the consequences.

“I openly say my opinion and this is not good. Coolness in the relations comes on and [their] decision is imposed in other ways or it just becomes clear ... this is what will happen and that’s it. And after that you do not have any other alternative except to accept the facts and to wait for the time to prove that it wasn’t the right decision, to arm oneself with patience and to hope that better times will come - which happens, by and large” (BG11).

While describing a similar case of disagreement, the rhetoric of an older manager is quite different. Entering into dangerous opposition is labelled with the socialist times’ jargon: *giving a pull to the work-book*. It is perceived as a matter of bravery and the acceptance of his/her opinion by the Austrians is regarded as a real achievement.

“It cost me a great courage as a director ... one month after the privatization to express my categorical disagreement about [a certain plan] with the head office plenipotentiaries” (BG1).

The young managers share the negative Austrian surprise at the passivity of their older colleagues which is attributed to their socialisation in the socialist state organisations.

“I have worked before in companies which have nothing to do with state institutions. Here I was startled by the attitude – “This is not my job”, some underhand dealings are exchanged, a passivity, a routine – this is the first thing

which startled me. There is apathy, passivity. The bank employees – disinterestedness: “That’s somebody else’s job.” ... In a situation, where, in order to solve whatever problem, a solution is offered [by an employee], the Bulgarian boss just *re-acts* – he/she informs what kind of problems he/she sees with this kind of solution but he/she does not take the initiative to solve it in another way, another boss must order him/her to do it” (BG6).

As the excerpt shows, the unnecessary devolution of decision making to the higher management level is practised in order to guarantee security of one’s position. Another practice that indicates risk aversion is the insistence on written instructions which is ‘translated’ as a way of coping with the low quality of communication in the bank.

“I personally prefer, when receiving any comment, consultancy or advice [on the job I have performed], this to be defined in writing because - that is human, that’s not typical only for the international culture – it happened, unfortunately, that I received afterwards another comment or opinion and since I am an upholder of the very strong discipline, I would like these things to be clear and documented” (BG1).

One of the young Bulgarian managers has also shared problems with the way of communicating and shouldering responsibilities in the bank. As, however, the following excerpt shows, his/her problem comes from an opposite side, i.e. from the position of a risk taker.

“I just found out, that when one very firmly, in a very serious way says the things, they [the Austrian management] take the advice. But one must, you know, have really very well structured arguments, to be very clear, precise: “That is the danger and risk you are in grave ... if somebody else would take the responsibility...” I want somebody to sign [a commitment sheet], somebody who will carry out this decision. And then, there is nobody who signs. Whereas, I have twice signed upon my decision, I was forced to sign a commitment sheet that something will happen within such a period, if not ... which I do, of course, because I normally know very well, when it has reached to this point ... at least I hope, risk does always exist. ... I have twice resorted to this hard variant” (BG11).

Risk taking vs. risk avoidance is one of the important areas of controversy between the young and the older Bulgarian managers. The risk-aversive behaviour of the older Bulgarian respondents which is very well manifested causes problems in everyday business routine. It could to a large extent be explained by the unstable acquisition and merger situation. Having worked for this bank normally a longer time than their young colleagues, they have been experiencing a lot of fears whether they would keep their jobs after the privatization. The lower the level the bigger the fears of losing ones job. At the lowest level, you can ‘smell’ the fear from the young employees who are coming *with their heavy CVs* and with the languages and

computer knowledge. At the top level, the older managers are not that much afraid of losing their jobs because, being experienced professionals and advisers, they have alternatives. Their worries were primarily connected to the cultural adaptation.

“I was curious and had fears whether I would stay on the same position, whether I would manage or if I would be efficient enough, having worked for such a long time in the state sector, in the mono-national environment. ... It is rather the way of thinking and the relation to things which are the main problem and not the language, and it cost me time to realize this” (BG1).

The older Bulgarian managers thus show full awareness of the crossing of “plan” and “market” in their professional life. In this sense they share the Austrian opinion that it is the cultural legacy that causes problems while working in a multinational milieu which makes them adopt more risk averse behaviour.

Another important aspect of the cultural closeness between the Austrian and young Bulgarian managers is their preference to instrumental and functional relations at work, i.e. to a clear separation of the personal informal relations from the professional relations at the work place. This is one of the most important signs of the distinction between *specific* and *diffuse* culture<sup>12</sup> (cf. Trompenaars, Hampden-Turner 1997, 2001). The insistence on functionalism in the relations at work is another name of the separation of the public from the private sphere.

Generally seen, it is the market that generates the differentiation between public and private. “The market’s emancipation presupposes that public and private are two autonomous spaces but are equally a person’s ‘own’ in whom he/she is equally integrated and equally distant from the roles performed” (Bahrtdt 1974: 63-66). In the Bulgarian case, however, instead of equal treatment being accorded to all economic actors in the market, the traditional subordination of the market to the political sphere gave birth to protectionism and informal power relations, i.e. to another type of integrity and social behaviour. That was why the domain of formal relations was hostile to the individual. It did not bring forth identity and integrity but acquired such values only after being validated by the institutions of informality. This legacy was additionally strengthened by the socialist practices of public and private mixture.<sup>13</sup> Also a previous research done on the business culture in contemporary Bulgaria shows that the *diffuse* culture dominates in the management practices (cf. Chavdarova 2004). The empirical evidence derived from this case

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<sup>12</sup> According to Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, the polarization *specific – diffuse culture* has to do with the structure of interpersonal relations. In certain cultures, there is a clear distinction between public and private life. In such cultures, the so-called *low context* of the relationships prevails. The so-called high context is predominant in diffuse cultures and there is substantial overlapping between the public and private life in organizations, in the family and among friends. People with *specific* cultural orientation are direct, to the point, purposeful in relating because the leading aspect of the relationships with the other individuals comprises the *specific* functions of each side and the tasks stemming from them (Trompenaars, Hampden-Turner 1997: 100-1).

<sup>13</sup> For further details about the Bulgarian cultural legacy in economy see Chavdarova 2000.

study point out a process of changing of the cultural attitudes towards separating of public and private at work. One of the classical indicators in this regard is the conviction of the interviewed young managers that problems at work are just professional and not personal ones:

“They [the Austrian colleagues] have style of work which is my style, as well. I try to avoid the tension but not the problems. I look at them as problems which are on the table, and not as problems that are mine or yours ... I try to accept the working conflicts not personally, although sometimes people around me accept them in this way” (BG6).

These cultural differences are not just recognised but also quite rationally put into practical use by the Austrian managers. In crediting they develop a system of client service, which matches the age (i.e. the socialisation) of the clients and managers.

“Average age [in the unit] is 35 years. I have three older people and the rest are young, even under 25. The older people are more relationship oriented, the younger are more business oriented. It depends on [the] clients in the company: if [the clients] are at the same age [as the relationship manager], if they are from the socialist times, they have very similar understanding. If [the clients] are young, if they got all their training in the UK or in Germany after the changes, it's better to give them [as a relationship manager] one of the younger guys” (A12).

In their relations to the older Bulgarian colleagues, the Austrian managers have also shown a great adaptability towards the cultural specifics which requires more human approach and personalised relations at the work place.

“I learned that the approach can be different... Communication is different. What is effective is to meet... somebody face to face and negotiate. ... In terms of communicating and committing somebody to something, it is absolutely necessary to have personal meetings on that ... and the reaction is completely different. Maybe, from business point of view, in advanced countries it is maybe easier to reconcile something on an email level. Here at the moment it is not yet that effective, let's say” (A15).

The development of good personal relations by unofficial personal communication, delegating responsibilities, and learning to listen turned out to be a winning strategy for overcoming power distance and provoking activism.

The young and older Bulgarian managers reach only one point of consensus while speaking about the cultural differences between Austrians and Bulgarians: the “fondness” of the Austrians for strictly organized team meetings and discussions with agenda planned well in advance and the Bulgarian inclination to spontaneity, short-term planning and entering into non-structured discussions. These features are well established and broadly recognised cultural indicators for understanding of time and planning (cf. Shein 1997, McEwan 2001, Hall, Hall 1987, Alvesson 1993).

Planning of a particular action and discussions takes much less time in the Bulgarian perception than in the Austrian one. The Bulgarian managers are surprised and do not understand why the preparation of action should need so much effort for careful coordination and discussion:

“The long meetings, consultations, the too long discussion of things, the discussion of details, repetition – maybe the counterpart wanted to receive enough proof that what is being discussed is really so or it must happen in a certain way – this was a surprise to me. I imagined that things would be much more dynamical, but this is a personal view. ... I would say – in my perception, thinking over any approach is 50% of the stuff and 50% is action, whereas I had to think over the stuff 90% of the time and to reduce the action to 10%. I am madly result oriented ... I prefer action, which sometimes turns against me, if it had not been examined and thought over” (BG1).

This controversy, however, is the only aspect in which the Austrian management shows totally uncompromising attitude requiring meetings with *a quite clearly structured agenda* and *everything on minute* (A15); insisting on long-term planning of various events, otherwise they get *stomach ache* (A8) though they recognise with surprise that the Bulgarian short-term planning actually works in quite an effective way. As a result of their hard position on this matter the Austrian managers report that Bulgarian habits have been changed.

“The Bulgarian managers have learned a little bit more structured way of doing their jobs; how to prepare a meeting, to stick to the agenda and not to have various non-planned discussions. Now it is a common rule to have meetings in this way” (A8).

The Bulgarian managers admit that they respect the Austrian “proportions” *discussion/action* but only when they have to do with Austrians. When, however, it comes to working with Bulgarians, they act as they are accustomed to.

To sum up, the Austrian culture meets two different Bulgarian economic cultures – those of young and older generations. Whereas the first encounter is harmonious in its nature, the second one is marked by tensions. They are mostly hidden and do not develop into open conflicts. In addition, the adaptability of both parties plays a positive role in overcoming the tensions and conflicts. The harmonious cultural encounter between the young Bulgarian and the Austrian management is a result of a process in which one type of Western culture strives to meet “Western culture” on the Bulgarian business terrain. The harmony is secured well in advance by the recruitment of managers socialised in the Western socioeconomic milieu. This is not a scheme, in which the “strong Western” culture devours the “weak Eastern” one. Rather, it is a scheme in which the “Western” culture makes itself stronger beforehand. That is the recipe for the “strong” cultural mix and the “win-win” situations. This case study does not provide material to compare the ‘weight’ of the Bulgarian “transitional to market” socialisation from the Western socialisation as factors that influence the cultivation of the market oriented

economic culture among the young managers, as most of them, as it was mentioned, have graduated from Western universities. Still, the findings favour the hypothesis that internalisation of the market oriented economic culture is a very important competitive advantage and stratification factor on the Bulgarian labour market.

### **3. The perceptions of status inequality**

The different nature of the cultural encounters may explain the different perception of status inequality in the bank. They are well indicated by the differences in the appraisal of younger and older managers regarding the way the Austrian management brings into line their decisions concerning the privatisation and merger (imposition vs. coordination and adaptation).

Setting up a new business structure after acquisitions and mergers is difficult everywhere. In this bank case, the very high expectations of the older Bulgarian staff for rationalism and perfection in the Austrian managing of the new structure have fallen short by the occurring, according to their perceptions, bureaucratic mess and even chaos at some point. This caused great tensions and conflicts in the first 1.5 years after the privatization – a fact admitted by both sides. The older Bulgarian managers believe that their Austrian colleagues have to adapt their actions to the Bulgarian environment but they claimed that what happened in reality is that the Austrian managers mostly imposed their methods without taking into consideration the Bulgarian specifics.

“The Austrians do not change anything in their way of acting. If something happened to be effectively enough in Croatia ... it must happen here in the same way. ... The things need adaptation but [the Austrian managers] in most cases impose their method. Paradoxically enough, however, in most cases things end successfully” (BG1).

Contrariwise, according to some young Bulgarian managers, exactly the ability of their Austrian counterparts to learn and adapt is the criteria to which they get assigned here.

“The Austrians do not send people, who are diehard, conservative. The people who come here are such who first adapt to the environment. One-man decision-making does not happen here, there are things which are strategically important and many people take part in the decision making. They start very soon saying “we”, Mr. X. says: “We now will enter NATO.” I think that Bulgaria affects them very positively” (BG9).

The perceptions of status inequality are partly bound to the fact of double submission in the bank – on the one hand, each Bulgarian manager has a contact person in the head office and has to coordinate his/her decisions there, and on the

other side - he/she got their bosses in Sofia. This causes status inequalities<sup>14</sup> and contradictions between the formal and informal power structures which, however, are underlined only by the older Bulgarian managers. They believe that using the two networks is a matter of personal capability and the winners in this game of double submission are the youngsters who are more tightly immured into the Austrian networks. Those who stay aside from them are unhappy believing that their estimation derives not only from professional criteria but from personal attitudes of (dis)liking.

“There are elements of fancy and non-fancy which I do not like. In the professional relations the capabilities should dominate” (BG1).

The older Bulgarian managers note also the differences between themselves and their Austrian colleagues in contracts, salaries, and regimes of working and leisure. These differences call forth mixed feelings – they strengthen the distance and provoke jokes and envy.

While recognising the presence of some elements of status inequality, the younger Bulgarian managers stress upon the process of positive change of the Austrian managers’ attitudes and behaviour towards their Bulgarian colleagues.

“In most cases [the Austrian colleagues] have come here with absolute non-willingness and under firm conditions when exactly they will leave. The truth is that, subsequently, almost all of them wish to stay here for a longer time, they start liking it here, they start estimating the Bulgarians, and they start listening to our counsel more and more. We get much more equal and by and large they start looking at us as they look at every other Western partner. The underestimation disappears within a very short period of time and now we are partners of equal worth – everybody with their interests” (BG11).

The described attitudes are results of the adaptation of the young Bulgarian managers to the management in Western manner, including previous adaptation while working for other Western companies in Bulgaria. The promotion of young Bulgarian managers to head positions in the bank is a logical continuation of the bank orientation toward recruiting internationally trained managers. The older Bulgarian managers are those who must change under the pressure of the Western business culture, and from this point of view, they are losers. They, however, notice that they feel themselves more appraised in this multinational environment as compared to the pre-privatization period. Hence, the feeling of satisfaction about working in this bank, in this environment is the greatest sign of the reached cultural compromise.

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<sup>14</sup> One example is the imposed by the head office approach to the Bulgarian and Austrian managers manifested via the requirement only Bulgarian managers to pass through screening of the managers’ potential, thus attaching a higher status to the Austrians. This case speaks about some contradictions and incoherency between head office and subsidiary which heavily affect the older Bulgarian managers who feel offended.

#### **IV. Labour market consequences**

The described two types of cultural encounters in the bank originate in its recruitment orientation and have as an outcome a management segmentation between the representatives of the young generation socialised in the transition times (mostly aged 25–32) and the older ones. Is the recruitment mode observed in the bank case transferable to the other multinational companies (MNCs) in Bulgaria? If it is so, this would cause an increased demand for highly qualified young employees and managers who do not bear the mark of the socialist past and who have fully internalised the market values. This would create segmentation (1) between younger and older and (2) among the young professionals themselves on the basis of the economic culture whereby the Western diploma would give an important competitive advantage. There are some, though indirect, arguments supporting the hypothesis that the described bank case recruitment strategy is typical for the MNCs and, consequently, that the labour market inequalities based on economic culture already exist.

Looking at the demand side of the labour market in Bulgaria, there is a severe deficit of highly qualified employees: 86% of the Bulgarian firms report difficulties in recruiting employees and this especially concerns the highly qualified specialists. It is expected that in the near future exactly the highly qualified Bulgarians working in the West will be intensively demanded on the Bulgarian labour market. This demand is enforced by the substantial increase of the direct foreign investments (DFI) in Bulgaria: For period of ten years (1996-2006) the DFI have increased 30 times – from 137,3 in 1996 to 4104,5 mil. Euro in 2006. In 2005 Bulgaria was on the 12<sup>th</sup> place in the world according to the size of the received foreign investments. The tendency is thought to be strengthened even more by the expected further increase of the foreign investments after the EU accession of Bulgaria and of emigrants' return. Its immediate consequence for the market of highly qualified jobs will be the gap in the level of salaries provided by the foreign and Bulgarian employers. Reports show that the salaries offered by the foreign employers are pretty much higher than those offered by the Bulgarian employers. That is why one should not be surprised that the level of salaries received by the young top professionals steadily increases and reaches the levels of the EU, alongside with the drastic diminishing unemployment among them. This creates incentives for the return of the emigrants. The typical path of return of young Bulgarian professionals to Bulgaria is through the MNCs they have been working for in the West. When such MNCs set up a branch in Bulgaria, they normally transfer their Bulgarian employees to the new Bulgarian branch.

Looking at the supply side, we can also discover indirect evidence about the youth labour market segmentation. *First*, the private sector in the economy demonstrated clear preference for young people: 79.2% of the Bulgarian population aged 18-35 is working there (cf. Council of Ministries 2006). *Second*, the bettering of remunerations and the conditions of employment for young top professionals could be regarded as one of the most important factors for the observed steady

tendency for the last seven years of decreasing of the potential emigration by 50% among the young people in Bulgaria. The emigration flows will less and less consist of young people with higher education. *Third*, there is a tendency of constant increase in the number of the Bulgarian students abroad. In 1999 only 10 024 Bulgarians studied abroad. Their number reached 25000 in 2004 and 54000 in 2006. Whereas the increase in the period 1999-2004 was 2.5 times, we have witnessed a similar increase of 2.2 times only within the next two-year period (2004-2006). For the academic year 2005-2006, 14% of all Bulgarian students were enrolled in foreign universities (cf. UNESCO 2007). This tendency will continue as, according to some nationally representative surveys 16% of those who intend to become students in 2008 declare their plans to study abroad (cf. Council of Ministries 2006). A qualitative research of the author conducted in 2005 (still in print) on the higher educational choices of the last school year students has certified that one of the basic reasons why they decide to obtain their higher education abroad, particularly in Europe, is the desire to find afterwards a job for a Western company in Bulgaria. Working for a Western employer in Bulgaria is the “the sweetest dream”; it is the chief motive that propels students for studying in Europe. In their perception, the cultural socialisation in the West and the established networks there, the Western diploma and the fluent language knowledge would provide them with the desired competitive advantage which is quite an adequate reaction to the demand on the Bulgarian labour market.

This matching of the demand and supply will further work in favour of those who are carriers of the market oriented economic culture which – for the time being - is best proved by evidence for Western type of socialisation (Western diploma, international training, previous work for a Western company in Bulgaria, fluency in at least two foreign languages, etc.). Thus the economic culture stops just differentiating but turns to be a stratification factor that significantly influences the labour market position of the young people and their social status in general. The track and the speed of change of the Bulgarian economic culture and the intensity of the business contacts between Europe and Bulgaria will determine the scope of this segmentation. With the course of time this situation will naturally blow over but only the future will tell us how long it will take.

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# **Power Distance and Degrees of Legitimacy: The Case of Bulgaria**

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## **Abstract**

The popularity of the meanwhile historic work of G. Hofstede on organisational cultures is still causing researchers from nations initially not represented in the study to apply Hofstede's methodology for the collection and evaluation of data from their own country and thus to make possible grounded cross-cultural comparisons. There are newer findings that basically confirm the core ideas of the prototype study, but they include reflections that go beyond the streamlined conclusions of the original. This is the case with the present article. Its authors were motivated by a "paradox" that came to light in the wake of the surveys on Bulgarian organisational culture conducted 2000-2004 with Hofstede's methodology: the evaluation and interpretation of the data indicated the "strange" combination" of a relatively high power distance together with clear egalitarian attitudes, a basic discrepancy between the high degree of acceptance of power inequalities (in tune with the definition of the power distance category) and the strong preference for egalitarian relations, attitudes well known to the "gut-feelings" of every Bulgarian layperson.

The authors attempt to solve this "paradox" by including the additional category of "legitimacy" which they take from Max Weber's dichotomy between legitimate vs. illegitimate domination. The results of their empirical research confirm the coexistence of high power distance with genuine egalitarian attitudes as well as the important role of the new category (with its variations of personal vs. impersonal authority), that allows for the reconciliation of the seeming contradiction between the first two categories. The referral to everyday interaction practices provides some valuable insights into models of leadership and motivation in the Bulgarian business environment.

## **1. Introduction**

This study has been motivated by a paradox which was brought to public attention by the results of five surveys on organizational culture in Bulgaria conducted between 2000 and 2004 by the methodology of G. Hofstede.<sup>15</sup> They produced data

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<sup>15</sup> Representative National Survey of Organizational Culture 2000 – 2002, 1200 respondents

which indicated a relatively large power distance (PDI between 60 and 75) together with clearly egalitarian attitudes. Evidence of the latter was the high preference for a consultative type of manager, declared by the respondents. As can be seen from the formula used by Hofstede for computing the PDI, this preference is negatively correlated with the index.

“PDI = 135 – 25 (mean score employees afraid)  
+ (percentage perceived manager 1 + 2)  
- (percentage preferred manager 3)”  
(Hofstede 2001: 86)

Hofstede comments the results of his IBM survey in this way: “In countries where many employees were perceived as afraid, employees tended *not* to prefer the consultative manager but to vote for the autocratic, the persuasive, *or* the democratic, majority-vote manager” (ibid.). Interestingly, in our case precisely the opposite happened. The percentage of the respondents who preferred the third type of manager was in the range between 40 and 50% and the relatively high end-result of PDI was due to the great values of the variables “mean score employees afraid” (between 2.6 – 2.9) and “percentage perceived manager 1 + 2” (55 - 60%).

Why do we consider these results to be paradoxical – at least in the conceptual framework of Hofstede’s theory of power distance? The data indicate a great discrepancy between facts and values in the case of organizational culture in Bulgaria. Many employees are afraid to disagree with their managers, the autocratic and the persuasive/paternalistic types of managers prevail, but on the other hand people prefer a consultative type of manager. If we agree with the definition of power distance as “The extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally” (Hofstede 2005: 46), what can we say about the degree to which the employees in question *accept* their unequal position with regard to their bosses? In principle the high PDI implies acceptance of inequality. If this is the case in Bulgaria, how can we explain the preference for egalitarian relations between subordinates and superiors which was not less clearly demonstrated by the surveys?

## 2. Hypothesis

We propose, as a means to resolve this paradox, to use the category *legitimacy* in conjunction with *power distance*. In such case the difference between large and small power distance in Hofstede’s terms can be interpreted as a difference between two kinds of legitimate domination in the terms of Max Weber. In cultures with high PDI, power is exercised thanks to a combination of traditional and charismatic

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(Davidkov, 2002, cf. also Davidkov 2004); Survey of the Public Administration, 2003–2004, 263 respondents, (Sotirova, Davidkov 2005); Survey at a Central Administration Institution, 2003, 90 respondents (ibid.); Survey at Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”, 2004, 500 respondents (ibid.).

authority; in cultures with low PDI, it is exercised thanks to legal (or rational) authority. In other words, the legitimacy of domination in the organizational environment can take the form either of loyalty to the persons who occupy the managerial positions or of respect to the rules which regulate the activities in the company. If we take into account Weber's definition of legal authority as "resting on a belief in the legality of enacted rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issue commands" (Weber 1978: 215), it will follow that traditional and charismatic authority are compatible with one another, but they are mutually exclusive with legal (rational) authority. One conceives social order either in personal or in impersonal terms.<sup>16</sup>

This means that there are two extreme cases of anchoring subordination – either in interpersonal relations (high PDI) or in abstract rules (low PDI), but there are also less clear and very interesting intermediate patterns of power distribution. It is impossible, indeed, to combine personal loyalty to the boss with genuine respect to the procedure, but a deficiency of both of these is quite a realistic option. *So, we see a possible explanation of our paradox as a manifestation of insufficient legitimacy of power relations in both dimensions.* In such case the lack of respect to the superiors (there is little preference for the autocratic and the persuasive/paternalistic as well as for the "democratic"<sup>17</sup> types of managers) can be "compensated" by the absence of an alternative legitimate organizational order. We see here an interesting asymmetrical relationship: if normatively there is a deficiency of legitimacy both of personalized or impersonal (legal, rational) authority, then factually the personal domination prevails. We shall try to explain later why this happens. For the time being we shall only point out that Hofstede's methodology does not have the capacity to distinguish between a case of legitimately large power distance (where a PDI of about 60 to 75 is an expression mostly of the authoritarian values of the subordinates) and a case of illegitimacy of power relations of both, personalized and impersonal, types (where a PDI of the same level is supported most of all by evidence of the factual domination of the superiors).

### 3. Method

In order to verify our hypothesis we designed a questionnaire with 31 closed questions (see Appendix). They were of three types – measuring the PDI (the classical questions of Hofstede), measuring the egalitarian attitudes, and the personalization of organizational order. Our assumption was that a combination of

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<sup>16</sup> Even if we consider this issue out of the conceptual framework of Weber's typology, we should admit that it is not possible to combine loyalty to the persons who hold power with respect to the "rules of the game". What should we do if the person in power breaks the rules?

<sup>17</sup> Concerning the fourth, "democratic" type of manager Hofstede makes the somewhat counter-intuitive assumption that the preference for it is an evidence of large power distance too, because this is a rather unrealistic ideal of management and if the respondents support it, this should be interpreted as "...a *counterdependent* reaction to large power distance" (Hofstede 2001: 86).

egalitarian attitudes with evidence that order is conceived as a network of interpersonal relations rather than a system of rules would mean that neither type of authority (traditional/ charismatic and rational/legal) is accepted as legitimate. If the case turns out to be like that, the paradoxical results of the former surveys will find an explanation and important conclusions about the specificity of organizational culture in Bulgaria, and perhaps in the Balkan region generally, can be drawn.

At this stage of the development of our conception of power distance in Bulgarian organizational culture we did not aim at representative results. We simply wanted to determine whether such a pattern of awareness of power relations is available or even possible. A survey which has the ambition to find out what the situation in the country really is should be much more comprehensive and should be conducted from a comparative perspective. That is why we decided for an unrepresentative typological sample of 209 respondents from 21 organizations from business, public administration, education, the NGO sector, and others. The survey was realized in February and March 2007 in five regions of Bulgaria (Sofia, Plovdiv, Rousse, Vratza, Chelopech).

Our indicators can be grouped in the following way:

Referring to power distance directly – the questions from Hofstede’s IBM survey:

- The employees afraid to express disagreement (our question No 6)
- Preferred manager (3)
- Actual manager (4)

Referring to egalitarian attitudes

We used questions of considerable variety. Our chief concern was to avoid confusion, which might have ensued from socially desirable answers. Hofstede himself remarks an apparent paradox, resulting from the juxtaposition of his PDI with the answers of the employees to another IBM survey question. It turned out that the “...agreement with the statement ‘Employees in industry should participate more in the decisions made by management’ was positively correlated with PDI” (Hofstede 2001: 91). The author’s interpretation is that it was for ideological reasons that this statement has been supported by many of the employees of organizations characterized by large power distance: according Hofstede “the ideological statement acts to some extent as compensation for what happens on the pragmatic level” . That is why we tried to formulate two types of questions: ones which referred and ones which did not refer directly to the boss–subordinate relations:

- What do the employees think about their manager? (7, 13 and 24)
- Level of trust between managers and employees (10)
- What do employees think about the mechanisms of change? (8, 12)
- Is dialogue possible between managers and employees? (17)
- How would the employee react to an order which seems to him/her unreasonable? (22)
- How would the employee react to an order which hurts his/her interests? (23)

Referring to personalization vs formalization of organizational order:

- Change through personal involvement (9)
- Change through influential people (11)
- The name more important than the institutional position (21)<sup>18</sup>.

#### **4. Results**

Applying the formula of Hofstede we obtained a PDI of 67. This result is an evidence of a relatively large power distance, although it is slightly lower than the one of the representative survey of 2002.

In confirmation of our hypothesis that genuinely egalitarian attitudes (not ideological stereotypes) prevail among the employees in Bulgarian organizations, we obtained the following data. The dialogical mode of resolving the problems in the organization is supported more or less categorically by 85% of the respondents (question 8). If they get an order which seems to them unreasonable, 54% would request a clarification from their boss (question 22). If an order hurts their interests, 27% of the respondents would challenge it, and another 44% would fulfill it only if according to their judgment it is in the interest of the organization as a whole (question 23). Especially interesting are the results in the case of questions 7 and 13. In order to check for a propensity among our respondents to give socially desirable answers, we presented two statements, contradictory in content, but formulated in terms which invited (as socially desirable) agreement with them. The first portrayed bosses to be people as anyone else, who at present happen to fulfill managerial functions; the second characterized the managers as generally superior personalities. If we got predominantly affirmative answers in both cases, this would have put in doubt the reliability of all data obtained by our survey. However, 81% of the respondents reacted more or less positively to the first statement (which in itself was a strong manifestation of egalitarian attitudes), and only 34% agreed to some extent with the second one. Interestingly, the respondents who took an undecided position (“equally agree and disagree”) were 9% in the first case and 36% (the majority) in the second. It seemed as if our respondents felt that something was not in order with these questions and hesitated how to answer the second one.

Concerning the personalization of organizational order, we relied on three questions. The first and second referred to the ways how to achieve a desired change in the organization. A great part of the respondents (79%) agree that this requires personal involvement and 40% (the biggest part) support the statement that another necessary condition is the intervention of influential people. The third question described a hypothetical situation: if the respondent were a manager him/herself, what kind of plate would hang on the door of his/her office – the person’s name, followed by his/her institutional position, or vice versa? Somewhat surprisingly, we

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<sup>18</sup> Beside these, our questionnaire contains also other indicators. We were verifying also a couple of alternative hypotheses. However, we are not going to comment on them here for the sake of clarity and brevity because they were not confirmed.

got 87% in favour of the first option, which indicated a strong tendency to conceive organizational order as a network of interpersonal relations.

## 5. Discussion

Summing up, the results of our survey demonstrated that a combination of egalitarian attitudes and personalisation of order exists as a pattern of organisational culture in Bulgaria.<sup>19</sup> We mentioned above that we interpret this fact as evidence that neither traditional and charismatic, nor rational/legal authority is recognized to be legitimate enough in order to guarantee the conscientiousness of subordination. Still, the power relations in the country's organizations are generally stable. How can we explain this?

Little has been done to study this matter in Bulgaria. Still we found one reliable empirical survey on the relations between Bulgarian and Western economic culture (cf. Chavdarova 2004), which provides suggestions how an illegitimate large power distance can be sustainable in our organizational environment. The author has conducted 25 in-depth interviews with Bulgarian (15) and foreign (10) businessmen and women.

Some of the respondents (foreign and Bulgarian alike) commented on the dependency between the personalization of organizational order, the distribution of responsibilities and power distance in Bulgarian corporate entities. As people typically tend to interpret criticism as personal, it is very difficult to resolve problems without offending someone. If one points out that a co-worker is not fulfilling his/her duties properly, this is not understood (by the person targeted, but also by the other colleagues who are involved) as a technical "diagnosis" of a fault in the functioning of the system, but as an accusation against the person. That is why "horizontal" professional interactions are loaded with personal content and this makes it difficult to take responsibility for maintaining and enhancing the organization's performance. People typically do not jeopardize their relations with their colleagues by criticizing them. As a consequence, employees tend to shift responsibility upwards, to superiors, who can "afford" to be disliked by their subordinates since their positions do not depend on them (Chavdarova 2004: 52-53).

Of course, this case study demonstrates only one possible motive for tolerating large power distance without accepting it as justified. In order to draw a broader picture of organizational patterns of this type, we need to take into account a wider range of cultural typologies. The most obvious "candidate" for conceptualizing the Weberian dichotomy of personalized-impersonal authority with the help of categories of intercultural communication seems to be E. Hall's classification of low context and high context cultures (cf. Hall 1976). These two types of culture differ in many respects and one of them is whether the person is separated from the issue.

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<sup>19</sup> As mentioned before, only a representative survey could assert what the situation in the country as a whole is. For the purposes of this paper it is enough to check whether such a pattern (a combination of egalitarian attitudes with personalization of organizational order) exists at all.

As Stella Ting-Toomey points out, people with low context attitudes tend to do this while the ones belonging to high context cultures do not (cf. Ting-Toomey 1985)<sup>20</sup>. That is why in the latter case the motive to save face is generally quite strong (cf. Ting-Toomey 1988).

Another relevant typology is the one of diffuse vs specific cultures. As described by W. Gudykunst and Y. Kim (actually they refer in this respect to T. Parsons' *The Social System*), this is a difference between treating a person or an object in a holistic manner and treating him/her/it in one or another particular aspect, focussing on the function which is fulfilled by that person or object in the concrete case. They give the example of a waiter – one can respond to him as a whole person but, alternatively, also just to his role (Gudykunst, Kim 1992: 52).

A somewhat different interpretation of this typology is given by F. Trompenaars in *Riding the Waves of Culture*. He sees the main difference between these cultural attitudes as manifested in the way that the demarcation line between public and private life is drawn. In the case of specific cultures there is a clear distinction between the public and the private spheres whereas in diffuse cultures they overlap (Trompenaars 1993: 73).

A more general approach to the same matter is demonstrated by W. Gudykunst and Y. Kim. In another chapter of the book quoted above they single out four dimensions along which role relationships differ across cultures: degree of “personalness”, degree of formality, degree of hierarchy, and degree of deviation allowed from the “ideal” role enactment (Gudykunst, Kim 1992: 75). In our case we are interested in the first dimension. Actually the authors link it with the “diffuse–specific” typology, but the difference is that they relate it to role relationships and name it more directly (introducing the term “personalness”).<sup>21</sup>

How does our thesis look in light of these typologies? As mentioned before, we maintain that in the absence of respect to impersonal (in Weberian terms – rational/legal) authority, a pattern of large power distance relations is inevitable, even if not regarded as legitimate by the subordinates in the organization. Such situations appear to be superficially indistinguishable from the cases of genuine large power distance (presented by the IBM survey of Hofstede), but they are characterized by deep psychological tensions and “frictions” in the relations between the hierarchical levels. In other words, the explanation of the paradoxical co-existence of high PDI and egalitarian mentality in the Bulgarian case is that the large power distance is tolerated but not accepted by the subordinates.

What makes personalized subordination so necessary, if organizational order is not conceived as a system of rules? We have already described a concrete “mechanism” of spontaneous shifting of responsibility “upwards” in order to avoid embarrassing situations in the “horizontal” interactions among the employees (these situations arise because of the conflation of issues and persons, characteristic of high context cultures). In more general terms it can be claimed that here we are dealing

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<sup>20</sup> A sobering critical approach to the “high context – low context” typology is given in Thomas 1998.

<sup>21</sup> Another pattern of the personalization of the relations at the work place is described in Kim 1994.

with an analytical truth: if organizational order is not impersonal, then it must necessarily be personal. If there should be order at all, one should obey either the norms or someone's commands. In the case of the overall deficit of legitimacy concerning both traditional and charismatic authority on the one hand, and rational/legal authority on the other, large power distance appears to be a necessary evil.

Let us consider an example. If something goes wrong in the field of an employee's responsibilities, how can this person prove that she or he is not to blame? If rules and procedures are taken seriously in the organization, it would be enough to make sure that the employee has kept them. If this was the case, and still a failure occurred, then the norms were not good enough, or someone else made a mistake, or something extraordinary happened (the effect of *force majeure*). In this cultural setting the consequences for the employee would not be decided by his/her boss. On the contrary, if such an event happens in an organization where the "rules of the game" are treated as a mere formality, the answer to the question "Who is to blame?" is given by the person in charge. This person then has to decide whether the employee could have prevented the failure, even at the expense of acting against the norms. Actually, the working morale of Bulgarian organizations encourages and even glorifies good performance which is achieved in spite of the normative framework. Inventiveness is considered to be a necessary complement to the procedures. However, the evaluation of an activity which is supposed to be inventive, when necessary, cannot be objective (unlike the judgment whether someone has kept the norms or not). And here there is plenty of room for the boss to decide according to her/his personal preferences. In this setting employees are dependent on their superior's will, the dependence having nothing to do with loyalty and respect toward the manager.

Why do such specific patterns exist as part of Bulgarian organizational culture – egalitarian attitudes in a predominantly high context, diffuse setting? Usually the personalization of social order goes together with an autocratic/paternalistic mentality. Why is our case different? This is a difficult issue and trying to find an explanation without comparative research would not be realistic. We would like just to suggest a possible direction of studying this matter. The answer to our question might have to do with the cultural legacy of the Ottoman period in Bulgarian history (i.e., between 1396 and 1878, when the Bulgarians were subjects of the Ottoman Empire). During this period power was associated by the Bulgarians with domination by people with whom they did not identify neither in ethnic or religious aspect. That is why power was equated with oppression, it was not morally justifiable. In this way the egalitarian attitudes that we are dealing with could have developed. And if this is the case, the pattern of power relations which is typical for the organizational life in Bulgaria might also be characteristic for other countries in the Balkan region, which have a similar history.

In conclusion, is it really so important whether power relations in an organization are considered legitimate by the employees or not? Isn't the difference between large and small power distance the only cultural trait which matters in this respect? It can be replied, first of all, that insufficient legitimacy in principle burdens human relations with mistrust, and makes people act with minimal personal

commitment and energy. In terms of organizational psychology, less legitimacy of power relations means less identification of the employee with the company, lower motivation and discipline, instability of hierarchies (every level contests the domination of the upper one and intrigues against the superiors are something common).<sup>22</sup> If a foreign investor takes the results of the empirical surveys conducted with Hofstede's methodology seriously and draws the conclusion that power relations in Bulgarian organizations are similar to the ones in Colombia (the other national culture with a PDI of 67, cf. Hofstede 2001: 87), he or she would be terribly wrong. Actually, one of the leading methodological assumptions for this paper is that cultural differences in the dimension of power distance should not be considered only in a quantitative aspect (as levels of PDI) but also in a qualitative one. Between the poles of the ideal images of the boss as a well-meaning autocrat and as resourceful democrat (Hofstede 2001: 107), which are two alternative embodiments of equally legitimate authority, we may have a range of more or less personalized, more or less legitimate (not necessarily in the same order) forms of domination.

And a couple of final lines about organizational culture in Bulgaria. We are aware that we have described it in a simplistic, essentialist way. Actually the situation is much more diverse, but our aim has been to present our paradox of power relations as clearly as possible. Besides, by drawing a rather pessimistic picture about the deficit of legitimacy of authority, we did not mean that it is not worthwhile to invest resources and efforts in the Bulgarian economy. On the contrary, a conclusion that can be drawn from our research is that at present the human potential of this economy is not being utilized properly and the situation could be greatly improved by applying more intercultural competence.

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<sup>22</sup> More about the importance of legitimacy in organizational life can be found in the following recent publications: Baugher 2007, van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, De Cremer 2007, and Mannion 2006.

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## **Appendix**

### **Sociological Survey "Organizational Culture in Bulgaria – 2007"** (excerpts)

The descriptions below apply to four different types of managers. First, please, read through these descriptions:

Manager 1 Usually makes his/her decisions promptly and communicates them to his/her subordinates clearly and firmly. Expects them to carry out the decisions loyally and without raising difficulties.

Manager 2 Usually makes his/her decisions promptly, but, before going ahead, tries to explain them fully to his/her subordinates. Gives them the reasons for the decisions and answers whatever questions they may have.

Manager 3 Usually consults with his/her subordinates before he/she reaches his/her decisions. Listens to their advice, considers it, and then announces his/her decision.

He/she then expects all to work loyally to implement it whether or not it is in accordance with the advice they gave.

Manager 4 Usually calls a meeting of his/her subordinates when there is an important decision to be made. Puts the problem before the group and tries to obtain consensus. If he/she obtains consensus, he/she accepts this as the decision. If consensus is impossible, he/she usually makes the decision him/herself.

3. Now for the above types of managers, please mark the one which you would prefer to work under.

	2007 (209 respondents)	2000/2002 (1200 respondents)
Manager 1	9 %	9%
Manager 2	24%	21%
Manager 3	49%	47%
Manager 4	18%	23%

4. And to which one of the above four types of managers would you say your own managers most closely corresponds?

	2007 (209 respondents)	2000/2002 (1200 respondents)
Manager 1	26%	28%
Manager 2	31%	28%
Manager 3	33%	32%
Manager 4	10%	12%

6. How frequently in your experience does the following problem occur: employees being afraid to express disagreement with their managers?

	2007 (209 respondents)	2000/2002 (1200 respondents)
very frequently	15%	21%
frequently	17%	20%
sometimes	34%	29%
seldom	20%	17%
very seldom	14%	13%

The following statements do not refer concretely to your organization, but to society as a whole. To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

	fully agree	rather agree than disagree	equally agree and disagree	rather disagree	do not agree at all
7. Bosses are people as anyone else – simply at the given moment they fulfill managerial functions.	61%	20%	9%	5%	5%
8. If in a organization things are not quite OK, the only way to solve the problem is that the managers and the employees negotiate the solution between themselves.	57%	28%	10%	3%	2%
9. If someone wants changes in his/her organization he/she should deal with this in person – there is no other way.	52%	27%	15%	4%	2%
10. It is difficult to get the trust of the boss. If you do not belong to his/her circle, there is no chance.	12%	15%	29%	33%	11%
11. Things can be changed only if influential people engage themselves with this.	16%	24%	32%	14%	14%
12. If in a organization things are not quite OK, they cannot be negotiated out – simply the managers should be replaced with more able people.	16%	15%	27%	31%	11%
13. The managers are generally superior as personalities in comparison with their subordinates	11%	23%	36%	20%	10%

And now let us return to your organization. To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

	fully agree	rather agree than disagree	equally agree and disagree	rather disagree	do not agree at all
14. Things are more or less OK in our organization.	20%	40%	27%	9%	4%
15. If an employee has a problem, his/her colleagues show solidarity and help him/her.	30%	33%	22%	8%	7%

16. There is a common spirit among the employees in our organization – they can stand together in defense of their common interests.	17%	25%	30%	11%	17%
17. The reasonable ideas usually find support in our organization.	19%	37%	26%	13%	5%
18. Things could be much better in our organization.	13%	20%	27%	30%	10%
19. Hardly something can be changed in our organization.	6%	13%	26%	33%	22%
20. If someone has a problem he/she cannot rely on anyone else – he/she must deal with the issue him/herself.	13%	16%	23%	23%	25%

21. Imagine that you are a manager. Which one of the following plates would hang on the door of your office?

IVAN PETROV manager 87%	or	MANAGER Ivan Petrov 13%
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22. If you get from your boss an order, which seems to you unreasonable, you will:

	2007 (209 respondents)
fulfill it only because you don't want trouble	9%
fulfill it because you presume that the boss, probably, has some considerations, which are not known to you and s/he is not obliged to inform you about them	30%
ask the boss for some clarification	54%
simulate that you are fulfilling the order	1%
refuse to fulfill this order	1%
do something else (please, specify)	5%

23. If an order of your boss hurts your interests, you will:

	2007 (209 respondents)
challenge this order (before your boss or before a superior)	27%

manager)	
accept the order, if you judge that it is in the interest of the organization as a whole	44%
conform to this situation, because the boss has the right to take decision without taking into account your personal interests	12%
conform to this situation, in order to preserve your good relations with the boss	2%
conform to this situation, because you do not have the means to oppose effectively	7%
do something else (please, specify)	8%

24. The managerial positions in your organization are occupied mostly by people, who:

	2007 (209 respondents)
are really good for the job (able, competent)	57%
have the right connections	16%
are lucky	20%
are there for some other reason (please, specify)	7%

# **Intracultural Diversity: Japan at the Beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century<sup>23</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

Researchers of Japanese culture report recently a major shift in fundamental cultural values: from collectivism to individualism, from high to low uncertainty avoidance, from high to lower power distance, from masculinity to femininity, and from long-term orientation to short-term orientation. The paper informs about several aspects of culture change and looks at their impact on desirable organisational behaviours. It also draws attention to the discrepancies between the overtly positive evaluation of most innovations and their poor translation in everyday interactions: empirical evidence shows that culture changes remain less manifest on the level of observable actual behaviours.

## **1. A shift in values**

Recent studies (Matsumoto 2002) have reinforced observations of local and foreign residents of Japan concerning the drastic cultural changes being experienced in Japan. Earlier held and widely known stereotypes about the loyalty, commitment, diligence and self-devotion of the Japanese workforce seem to be debunking in view of lately completed surveys. Many experts hence argue that these essential changes in people's values and attitudes, that is, cultural changes are the ones that trigger changes in society and in the employment system. Conformist tendencies prevalent in Japanese society and the risk-averse attitudes of both individuals and institutions would in principle contradict these predictions. Others therefore, including myself, assume that it is the changing environment that has triggered changes in behaviour. The business environment has namely profoundly changed in a relatively short time after the burst of the bubble-economy and this requires new attitudes to employment. So it is not the changing cultural values of people that bring about changes in the economy, but it is a reverse process: the new needs and expectations make people think and behave differently from earlier valid patterns. Either way, what we see is a state of flux in many areas of social and business life in Japan.

The present paper aims at taking a closer look at the nature of these changes with special attention to the issues of generation, gender, education, and information

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technology.

Although some recent studies based on comparative cross-cultural surveys have found that there is a definite shift in values of Japanese towards values traditionally attributed to Western influence (Matsumoto 2002), empirical evidence shows that only few changes are fully manifesting themselves on the level of actual behaviour. People, for instance, who confess a strong preference for individualism above collectivism would often behave in real-life situations following collectivistic behavioural patterns. This can be seen very well in decision making situations. The following dialogue may well serve as a case in point:

Jenny: How did the meeting go last night?

Tomoko: It was a very useful discussion.

Jenny: How so?

Tomoko: We all talked. And Mr. Takeda explained his reservations about the proposal.

Jenny: Did anyone else agree with him?

Tomoko: No. He was the only one who has some doubts.

Jenny: Then we won the vote.

Tomoko: Oh, there was no vote, of course. We postponed it.

(Storti 1994: 53)

The mechanism of consensus-based decision making is still the rule in most working environments in Japan, be it in the business world or in academia. On the level of words uttered in a meeting one would expect a fast and smooth decision respecting the will of the majority. But in accordance with Japanese traditions the real messages are often left unsaid which makes outsiders confused.

As a frame of reference I turn to Hofstede's (2002) cultural dimensions (identity, truth, hierarchy, gender, and virtue) theory. Hofstede's analysis assumes, that Japan is markedly different from other Asian countries (even from its close East Asian neighbours) in a number of dimensions.

### *Identity*

The majority of young Japanese (68%) claim themselves to be individualistic in anonymous surveys (Hidasi 2002) but in real-life situations behave invariably following *collectivistic behaviour patterns*. This can be observed very well in classroom situations as well. Students would not volunteer even if requested so in answering a question, in contributing to class-work. A question directed to the class by the teacher is usually left unanswered not so much because of lack of knowledge but because no one takes the odium to be singled out from the group. By avoiding eye contact with the teacher students signal their unwillingness to cooperate on an individual basis because this would mean standing out from their peers. Since cooperation and hence group achievement is given preference in Japanese culture over individual achievement, people tend to be less competitive in their behaviour and attitude, and less assertive in their communication than what their scores suggest in sociological or psychological surveys. The new requirements of the job market,

however, do not fit this pattern: firms place highest value on ability for innovative planning according to a government survey published by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare in October 2002. Human resource managers of companies need graduates with vision, with leadership skills, with innovative ideas (The Japan Times, 2003/07/15, 10). It says, conformists cannot meet these demands. May be this is the reason why there is a boom of books teaching people how to change, how to think individually, like Deguchi Hiroshi's "I want to be different from what I was yesterday: a guide to logical thinking" or the Japanese translation of Zechmeister and Johnson's "Critical thinking: a functional approach" and many others. "In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, companies could lay out your career path for you, but in the 21<sup>st</sup> century you have to build it by yourself" says Fumio Sato, managing director of the head hunting company Tokyo Executive Search Co. (The Japan Times, 2003/07/13, 9).

#### *Truth*

The former dimension has a strong correlation with the *high ranking of Japanese in uncertainty avoidance*. The Japanese people avoid risks and show little value of personal choice or freedom of thought. Participants of a meeting or of a seminar are reluctant to give opinions when confronted with open questions for debate like "What do you think about unemployment?" or "What are the benefits of studying abroad?" Just to be on the safe side, answers are mostly general (often dutifully memorized prête-a-porter texts) instead of contributing individual solutions. Many foreigners would then conclude in their evaluation that Japanese partners have no opinion of their own which is of course usually untrue, but that is the impression one gets. With this mind-set it is particularly difficult for the Japanese to cope with the insecurity they are recently experiencing in employment. The number of *freeters* (the word first appeared in the 1980s as a combination of "free" and "arbeiter", i.e., part-timers, is rising steadily and approaching three millions. The concept itself is the antithesis of the traditional Japanese system of lifetime employment. People have to learn to cope with social uncertainty. And in fact they do: books that teach the know-how of this new way of life are at the top of best-seller lists.

#### *Hierarchy*

The relatively *high power distance* sets the tone even now in working and academic environments. Teachers and students are not interacting in the real sense of the word: their communication is less mutual, it is rather a one-way process directed from the teacher to the students. Students do not make efforts to become active and dynamic players in the communication; if they react at all, they would do it only after being encouraged. They do not enter into the communication flow with the same commitment, because they do not feel to have the right to do so. One can interpret their passiveness in interaction from different standpoints: as a sign of respect within the Japanese frame, and as a sign of indifference within the Western frame. There appeared recently in the Japanese vocabulary a new word coinage. After the analogy of *sekuhara* (sexual harassment) it is called *pawahara* (power harassment). Companies push their employees to overwork without properly paying

them for it. The employees tolerate this abuse and do more overwork than ever before for fear of losing their job amidst the threatening waves of lay-offs. This tendency results in a growing number of *karôshi* (death due to overwork) and of suicide cases among the middle-age generation of *salary men*.

#### *Gender*

Japan still has a long way to go in terms of promoting sexual equality, as its workforce is still heavily male dominated and traditional gender role stereotypes remain deeply entrenched, as admitted in the latest government report carried out in June 2003 (The Japan Times, 2003/06/14, 2). In most areas of employment the “glass ceiling” still often prevents women from reaching managerial positions: the worst being the case in the government sector, where only 20.2% of the civil servants are female. As a rule men are still given preferential treatment at work. The report attributes the slow progress in promoting gender equality in Japan to the deeply set sense of career divide between men and women. Recent changes like the expansion of small businesses and of self-employed sectors, though, have somewhat improved prospects for women who operate their own companies. Japanese society is slowly but steadily beginning to realize the potential of women as human resources. The number of companies with a female president more than doubled between 1985 and 1996, and is continuing to grow: over 65 thousand in 2002 (The Japan Times, 2003/07/13, 10).

#### *Virtue*

The majority of Japanese can be characterized by a *long-term orientation* that manifests itself in all spheres of activity: in handling their human relationships, in their way of living, in their way of making money and in their communication. The traditional Japanese business model is based on networking and relationships that all function very well in a stable and predictable environment. Due to changes in the macro environment Japanese companies are apparently moving toward a different model, a model based on individualism, entrepreneurship, and transparency. The emerging social values are suited to the needs of the changing economic context. More emphasis is put on meritocracy than on seniority, on performance than on stability. People in their 20s or 30s now more and more regard switching jobs as a normal part of life. A research council of the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare estimated that in the coming years, about 19 million people, e.g. 3 out of 10 employees are likely to switch jobs (The Japan Times, 2003/07/13, 9). This would happen not only because of the restructuring of companies, but also because people, particularly the younger generation, tend to place more importance on what they really want to do and/or on what they like to do.

In communication style, too, long-time orientation comes to surface with respect to the direction of the communication flow, with respect to handling time, and with respect to the effectiveness in communication, all of which are intertwined. Instead of the low-context, speaker-oriented offensive communication style, Japanese give preference to the high-context, listener-oriented, defensive communication (Hidasi 2003). The time management of communication also reflects long-term orientation: hesitation, delayed reaction, silence, evasion of answer, etc. are all pragmatic

instruments of the linguistic repertoire. This slows down the communication flow and the dynamics of interaction. Delay in providing a prompt reaction affects the effectiveness of communication. Effectiveness in communication means namely two things in international settings: preciseness of message transfer on the one side and economizing on time on the other. This interpretation of effectiveness of communication nevertheless leaves the Japanese with a great handicap since neither of them is a prerequisite in their native communication. The characteristics of Japanese communication patterns are well functioning within a Japanese context. The problem arises when these same communication strategies are transferred to communication with foreigners and/or in a foreign language. This often leads to misunderstanding, embarrassment, and frustration (Hidasi 1997).

Business people and executives in Japan have gradually come to realize that the traditional social value system which supported the high economic growth until the 1980s was incompatible with the trend of globalization and the IT revolution.

## **2. The impact of globalization: communication barriers**

Indicators of global integration have shown remarkable growth. Back in 1960, when coining the phrase “global village” to describe the world-contracting effect of television, Marshall McLuhan himself probably did not dream of its sky-rocketing career and all-inclusive application. Technology has become the engine of globalization. But in recent years non-technology factors like trade in goods and services, capital flows and personal contact have come to the foreground of global development. Does Japan meet the requirements of our changing globe?

The annual report released by the Swiss based Institute for Management and Development drew attention to the fact that Japan was ranking 30<sup>th</sup> among the 49 nations surveyed on international competitiveness. Japanese graduates have difficulties to perform on the international stage because they are not prepared to compete internationally (The Japan Times 2002/07/22, 15). This rather shocking result is reflected in another international comparison, the extent of globalization.

A survey based on 1998 data that appeared in the January-February 2001 issue of the Foreign Policy Magazine made an attempt for the first time to measure the extent of globalization by dissecting the complex forces driving the integration of ideas, people, and economies in 50 countries in the world. The study revealed that Japan was lagging behind much more than expected in globalization if compared to 49 other countries in the developed world. The survey was repeated in 2002, presenting scales of the 20 most global nations (Foreign Policy Magazine, Jan.-Feb. 2002). Levels of global integration reached new highs in 2000, and Singapore, the most global nation in 1998, has been bypassed by Ireland and Switzerland. Japan, however, is not figuring at all among the top 20 countries on any of the four globalization indices (economy, finance, personal relations, and technology). From the earlier survey it had become clear that Japan was scoring particularly low on the personal relations index. The possible reasons for this can be manifold, but one, if not the main obstacle is to be found in the communication difficulties experienced by and with Japanese speakers in intercultural settings.

Japan is tightly engaged with the rest of the world in economics and trade, hence its business has been global for some time. Compared to Japan's involvement in business and trade there is nevertheless a lag in globalization of management and human resources. Since Japan's past advantage as a producer of high-quality products erodes with the IT revolution and technology transfer, there will be more importance in the future on the ability to cooperate in all fields of its activity production, innovation, research, services on a global basis. No one doubts that it is, above all, mutual understanding that is necessary for successful cooperation. This goal cannot be reached without communication. Hence many believe that the improvement of English language skills is the key to the problem. It was the business world which had first alarmed the public and government institutions in Japan about the need to change requirements as far as human resources are concerned. As Terasawa (1997: 18) points out: "Anyone can cope with official gatherings during summit meetings, since everything has been set up in advance by officials, but it is in informal chats after a drink or two at parties that leaders can sound out each other's true feelings. Japanese leaders aren't up to it. With an interpreter in tow, there is no hope of sharing a whispered conversation. I think Japan's really missing out".

Japanese are making desperate efforts to catch up with the foreign-language-literacy demands of our global age. Some way or other seemingly all Japanese companies try to make efforts to raise their employees English proficiency level in order to match the changes in the business environment. This has become a requirement partly because many production bases of Japanese manufacturers have been transferred abroad, where communication with the local employees is possible only in foreign languages, mostly in English as the lingua franca of our global age. Language barriers can greatly hinder information flows between parent companies and subsidiaries. Partly because more and more companies are forced to introduce international management systems within Japan, this involves an increased participation of foreigners in Japanese companies and organizations. This rapidly changing business environment requires adaptation on the level of communication as well. It is evident that without a bilingual management system firms may find it hard to speed up decision-making.

In the desperate competition to meet global standards some firms have adopted radical practices like using first names to the great frustration of most Japanese employees. Everyone knowing the Japanese language usage would agree that instead of saying

*"Kachou, shitsurei desu ga, ima o-jikan wa yoroshii deshou ka?"*

(Sorry for disturbing you Sir, could you spare me some moments please?)

to say

*"Tadashi, shitsurei desu ga, ima o-jikan wa yoroshii deshou ka?"*

(Sorry Tadashi for disturbing you, could you spare me some moments please?)

sounds rather odd – to say the least. One wonders in what way would shallow

imitation of social practices help to promote English proficiency of the Japanese staff. The phenomenon of *tatema* or “superficial internationalization” is not unknown in other areas either: it can be traced in the service industry (when one receives a beautifully designed menu in the restaurant but all inside is written in Japanese) just as well as for instance in educational settings, as pointed out by Kiguchi (1997) in her article on the notion of internationalization in Japan.

Some companies, like Nissan Motor Co. or Japan Telecom, have simply adopted English as their official language to facilitate communication between the Japanese and the foreign staff and workers. These companies usually provide their employees with English language training programs at all levels.

An increasing number of Japanese companies nowadays are putting pressure on their employees to improve their English-language proficiency. To this end quite rigorous administrative measures have been implemented at a number of Japanese companies: at Hitachi Electronic Manufacturers, for instance, section chiefs and managers are required to score 650 on the TOEIC exam managed by the Institute for International Business Communication, and 800 points is set as a prerequisite for employees to be considered for a future education course. Language proficiency requirements for promotions of employees have become common practice at many companies. Fresh graduates at job interviews are also often required to produce a set score from the TOEIC exam. Even so there is a great discrepancy between the score requirements of Japanese companies and international standards. Only a B level TOEIC exam (730-859 scores) or higher are the minimum that could guarantee a working proficiency in international settings, a level that only a limited number of employees in Japanese companies are able to achieve. It would, however, be a naivety to believe that English language exams alone could solve the communication issues between Japanese and non-Japanese speakers.

There are companies, for instance, that require their employees to use English at in-house meetings that include foreigners. The reaction of the Japanese staff is not really enthusiastic about these drastic measures. As one employee of a telemarketing firm laments: “Unless we are given an explanation in Japanese afterward of what was said, we won’t understand what was covered” (Spa! 2001/12/26). No wonder employees have difficulties in catching up without having sufficient English language knowledge. Foreigners for whose sake the measure is taken are not satisfied with this solution either. It is still difficult for them to follow the meeting even if it is in English, because the flow of the communication itself follows Japanese patterns.

While high context communication (particularly silent or vague communication) can be effective in intra-cultural contexts, it is less so in intercultural environments. So Japanese communicators are often found to be difficult to understand and often find it difficult to express themselves in a comprehensible way. One might think that acquiring English which has become the global language and has at the same time functioned as an instrument in the process of globalization would help to solve the problem. However, since communication strategies are principally culture bound, Japanese speakers tend to apply their own characteristic communication strategies in any language-environment. This “communicative interference” or “communicative behaviour transfer” might lead to incomprehensibility. Hence, even linguistically

well-educated speakers of English with a Japanese cultural background might behave communicatively in their own Japanese way which in a sense might be one factor for being labelled as globalization-resistant.

If Japan wishes to become more global, more attention has to be paid both to the development of foreign language skills and to the improvement of international communicative competence. This is one more facet of human resource policy where changes are to be carried out urgently and in a well coordinated manner for the benefit of the whole society.

### **3. Perspectives and expectations**

Japan cannot escape the blessings and merits of a multicultural working environment, be it within or outside Japan. The need for being competent to adjust to multicultural settings in all spheres of activities such as industry, trade, academic life, research, science, and politics has aroused new requirements and the need for new competencies both on the level of intellectual and technical skills, and on the level of human interactions, like behaviour and communication. Companies, and especially the ones operating internationally have made efforts to reflect the new needs and requirements in their recruiting policy.

At the same time sociologists and psychologists report radical changes in the collective psyche of the Japanese: most value shifts are being predicted in surveys. Both society as a whole and specifically the domestic business world are experiencing difficulties in handling these cultural changes for several reasons:

- *Psychological discrepancy*: the changes registered in surveys of individuals show a discrepancy with behaviour patterns in real life situations: the divide between “who I want to be” and “who I am” is too great;
- *Generation gap*: while the younger generation is mentally switched on to the changes, the elder generation experiences uncertainty and loss of identity;
- *Domino effect*: trying to alter one element in the value system of the culture without rearranging the rest is difficult: many fear the domino-effect of the changes;
- *Rigidity of the social institutions*: the society as a whole with all its institutions is prepared neither psychologically nor structurally for the absorption and implementation of too many changes at a time;
- *Change-resistant psyche of the Japanese*: while the need for change is acknowledged, the core values of Japanese culture inhibit change. Hence the process itself becomes a more difficult and painful one than in cultures which *ab ovo* encourage change (like some countries in South-East Asia, Finland, the US etc.);

- *Limits of receptiveness*: the intensity and the speed of the changes is overloading the receptive capacities of the society;
- *Endangered cultural identity*: there is a general fear of loss of cultural identity, of losing one's "Japanness".

There is a growing number of people who, being unable to cope with the tension of conflicting values and the lack of stability, react with crime and violence. The job market reacts to the changes in environment with restructuring. This in its turn will often result in layoffs and in providing less security in general. Ethical problems are on the increase. Society expects the education system to improve, and the educational government expects parents and communities to cooperate more. Societal problems have reached new heights for which many blame changes affecting the traditional cultural values. Japan is on the road to change from an economic power into a country seeking quality of life; from a predictable, secure social system to a risk-taking, entrepreneurial system; from a homogenous culture to a diverse one. Intracultural rifts in society are widening as a consequence of diversifying life-styles and life-paths. On the whole, society is becoming more complex than ever before.

The Dentsu Institute for Human studies has made comparative surveys of global values since 1996. The results of its fifth survey (taken in 2000) reveal that Japanese still lack confidence in the future and are searching for a new value system so they can cope with the tide of globalization in political, economic, and social arenas, catch up with the top level of information technologies, and heighten their creative capacities (The Japan Times, 2001/05/28, 7).

Change is never easy but it is inevitable, particularly in the case of Japan. The impact of globalization and internationalization on these cultural changes is extreme; without them there would in fact be no urgent need for Japan to change. At the same time the predictable changes in cultural values are going to have a positive impact on the process of internationalization and globalization of Japan. These expected cultural changes in Japan, although slow and gradual in their progress, will definitely facilitate the adjustment process.

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# **Culture Does Matter – But Differently.**

## **How the Interpretative Anthropological Approach Helps to Rethink the Interculturalist’s Role in the Multinational Company**

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### **Abstract**

Culture, no doubt, is in fashion: I can travel “across cultures”, I can dress “cross-cultural”, I can read “intercultural literature” and I can even eat “interculturally”. But there is more to the term: In the globalized world of today’s companies, so called “intercultural competency” has become an asset. Hardly any job advertisement posted online or in print by any player on the global market fails to mention “intercultural competency” as a key requirement – be it in engineering or in management. All these mentions of “culture” imply that there is a border to be crossed, and that this border can be localised. The person doing so, being an expert on “culture”, would then be the so-called “interculturalist”. But what happens when the expert on culture cannot clearly define the borders of culture anymore?

In this paper I want to show how the alleged intercultural expert can be wrong in assessing the cultural borders within a multinational company and can even alienate employees through intercultural theory. Furthermore, I demonstrate how the interpretative anthropological approach to culture can be used to comprehend the actors’ point of view on cultural boundaries in their work practice. Based on these assumptions, I conceptualise culture as a complex and changing system of contested social meanings and show how anthropology can help understand this concept of culture as multiple collective identities in practice within multinational companies.

### **1. Theoretical starting point**

„...relatively little is known about the content or the social organization of technical work. To be sure, science and engineering have attracted considerable attention over the years, but only recently have researchers begun to examine what scientists and engineers actually do and how their work is organized” (Barley, Orr 1997: vii).

Today’s corporate work takes place in complex fields. Managers and employees of national and multinational, large and medium-sized companies have to master this complexity in order to work in the best interests of their companies, that is: to gain competitive advantage on the global market. On the other hand, groups of experts have emerged who study the borders between culture. The culture-free paradigm (an oil refinery is an oil refinery is an oil refinery – be it in Indonesia or the US, to cite but one famous example) certainly has lost its appeal. Others like Hofstede, Trompenaars and Hall have taken over the lead, analysing the differences between cultures. Their credo: “Culture matters!” – and both practitioners and academics in

management came to believe in it. Thus, hardly any theory of international management nowadays fails to take culture's influence on today's organisations into account.

However, leaving the culture-free paradigm surely cannot mean to put culture into an oversimplifying deterministic national-cultural container. For 'culture' within the multinational company is a multi-layered concept reaching from transnational business cultures to organisational cultures, as others have pointed out before me (Phillips, Sackmann 2002). To study it comparatively along just one variable (national culture) means to sacrifice external validity of study for sake of internal validity and thus fails to bring about significant knowledge on culture (Yeganeh, Su 2006). I simply leads to a statement like: "Yes, managers x and managers y vary in their behaviour commensurate with cultural dimension z (internal validity)." However, it does not bring about external validity, framed in a question such as: "Is this cultural dimension applicable." The focus of cross-cultural management research on national culture (e.g. Tjosvold, Leung 2003) thus has severe shortcomings.

In summary, the concepts of culture being used to study a multidimensional and complex phenomenon in a changing field need to be multidimensional and flexible themselves. I thus propose to view 'culture' as being more than a mere national cultural container. To overcome the inherent shortcomings in the application of existing cultural dimensions and theories, I suggest to draw from recent anthropological theory and conceptualize culture as an open process of sense-making in interaction with changing boundaries – which gives the concept the new meaning of 'collective identities in the making' in interaction with "the other". This making of a collective 'we' always takes place in interaction with the making of a group of 'other' (Ricoeur 1992). Internal (emic) and external (etic) view on culture always differ in such a sense. It thus cannot be the goal to define culture externally (etically) once and for all (Anthropological theory even suggests this might not be possible after all) but to grasp the actors' internal (emic) point of view through interpretation.

Collective identities of such a kind vary according to context; individuals in organizational contexts can thus develop different collective identities (Baumann, G. 1999, Baumann, Z. 2001) and do so, indeed, through 'cultural code-switching' (Mahadevan 2008a). From a national cultural container culture thus changes to multidimensional focus-points for and of collective interpretation. The collective identities are being developed in a multinational context are highlighted through anthropological fieldwork (Mahadevan 2007). For individuals in a global context *make sense* out of their changing surroundings, and it is the Anthropologist's task to try to follow this process of collective sense-in-the-making as closely as possible.

The article makes the following contributions: firstly, it conceptualizes culture as an interpretative category and thus links culture to recent Anthropological theory. Secondly, the article shows how the established dimensions of culture (the etic perspective) might not help unite the actors in the field but even alienate them from each other when etic and emic perspective differ. Thirdly, the article demonstrates how the interpretative Anthropological approach to culture can help to reconstruct the actors' categories of "we" and "the other" and thus understand the cultural

complexity of the multinational corporate field.

## **2. Research design and method within a specific field**

Main means of analysis was the so called method of participant observation within a German High-Tech company that will be presented later in this article. Through participant observation, the researcher makes themselves the main tool of analysis: They enter the field, live and work with the actors in the field, thus learning how to feel, behave and act in this context, and reflect upon their own interaction with the field, upon the actors and upon their social framework, thus following the reflexive paradigm of modern Anthropology (Van Maanen 1998). Fundamentally, the researcher oscillates between becoming or being 'one of them' and between looking on them and themselves from the outer perspective, thus validating their own experiences through inter-subjective cross-check.

Validity in the qualitative sense does not mean quantitative or statistical validity but validity through reflexive inter-subjectivity. By exchanging their interpretation of their world with the actors in the field, for example, the researcher validates their findings; by reflecting upon themselves and their research process in their final narrative interpretation of reality the researcher makes the determinedness of his approach visible to the reader.

It lies in the nature of this approach that it is not generalisable or usable in the quantitative sense. As it deduces theory from the field, however, it can find answers to questions one would not have known to ask for, meaning: Quantitative data is valid only within the model, if the model doesn't apply, the researcher only confirms his assumptions. Qualitative data comes before the model and can thus be used to design a model that is applicable to a specific reality.

The above mentioned theories have been applied through two years of fieldwork in a multinational German high-tech-company that built up a site in Bangalore, India, and will be named ChipTech-Corporation for sake of confidentiality. ChipTech is a global player on its relevant market. The fieldwork was conducted at an engineering department of ChipTech that consisted of approximately 450 engineers and technical management. Despite its futuristic name, the company can look back on more than 100 years of organisational history – a German history that is. By now globalization has reaped into this corporation, the most recent event being the ramp-up of a site in the Indian Silicon Valley in Bangalore.

Following the Anthropological paradigm, I deduced hypotheses from fieldwork. The systematic anchor for this approach was the above mentioned understanding of culture as a process of making and re-making sense out of changing social facts by certain actors within a certain field that cannot be reified from an outer perspective. Hence, a reified and valid picture of 'culture as such' was not the goal but constructed collective identities in the making.

Through this process, it became visible that for the ChipTech-employees at the German central-site in Big-City the process of globalization is a process of decline: In their collective sense-making, the ramp-up of the Bangalore site goes hand-in-hand with their own management restructuring the organisation and cutting down

employment in Germany. Thus, the framework of the Indo-German cooperation seems unstable and full of tension: Employees – from their perspective – have been asked to transfer knowledge to India while at the same time cannot be sure of their own employment in the future. At the same time, ChipTech-engineers struggle to maintain control over unstable and – from their perspective – uncertain technology. As other have shown before me (Orr 1996), engineers need to maintain a collective self-image as experts who control technology while at the same time be aware of the fact that such a control can never be accomplished. The details of the subsequent habitus of expertise within the engineering community have been described by me previously (Mahadevan 2007, 2008b). What is of utmost importance in this context, is the well-established knowledge that scientific facts are not simply there but have to be constructed through social negotiation for shared meanings (Latour, Woolgar 1979, Polkinghorne 1988).

As could be seen in the process of fieldwork, the members of Chip-Tech would place themselves within different collective identities – depending on the contextual framework. The relevant opposing group of ‘the other’ would differ contextually in the same way. As could be seen, processes of globalization formed a major framework for local collective identities in the working context. This goes along with the theories of Appadurai (1996) and Friedman (1994) who have shown that local identities always emerge in interaction with the global. Delocalised, transnational and translocal imaginations of the ‘We’ thus become possible, even likely, as Hannerz (2003) has pointed out.

This revelation shaped the future direction of my research: Instead of analysing the Indo-German border of ‘We’ and ‘the other’ (as I had planned to do), I came to research issues of power between sites, borders between employees (who referred to themselves as ‘engineers’) and their managers whom they referred to as the alien group of ‘management’. As it turned out to be, the cleavage between ‘engineers’ and ‘management’ was the main cultural border in the field from the actors’ perspective, and I felt obliged to shape my research accordingly.

The process of revelation was as the following: My role in the company as given to me by management was one of an internal PhD-student who would research Indo-German cooperation and thus give hints on how to improve it and prevent ‘intercultural’ misunderstandings. I started research with qualitative and narrative interviews at the German site which I conducted with approximately 100 members. Out of this process, I deduced initial hypotheses that I mirrored back to the field in management and project-team meetings. Those hypotheses would be discussed by participants, and it was at this point at the latest when the focus of research changed.

I then continued to interview company members’ from the Indian and the German site and started to conduct so-called ‘cross-site workshops’ at the German site for whoever was interested in participating. There, my and the actors’ interpretation of their work-practice across sites would be discussed again and agreed upon. Outcome of these workshops would be distributed within the company. As required by contractual agreement, the final ethnography – the written outcome of fieldwork that I compiled while still in the field – was then read and released by company’ representatives. Unfortunately, I could only do research at the Indian site of Bangalore for a period of six weeks. During this short period of time, I managed

to conduct almost 100 interviews with management and engineers.

To place my findings into a broader context beyond the specific field, I interviewed 30 experts – intercultural trainers and those responsible for intercultural training in human resource department of ChipTech – to gather their perspective on intercultural or cross-site work.

The following pages will focus on the categorisations of the ‚We‘ and ‚the Other‘ from the actors‘ perspective as revealed by the above mentioned understanding of culture – and as opposed to classic ‚intercultural‘ assumptions.

### **3. Background: the structure of cross-cultural human resource development**

For the major part of the intercultural experts that I interviewed, employees of technical companies – to be called ‚engineers‘ in the following – were the main target group for intercultural training with focus upon India. According to the experts, the most common HR-development-measure to spread ‚intercultural competency‘ among technical employees is the in-house intercultural training.

Three groups of people meet in this scenario:

- a. Those responsible for the selection of intercultural experts and the implementation of intercultural human resource development measures (to be called ‚intercultural training‘ in the following) within a company (to be called ‚HR-development executive‘ in the following).
- b. The intercultural expert who conducts any human resource development measure that is to enhance those employees‘ ability to cooperate with India (to be called ‚intercultural trainer‘ in the following).
- c. The participants of the intercultural training, most of which can be categorised into to group of engineers.

The structure of their relationship can be summarised as the following:

- a. Neither intercultural trainers nor HR-development executive can understand engineering work-practice; they thus have to rely on assumptions on the field.
- b. The most powerful actor in this relationship is the HR-development-executive for they are in charge of hiring or firing the intercultural trainer. Thus, it is essential for the intercultural trainer to meet the HR-development-executives‘ wishes (see Dahlén 1997).
- c. Besides this inequality of power, HR-development-executives and intercultural trainers share a common goal: To bring those ‚intercultural competencies‘ to the engineers that they require.

- d. The most common HR-development-measure is the intercultural training – a non-recurring one-day or two-day activity.

The perspectives those three groups have on the intercultural scenario will be analysed in the following, starting with the actors in the field, the 'engineers'.

#### **4. Categories of 'We' and 'Other' in the field**

The two main categories of 'We' and 'the Other' at the German central site of Big-City were 'engineers' and 'management'. To be an engineer from the engineers' perspective meant: to be close to technology, to be driven by an scientific urge to understand technology and to not compromise technical excellency for the sake of customer orientation or management strategy. To be a manager from the engineers' perspective meant: Not to understand technology anymore, to be far away from it and to sacrifice technical excellency for the sake of customer orientation, management strategy and other 'unimportant' things.

As could be shown through fieldwork, this conflict between 'management' and 'engineers' was visible in virtually almost every meeting that took place at ChipTech. As others have pointed out before me, this is a common observation in the technical field and is based upon the inherent conflict between the urge and need for technical freedom on engineer level and for control at management level (Kunda 1992). It has been assumed that through this public display of 'Otherness', engineers maintain their self-perception of being an 'pro-active expert' that is so important for the success of technical work (e.g. Orr 1996). However, the question has not been asked: Why does the system function under such conditions? For ChipTech does function as a social system.

As I have pointed out previously (Mahadevan 2007), the answer to this question lies in the fact that the conflict between 'management' and 'engineers' is simply a staged and ritualised one the purpose of which is to maintain collective identity and to resolve the inherent conflict between the urge and need for technical freedom on engineer level and for control at management level. This assumption is supported by the finding that it is only in official meetings – frontstage, as Goffmann (1969) puts it – that the conflict between 'management' and 'engineers' is enacted. Informally – backstage – managers categorise themselves as 'engineers, too' (and they all have a technical background) and thus integrate themselves into the group of technical experts who – informally – would then listen to management propositions. Common bond between them was a shared invented tradition (Hobsbawm, Ranger 1983) and a shared organisational saga (Clark 1972).

As I have pointed out (Mahadevan 2007), Managers themselves would categorise themselves as 'engineers, too – but on a different level'. The category of management thus did exist as a attribution made by 'engineers' but not as a self-categorisation. While being enacted frontstage, the conflict within the dominant discourse of difference between 'managers' and 'engineers' at the German site could be integrated backstage.

As the Indian site of Bangalore was new and much smaller one than the central-

site in Big-City, a separate collective identity of being 'ChipTech-Bangalore' had not yet been established there in the beginning of fieldwork but emerged slowly over the next two years. Also, the conflict between 'management' and 'engineers' was not discernible in the beginning but slowly emerged after some time. It was never as visible as in Big-City, however, a fact that can be attributed to the much smaller size of the organisational unit in Bangalore.

Engineers of both sites – in India and in Germany – shared the belief that 'engineers' were a global community. They were of the opinion that they did not have 'intercultural' or 'cross-cultural' issues in their shared work practice. To them, 'cultural difference' was something that did exist between India and Germany in general but was not applicable to engineering work-practice.

Following the interculturalists' paradigm, I would then have had to interpret this belief as 'lack of intercultural or cross-cultural competency' to be enhanced through human resource development measures. However, following the Anthropological paradigm, I chose to take this assumption as valid. I could then discern the following pattern: Almost every engineer at the German site in interaction with the Indian site expected to lose their field of competency due to this interaction. However, this did not stop most engineers to cooperate with the Indian site and to transfer their knowledge to those 'new engineers'. Only an engineer at the German site who was afraid of losing their field of competency due to knowledge-transfer to India and who would not expect to find another field of competency – alternative ownership – within the company, would culturalise problems with the Indian site. He would categorise the Indian engineer not as an engineer any more but as 'Indian'. An engineer at the German site who was afraid of losing their field of competency due to knowledge-transfer to India and who would expect to find another field of competency – alternative ownership – within the company, would attribute problems with the Indian site to distance or organisational or technological issues – facts that have nothing to do with the capability of the Indian engineer who was still categorised as 'engineer'.

In summary: Engineers of both sites shared the belief of forming one community. From the engineers' perspective the main issue of cross-site work was not 'national culture' but distance that impacts informal mechanisms essential for shared technical work-practice (see Mahadevan 2007). Other issues mentioned were technical problems, language (English) and time-lag. Only if a German engineer felt endangered by the presence of the Indian engineer, they would categorise Indian engineers as being 'culturally alien'.

## **5. The intercultural experts' discourse of 'cultural difference'**

The intercultural experts' discourse on the engineers' cross-site work at Chip-Tech can be summarised very shortly: National cultural differences do exist – and they impact cross-site work. Thus, HR-development-measures have to be defined and implemented that make this difference vanish and thus help improve cross-site work. The more one can assess the impact and measure the improvement, the better – hence the preference of cultural dimensions in the corporate HR-development

department (see Chiang 2005). The concept of culture used in such an exercise is thus a reified one (see Yeganeh, Zu 2006). This view on culture is not shared by every intercultural trainer but due to their dependence on the HR-development executives benevolence, even those intercultural trainers who do not share the reified view on the national cultural container feel forced to streamline their content in accordance to corporate tools, processes and requirements. But this is only a minor difference compared to what both groups have in common: The belief in the existence of national cultural difference that form the very core of the 'interculturalists' identity. As research has shown, this shared belief leads to two crucial assumptions:

- a. In contract to the actors in the field, intercultural trainer and HR-development executives possess knowledge on existing national cultural differences.
- b. Intercultural trainers and HR-development-executives are able to define the intercultural competency needed by the actors in the field.

Those two assumptions legitimate the ability – and the duty – to carry intercultural knowledge into the organisational field.

## **6. The intercultural experts' perspective on 'the engineers' and its implications**

Non-technical employees – and HR-development executives categorise themselves as such – mourn a lot about 'the engineers' at ChipTech. They perceive themselves as alien, their interests as being opposed to their own. This feeling is mutual: ChipTech-engineers also have the strong feeling not to be understood by those managing them on such a non-technical level. Between engineers and HR-managers, no integrating discourse can help build the bridge as it is the case between ChipTech-engineers and their own – technical – management.

The HR-development-executives' perspective on 'the engineers' can be summarised through the following beliefs that are being collectively held to maintain purpose and identity:

- a. Engineers do not possess social competency: Not only do they lack intercultural competency, but even within their own culture they lack basic social abilities.
- b. Technology and natural sciences are black-and-white only: There is no room for uncertainty. Hence, it is expected that engineers think in clear categories and patterns. As this article has shown previously, this is not the case from engineering perspective.
- c. Engineers oppose social competencies and intercultural trainings as being non-technical and in-accurate and thus being completely useless.
- d. Engineers who question the existence of national-cultural difference are wrong

and have to be educated and convinced of the contrary for their own benefit.

It is foremost the last point that goes to the very heart of the interculturalists' identity. One trainer said: "We had to bring cultural dimensions to the engineers. It was important to them to have a language and concepts that help them re-structure their experiences."<sup>24</sup> Another trainer said: "Fortunately, the engineers understand our models by now. It was a fight, for sure, but you have to stick to it, otherwise those technicians will never learn it."<sup>25</sup>

From the trainers' perspective, intercultural models for engineers have to be as exact as possible (for it is like that that they perceive the engineering world) and to be forced upon them for their own benefit. One HR-development executive said:

"It is important to present exact models to the engineers, use powerpoint, otherwise you will never win the over for the intercultural problem. They just don't have enough social skills – and where should they get them from, thinking of the kind of work they do? Mind, they never have to deal with people, only with technology, their social skills just waste away. (...) I don't want to get agitated over this, but life as an HR-manager in a technical company is just hard!" [author's translation from German original]

As I have shown (Mahadevan 2007, 2008b), technical work is far from being non-social from the engineers' perspective: For technical knowledge and expertise is deeply personal knowledge that can only be interpreted in relation to the person responsible for a certain technology. A lot of engineering work-practice is thus informal – exact models and PowerPoint-presentations being the management-tools that try to simplify complex technological realities but can never grasp them. By using those, intercultural experts categorize themselves as being 'non-engineers' and 'unaware of engineering reality' from the engineers' perspectives.

## **7. Conclusion and outlook: can interculturalists be 'good engineers'?**

This article has shown that and to what degree the interculturalists' etic assumptions on Indo-German cross-site work and the engineers' emic understanding of their own work-practice differ. This leads to the following conclusions for the practice of intercultural training within technical companies:

- a. The absolute ability of HR-development executives and intercultural trainers to define intercultural competency for the actors in the field without their voice has to be questioned.
- b. This would mean: The interculturalist thus has to take the actors' point of view first and base their own interpretation of cultural difference on those categories.

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<sup>24</sup> Author's translation from the German original.

<sup>25</sup> Author's translation from the German original.

This would then mean not to conduct a singular training-exercise but to focus on interactive and interpretative sessions such as coaching or workshop activities that would have to be *actor-specific* and *processual*.

- c. Engineers who reject the importance of national cultural difference and consider it to be technically irrelevant for their work-practice might be right. For HR-development this would mean not to put difference upon them but to build a bridge upon those shared beliefs that might overcome organisational and spatial distance and prevent culturalisation of issues due to endangerment.
- d. Engineers are no socially incompetent nerds. The view on the expert's personality and unclear and problematic interpretations of technology 'behind the code' is an established one in the engineering community of practice. This competency should be appreciated and utilised for cross-site work.
- e. From the engineers' perspective natural science, technology and engineering is not exact but unclear, blurred and open to interpretation. From the engineers' perspective there is nothing more unclear than technology – however, it is important to maintain the collective self-image as experts, especially in interaction with 'management'.
- f. The way intercultural knowledge is presented to the actors in the field is an alien one to them and based on the inaccurate assumption of technical reality as being black and white. Technical reality from engineering perspective is unclear and subject to interpretation – to codify culture and present it in management-tools to engineers will simply enhance resistance.
- g. Engineers do *not* favour exact models and PowerPoint presentations. On the contrary, the engineering community does not believe in them: They are just another meaningless over-simplification made by management.
- h. If a trainer chooses not to question the model, they will be categorised as 'non-engineers' by management and be rejected.

To conclude, this summarisation itself is an all-too-reified oversimplification and – following my own interpretative paradigm – I should reject it. However, I myself possess multiple identities, not only being a researcher in the organisational field, but also an intercultural practitioner. Thus, I see the need to simplify reality for the sake of practicality – on the other hand, I hope to have based my own categorisations on the actors' point-of-view and to have added knowledge to the intercultural field. But is there anything that the interculturalist can do to be a 'good engineer' themselves if they have never been to the field themselves? Let me end with a quote from the field, an engineer looking back on the intercultural India trainer he experienced in a (from my perspective) typical way.

This training has been evaluated in prior research (Mahadevan 2007) based on training documentation and interviews with participants and trainer. I did not

participate in the training itself. The training can be classified as a classic intercultural training based on given cultural difference according to the dimensions of Hofstede, Trompenaars and Hall. The concept of culture being used was that of the static container. However, it was differentiated briefly between national culture and professional culture. It was mentioned that there can be cultural overlaps in professional engineering culture between Germany and India.

The engineer said:

“The trainer, she was simply a great woman. I believed her hundred percent that she knew India, for she has lived in Bangalore and told us about her own life in India. That was the most interesting part: To get to know how she sees those things and why. I think this is the reason for why I liked the training as a whole – even though it did not have much in common with my work, and even though the Indians at work turned out to be very different, not so alien.

But on the other hand, the trainer is not the expert on our kind of work. To have this also, I mean the Indians, like they *really* are in our work – this would have been nice to have. However, the crucial part for me really is that there is someone who is not only rattling off their PowerPoint slides and acts as if they know the answer to everything but who questions things and says how they see things and gives us reasons why they do so and makes you think. If you are into this thinking-mode you can apply it to your own work yourself. The important fact in such a training is *that* you get into the right mode.

That’s why all those management-trainings are completely useless. We have those communication skills trainings and other such stuff all the time. Worst case is: There comes such a trainer person, all tatted up, in a business-suit, and they explain you some ‘four-ways-to-succeed-models’ and act as if they could explain reality with it. Then you immediately know, this has nothing to do with reality and you are pissed because it is simply a waste of time.”[own translation from German]

This perspective on the intercultural trainer encourages them not to present themselves as an absolute authority on intercultural questions but perceive the participants as the experts on their work-practice. Now being on the same level, the intercultural trainer could then simply present their view on the intercultural field and make visible to the participants what this perspective is based upon – thus being a good expert in disclosing working hypothesis on the world and discussing them with other experts. Or, as Polkinghorne (1988: 15) says about the engineering community: “(...) formulating a new theory is an act of insight offered for evaluation by one’s peers.” More claim for truth is also in the intercultural training neither necessary nor credible.

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## **Some Thoughts on the Transferability of Interactive Training Methods to East European Audiences**

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### **Abstract**

The idea for this article stems from practical experience: the author is looking back on fifteen years of work in the training field, first as an interpreter for US-American trainers delivering soft skill business trainings in Slovenia, and later as an intercultural trainer. Experience in both roles has shown that when delivering trainings in Eastern Europe one must be very cautious in using interactive methods. The article attempts to provide some background information for this claim, as well as share some helpful hints for how to overcome the problems that face any US-American or West European trainer who works in cultural environments where participative interactive learning methods are not the norm. Although based on insights gained mainly in Eastern Europe, some of the problems and solutions translate rather well also to other cultural environments, particularly to Asia and Africa.

What happens during a regular job-related training in Slovenia? On initial contact, the participants – probably like everywhere else – typically project into the trainer the ideas and attitudes they have acquired through formal schooling; some of them may well be negative, frustrating or even traumatic. For most Slovenian children, even nowadays, happy life ends when they start going to school. There the real ‘training drill’ begins: the aim of the schools seems to be to discipline people to be obedient, non-thinking, non-problematic and passive members of society. Does this remind you of the Eastern European regime from the Cold War times? Well, not much has changed from then in this regard. This goal can only be achieved if teachers and pupils stand on two opposing sides – which is exactly the feeling that the average Eastern European has developed through the years of formal schooling.

Teachers are not there to guide you to discover new horizons, improve your mental map of the world and help you learn problem-solving. No, teachers are here to train you to become an obedient member of society. They do so by searching for your imperfections and punishing all your failures; by blocking any creative thinking that may disrupt the normal order and the traditional ways (“How thing are done around here”); and by preventing any independent thinking that may question their authority.

Thus, besides having learnt heaps of facts, that get easily forgotten, the school-goer really learns the following:

- Learning is hard work and suffering.
- You get punished for any imperfection or failure.
- The argument of power always wins over the power of the argument.
- Forget about being creative – play safe and follow the rules.

Accordingly, employees sent to a soft-skill training cannot be expected to be very eager to expand their horizons and improve their mental maps of the world. They will enter the training room thinking that there is something wrong with them that needs to be fixed: “Surely, that’s why the boss had sent them there in the first place!” The initial reaction to the trainer is usually quite critical: now that we are grown-ups, we don’t need any teachers anymore.

### **1. How to establish trust**

A big American smile won’t help. Eastern Europeans are typically very suspicious of a highly positive attitude towards life. Remember – life has been hard for them not only in school, but also later on the job and actually everywhere. Besides the classic ingredients of establishing trust (knowing the subject, personal integrity, focus on the learners, etc.), the following hints may help the Western trainer:

- a. Consciously break down the invisible hierarchical barrier between you and the participant by emphasizing that you are here not to teach what is right and wrong, but to share with them some of your insights and solutions that you have found to have worked in similar work environments. Stress that you know that by now they have accumulated a lot of knowledge and skills in dealing with people, and invite them to share this knowledge with the group in order to find best hands-on solutions for their particular situations. In short – assume a very humble attitude.
- b. Credentials are important, but present them in a concise, practical manner. Not too little and not too much – or you’ll be judged as boasting, which is a no-no.
- c. As a Westerner you’ll be quickly accused of arrogance (of course not explicitly). The widespread feeling (often alive on both sides) that ‘Westerners know better’ bears a lot of resentment and works initially against you (even if nobody will admit it). Do your homework and learn as much as you can about the country. Choose cases, stories and problems that are relevant for *this specific* cultural environment. Remember – arrogance of any kind is out of the question.
- d. Charisma works well. If you don’t possess it, being knowledgeable and pragmatically-oriented may help.

### **2. How to strike a balance between educating and interacting**

These people have been trained to receive finite answers for all problems. The

teacher knew these truths and there generally existed one single truth about each thing. Different points of view were not encouraged. Discussion was too dangerous. Even as grownups, participants often expect the trainer to give them simple recipes – and are at the same time very suspicious of them (“They sound too easy, and we know that learning is hard work and suffering”).

Striking a balance between lecturing and interaction is one of the main issues. Here are some hints that you may find useful:

- a. Lecturing is OK to a certain point, for three good reasons: firstly, it is the most expected way of learning, and participants have been ‘trained’ to learn in this particular way. Secondly, in this way the thirst for ‘finite truths’ can be satisfied to some point. And thirdly comes a requirement that you’ll very often hear off-record: “That’s what the trainer is being paid for!” Why would you deserve to be paid any fee if you just force the people to search for the answers themselves?! Facilitation is not yet considered real *work* in many Eastern European environments. Make sure to keep the lectures short (up to 25 min) and engaging.
- b. At the beginning give a short background of interactive training methods: why they are important in this increasingly complex business environment where things change so fast that no finite answers can be given and where self-initiative is increasingly important – or, if the training is about intercultural issues, you may want to say that this is a hands-on approach to learning ‘how things are done’ elsewhere, e.g. in the US, in Great Britain or in Germany. So participants can be encouraged to learn not only new contents, but also new forms of learning.
- c. Be very cautious which interactive activities you choose. Many activities like icebreakers, games, simulations etc. are perceived as irrelevant and too childish by Eastern Europeans. The direct connection between the learning point and the chosen activity must be evident immediately. Some mental effort must be present even with the simplest of exercises. Activities need to be perceived as ‘serious learning’, not as fun per se!
- d. Briefing and debriefing are always important, but even more so with participants who are not very comfortable with activities that require acting, interaction, reflection, etc. A clear link to real life problems and good down-to-earth, and to-the-point debriefing are essential. Important: participants are generally very reluctant to show any discontent: they will obey you – but will express dissatisfaction in the anonymous feedback forms later. So make sure that you check the satisfaction with your activity-approach during the workshop itself, when there is still time to react if necessary.
- e. Most importantly: for these people learning means hard work. So do give them a lot, both intellectually and experientially. Capitalise on their ability to work hard under a strong pressure of time, be it individually or in groups. Never

underestimate the learning capability of Eastern Europeans; they may have been through a much more demanding school system than the one you know from home.

- f. Another obstacle that you have to overcome is that of inherent resistance to anything the 'teacher' asks: "This is how things were done in school and everybody loved secretly to undermine the teacher's intentions whenever possible". If you ask your participants to do a role play for 15 minutes, it may very well happen that after five minutes, the group communication will take a very different direction, and a general discussion about the hardships of their jobs or anything else, from politics to sex, will evolve. It is advisable to exploit the element of control here: the control issue is very much in the safety zone of most participants from ex-communist countries. Introduce observers into small group work and give them very clear written guidelines outlining their assignments. You can even use written tests – they work better than you may expect. Wherever possible, negotiate a follow-up session where progress of the project's transfer of skills into everyday work life will be checked.

### **3. How to win participation**

Obviously, the fear of failure and shame when speaking up in public is prevailing in many participants in most Eastern European groups. In school teachers often ridiculed anyone trying to disrupt the quietness of the class. The teacher ruled, and to challenge his authority was an utmost breach of unwritten rules.

The issue of winning participation is a hard one for any trainer, domestic or foreign; but if the training is conducted in a foreign language, the problem is even greater. You need to encourage and coach participants to start expressing their opinions and speak up. Another widespread 'disease' in Eastern Europe is the domination of the strong and loud individuals in group discussions. Remember, the general culture of discussion and dialogue is less appreciated than in the Anglo-Saxon or North European environment. People are on average not skilled to speak concisely and briefly. Listening skills also leave much to be desired. The result is that the dominant few usurp the airtime – and often nobody even notices that, let alone tries to change the course the discussion is taking. Dominance may originate either in the hierarchical position or expertise – or simply in personal communicative audacity.

Some hints for ensuring quality discussions:

- a. At an initial stage of the training, develop the guidelines for group discussion. If you don't have the time for the whole process, then just present them to the audience; but be sure to make them really simple and to the point. Encourage them to develop similar 'rules of the game' for improving their own meetings back at work.

- b. Develop a participative climate by using small groups in the initial phases of learning. Even in small groups of three participants you may ask them to think about the issue individually, i.e., for a couple of minutes, and write their findings on index cards. In this way you prevent participants from dominating the others, as the index cards serve as a prop for everybody to speak.
- c. As the supreme authority, you can build on obedience of your ‘subordinates’: use, for example, round robin in group discussions. An alternative approach is to give each participant three blue and three red poker chips; when making a point, the participant plays a blue chip; the red one is played when expressing disagreement. No one may talk without playing a chip, and the discussion ends only when all the chips are played.
- d. Even in small groups of five or more participants, take time to introduce the roles of the timekeeper, the focus keeper, the recorder, etc.
- e. Be very attentive to what is happening in groups, and simply jump in where you spot a dominant person invading the airtime.

With all the precautions taken, people will in the end appreciate and even enjoy interactive learning methods – but please do handle all the above issue with care. And please take into consideration that this paper refers to the very worst situations that can happen to a Western trainer in a typical Eastern European environment. The issues presented are less pressing when working with highly skilled young professionals with international experience who have studied and worked abroad.

## Ethical Considerations for Intercultural Trainers<sup>26</sup>

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### **Abstract**

Ethics in intercultural trainings is a topic that is closely connected with the names of Judith Martin and Michael Paige. In the 1980s they first drew attention to the ethical challenges of adult intercultural education and outlined some basic issues relevant to the design and course of trainings (Paige, Martin 1983). For some reason their pioneering work was not continued and the few ensuing publications focus mostly on elaborations of earlier topics. Therefore, the moral guidance that trainers can draw from extant literature is accordingly limited at a time when the global dimensions of their work put them more and more often in situations where they need such guidance. The necessity of new research in intercultural training ethics is meanwhile obvious, and the good news is that it has lately been positioned as a primary goal for the future development of the intercultural field.

In view of the serious need for new foundations of ethics in intercultural communication in general and in intercultural trainings in particular the article presents a modest attempt to formulate some ethical considerations for European intercultural trainers. The idea for each of the included suggestions is based on the author's actual experiences in trainings or other educational measures in the intercultural field. The article draws attention also to two important issues that relate to ethics in a wider sense, the need for theoretical elaboration and update, as well as for proper recognition of the diversity of contexts in which intercultural interactions occur.

### **1. Introductory**

Intercultural trainings are a relatively new phenomenon. When Edward T. Hall and his colleagues at the Foreign Service Institute in Washington DC some 50 years ago first developed a conceptual framework for dealing with intercultural issues, their intention was to make abstract anthropological and linguistic knowledge useful for the practical work in the Foreign Service. The members of his group are considered the pioneers of those educational measures that later on came to be called 'intercultural trainings' and were transferred to other professional groups. The first courses lasted for four weeks and included instruction in language and

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'Landeskunde' of the target country as well as the topics culture, personal adaptation, and the basic assumptions of US-American culture.

The comparison of this early development with that of the intercultural field in Europe and with the European practice of intercultural trainings, which were introduced in the beginning of the 1990s, reveals many similarities, but also some differences. Generally speaking, the differences between US American and European trainings revolve around two topics, and both of them lead to questions of ethics. Because of their relevance for the ethical aspects of the intercultural field, I will take a closer look at them.

### **1.1. Contexts of intercultural interaction**

In Europe – as in the US – it was practical needs and direct experience with otherness which creates an awareness of the necessity of culture-learning measures. The fields of such need were different, though: in Europe, the interest was aroused mostly by the consequences of the migration movement of the 1970s and '80s which brought large groups of migrant workers from the (then) less industrialized countries into the West European societies with the intention of a longer or – later on – permanent stay. While for the diplomats trained at the Foreign Service Institute cultural otherness was always located outside their home country and they were prepared for interactions with individuals positioned on roughly the same hierarchical level, the encounter with migrants is an inner-societal phenomenon based on social inequalities. The migrants' centre of life was usually in the recipient societies and over the years they were less and less inclined to return to their countries of origin. The local population and the migrants thus lived in a majority-minority relation, from which resulted a principal asymmetry in their interactions. This does not mean that the training of expatriates was neglected in Europe, but from the beginning there existed a duplicity of the contexts of intercultural interaction. And as it turned out later, both contexts - although having a lot in common - are rooted in different theoretical and methodological paradigms.

### **1.2. The balance between theory and practice**

Balancing between theoretical knowledge and its application in real life has always presented both academics and practitioners with serious challenges. In addition, different cultural contexts demand different solutions. The emphasis on the practical application of theoretical knowledge is generally highly valued in US American contexts, as is reflected in the well-known (and almost proverbial) saying, that "there is nothing more practical than a good theory", while in Europe there is a tendency to engage more in theoretical reasoning. In saying this I am aware that this is a gross generalizations and that there are certainly many variations of the above orientations both on the European and the American side. Nevertheless I believe that they are helpful short-hand categories which – when supported by empirical evidence – can be effectively employed as analytical tools. And evidence there is: Any review of the numerous US publications on intercultural trainings, be it handbooks, journals, edited volumes or monographs, supplies clear evidence of the

preference of practical aspects in intercultural work. Need satisfaction, hands-on approach and “how to get things done” characterize not only training guide books and publications of training methods, but also the organization of theoretical contributions to the field.

European analysts of intercultural trainings view this tendency very critically. Some of them go so far as to resent any kind of cultural preparatory work as theoretically and morally questionable. The Swedish social anthropologist Ulf Hannerz sees trainings as a commodity and part of a “culture shock prevention industry”. His doctoral student Tommy Dahlén takes this criticism as the point of departure of his monograph “Among the Interculturalists. An Emergent Profession and its Packaging of Knowledge” (1997), in which he presents an in-depth ethnographic study of all important institutions, personalities, practices and methods of US American trainings. He focuses mainly on the theoretical foundations of the trainings, and his findings supply him with reasons for an even harsher criticism. Dahlén arrives at the conclusion that the preference for practical issues and the ensuing negligence of cultural theory has led the US interculturalists to be “recyclers” of concepts and methods eclectically combined from different disciplines and time periods, without critical evaluation and attention for new developments in the respective fields of study.

Practice over theory or theory over practice? It is not my goal to embrace one or the other strategy, and I hesitate to look at them as black-and-white oppositions or suggest a “correct” combination of both approaches. By disclosing this basic difference of approaches I only want to enhance the awareness and reflexivity on the cultural specificity of US American intercultural training formats, which for understandable reasons have served as a model for intercultural trainings in most regions of the world, especially in the periods when the intercultural field was new.

Of course there are critical trainers who – on the basis of their professional experience – do not hesitate to point out that many basic assumptions, models and methods of intercultural learning do not apply to all parts of the world. But there are still very few theoretically founded contributions to the intercultural training literature from outside the US that consider, e.g. the specific features of the European learning environment. The short history of European intercultural trainings consists mostly of the adoption of the works of US interculturalists. Jürgen Bolten is certainly right in maintaining that in the German-speaking countries there is very little research on intercultural trainings.

## **2. Ethical imperatives for intercultural trainers**

Until today the publications of Judith Martin and Michael Paige are the only sources of explicit ethical rules in the field of intercultural learning and teaching. They advocate general principles based on a culture relativistic approach which closely resemble the anthropological ‘*Codes of Ethics*’ and aim at maintaining the integrity of the trainer. As particularly critical aspects they discuss the aspired transformation of the learner’s personality, his or her emotional shock as a result of cultural self-awareness, and the existence of power asymmetries in intercultural

interfaces. As concerns ethical issues and responsibilities, Paige and Martin consider the intercultural trainer as the central figure, and they establish rules for him or her which relate directly to the practice of intercultural trainings and can therefore be easily understood by practitioners. They refer explicitly to two categories, the competencies of the trainer and the risk factors in the intercultural learning process, and they present a very detailed catalogue of requirements for ethically responsible trainers. The authors do not claim to have exhausted the topic of ethics; rather, they insist that it is a very difficult and tedious field which will become more and more complex with the increasing relevance of intercultural trainings as a field of business.

In the German-speaking world, ethics in the intercultural field is as yet a very new topic. Therefore one is – more than in the other fields of training – forced to rely on the contributions of American authors. In the following I will discuss some ethical issues which came up again and again in my own intercultural trainings. For the sake of clarity and in analogy to Kant's moral imperative concerning general human interactions I have chosen to present them in the form of ethical imperatives.

### **2.1. Intercultural trainers should be mindful of the notions of culture and cultural difference they employ in their trainings**

The notions of culture and cultural difference are at the core of intercultural work. Their theoretical framing belongs to the intellectual domains of cultural anthropology and ethnology. For the design of their trainings, all intercultural trainers – those with a more academic background or the practitioners – are thus dependent on knowledge “borrowed” from a field other than intercultural communication.

Ever since the first modern definition of culture by the anthropologist Edward B. Tylor at the end of the 19th century, the various anthropological schools have developed their own definitions of “culture”. All of them emerged from the attempts of researchers to come to grips with the extant social reality, and by virtue of this they always reflect the *Zeitgeist*. The beginnings of intercultural trainings in the 1950s coincided with the predominance of the (then new) culture relativistic ideas which were an outcome of the upcoming anti-colonialist and anti-racist movements and the debate on human rights. The culture relativistic concept of culture perceived cultures as the specific, learned social knowledge of coherent and unified social units living in clearly defined territorial units. For that period of time with its relatively low mobility and its limited exchange of information, this definition of culture was probably quite adequate. “Culture” was viewed as objectifiable and was, at least for the industrialized societies, largely equalled to “national culture”.

This “classical” concept of culture could easily be made operational for the analysis of the (professional or private) everyday life of diplomats, employees in international organizations, development workers, business expatriates, exchange students or soldiers on peace-keeping missions – that is, those groups who sojourn temporarily as a foreign minority in a cultural majority, in other words: act in international contexts. The concept was also applicable to the analysis of encounters in which individuals with no or very little experience with alterity came together.

For such contexts, “culture” was very well represented by the well-known metaphor of the ‘cultural iceberg’ which is based on the clear distinction between the visible and the invisible parts of culture and presupposes a causal relation between the two.

Until today, this older concept of culture still forms the basis of most intercultural trainings and is well-established through numerous ground-laying publications and handbooks. Its advantage lies in the fact that with its help interactions between members of different national cultures can indeed be predicted with a relatively high probability and that misunderstandings can be analysed with the help of “culture dimensions” (such as Hall’s or Hofstede’s). Their disadvantage, however, is that they actually lead trainers to rely too much on rather generalized and simplified concepts of “national culture” and that more complex situations – as they are common in multiethnic or multicultural societies – can be grasped only with great difficulties or not at all.

In our present age of growing globalization, individualization, mobility, and world-wide flow of information many basic factors of intercultural encounters have changed dramatically. The fields of intercultural action can less and less be explained by means of clear cultural ascriptions. The idea of cultures as territorially bound and closed units has become highly questionable in many places in the world, most significantly in the highly industrialized regions. As a consequence, the idea of the determination of the individuals by their culture which was suggested by the culture relativistic approach, is today criticized as being static and deterministic.

Therefore, in the present understanding of cultural anthropology, culture is conceived of as something fluid, complex, and full of facets which has some structures, but these structures can be grasped only situationally and for the individual case. In this concept of culture, symbols, images, and subjective interpretations play a very important role. For the analysis of interactions in multicultural contexts this concept of culture offers a decidedly better tool. The asymmetrical relations between majority and minority in such societies can lead to the increased production of subjectively felt or even imagined differences which can then function as self-fulfilling prophecies and develop their own dynamics and produce their own reality.

Does the existence of the two rather different definitions of culture present a problem? Not really. In contrast to Tommy Dahlén, who wants to radically replace the classical concept of culture by the modern one, I would insist that in intercultural trainings today both concepts of culture can very well exist side by side and can be made useful. Thus, at the beginning of culture learning, the model of culture as an iceberg can very well serve as a first orientation. To the beginners it offers structures which enable them to organize their pertinent life-world experiences and to make the abstract concept of culture concrete for themselves. Depending on the context, the duration, the learning needs, and the goals of the training, the trainer can then introduce the second model. It conceives the cultural knowledge of the individual as an invisible ‘rucksack’ which one always has on one’s back, but is not obliged to keep it open all the time. The use of the ‘cultural baggage’ is rather flexible because the individual has the freedom to use it individually and situationally.

Thus, the two models do not contradict each other: There are contexts and situations which can be handled better with the help of the ‘iceberg’ model, and

there are others that can be grasped more adequately with the 'rucksack' model. The more competent the trainer can handle the two concepts of culture and be aware of their limitations, the more differentiated he will deal with intercultural realities, find the adequate theoretical approach to them and accompany the learners in the process of intercultural learning.

## **2.2. Intercultural trainers should refrain from using cultural comparisons based on black-and-white contrasts**

In their choice of training methods trainers are highly dependent on handbooks, and it is in this field where the predominance of the American interculturalists is most visible. The sheer number of handbooks and training videos dwarfs everything that has been produced on – and for – the European market. In addition, the American books are made up in an attractive manner, their texts are easily comprehensible and their didactic is extraordinary. This is why many European trainers like to use them. The question is, however, whether the methods presented in these books, which are geared to the social characteristics of US-American middle-class trainees, are really applicable to the European situation. Trainers practising in the US say that they expect, among other things, to work with trainees who know no foreign languages, have no or only superficial experience with otherness, and want to learn in a practice-oriented manner. In the US, these factors are taken as corner stones for the construction and execution of trainings.

It is probably due to these US related features that those methods are popular which illustrate cultural differences by means of black-and-white contrasts. Thus, simulations and case studies, but also exercises on value orientations and intercultural dialogues usually employ extreme cultural oppositions. This is why they are, in the European context, usually perceived as “naïve” or “simplistic” and do not achieve their didactic goals.

Similarly, the use of the method of the “culture assimilator” is highly problematic. The classical application of this method – the presentation of a simple story of a conflict between individuals with different cultural backgrounds, the presentation of four solutions and the pertinent explanations – is today criticized as being too directive and as leaving no space for creative thinking. Furthermore, many critics do not trust the concept that there is only one “correct” solution, because today even laymen recognize intuitively that cultures cannot be understood as closed systems providing unambiguous orientations. Even the counter argument that these explanations contain valuable information about the given culture is not valid in view of the rapid culture change: all too often this modernizing change annihilates the topicality of these stories and turns them into documents of by-gone times. This is particularly true for the assimilators for the rapidly changing transformation countries, for example in East Asia or Eastern Europe. The recent attempts at updating the assimilator method concern only their production and cannot invalidate the fundamental criticism of their formalism and their tendency to convey a false feeling of security. A useful alternative is today offered by the method of “otherness narration”: this method also uses short and simple episodes which are presented to the trainees with the goal of positioning and grasping cultural differences, of training

change of perspective etc., but which are then made the object of analysis and discussion in the classroom.

### **2.3. Intercultural trainers should be very critical about passing out “recipe-knowledge” to their clients**

Many intercultural trainers are familiar with the problem of being urged to present ready-made ‘recipes’ for behaviour in difficult intercultural situations. How should they react to these demands? Ignore them or point out the risks of such cultural “dos and don’ts” or “culture portraits”? It is well-known to professional trainers that any reliance on such “recipes” is highly misleading and that they are “false friends” who can never do justice to the complexity of culture contacts. The reason for this demand for strict rules is all too well known: it lies in the insecurity arising in each intercultural situation, a fact that gave rise to the most widely known model in Intercultural Communication, Gudykunst’s ‘Anxiety/Uncertainty Management’ model. To the above demands one must add the popular expectation that intercultural trainings merely teach people how to avoid “cultural pitfalls”, an expectation that is even amplified by phrases such as “Fit for dealing with foreign cultures” or “Learning to avoid cultural pitfalls” in the advertisements for training seminars.

For the trainer this dilemma leads to a very difficult situation. Even if they, as people working in the service sector, are inclined to fulfill the wishes of their clients, ethically conscious trainers should make it very clear from the beginning that ‘recipes’ and ‘quick fixes’ are not at all sufficient for a competent and professional management of cultural differences. But this approach has of course its risks and can hardly be taken without professional integrity and didactic stability. In this situation, the reference to the analogy between culture learning and foreign language learning can often be helpful: in the same way as mere learning of an English dictionary cannot help a Chinese to form proper English sentences, the learning of a vocabulary of Chinese pitfalls cannot enable the European businessman to understand the way of thinking of his Chinese partners.

### **2.4. Intercultural trainers should be aware of the manipulative power of intercultural knowledge and competence**

There is yet another problem which some trainers may not have been openly confronted with. It is, however, well-known to all those who in the course of their professional careers found themselves in the situation that they were asked by their trainees to tell them “cultural tricks” with which they can “pull their partners across the table”, or by personnel managers who want to know who in the trained group had done best, or who were asked outright to take sides with one of the negotiating parties. In all these cases the trainers are placed in the role of the ‘man in the middle’, a role that is well-known to professional ‘go-betweens’ such as interpreters or mediators. Already in the early phase of professionalization of intercultural trainers, Condon and Yousef were the first to point out the dangers of this role. They warned against the so-called ‘Malinche Syndrome’ to which professional cultural

mediators can easily fall prey. The name refers to the role which La Malinche, the interpreter and mistress of the Spanish conqueror Cortes, played in the conquest of Mexico in the 16th century. It is known of her that she did not only have a talent for languages and learned Spanish very soon, but that she also adopted Spanish values and was thus able to support the Spanish conquerors in all the negotiations – very much to the disadvantage of her own people. Since that time, La Malinche stands for the unloyal cultural mediator who misuses his knowledge by making it available for only one party.

It is surprising that this problem is not addressed in any of the later publications on intercultural trainings and on the role of the trainer. In view of the world-wide increase in culture contacts, however, this issue has certainly gained new topicality: while in the earlier periods the learners and the objects of their learning were divided by large distances and barriers, today they increasingly find themselves in permanent physical or medial closeness to each other. From this follows the obligation for the intercultural trainer to maintain personal neutrality, an ethical demand that should be added to the catalog of criteria set up by Paige. In any training, the trainer's loyalty should not be with one of the participating parties but with the task he or she has accepted. Observing this ethical demand is not at all easy for any trainer, because in case of conflict one must be ready to accept economic losses in order to maintain high ethical standards. This demand for neutrality is particularly relevant – and difficult – for all trainers who belong to one of the cultural groups represented in a training.

## **2.5. Intercultural trainers should be aware of the Western nature of intercultural trainings**

The question whether intercultural trainings as educational formats can be transferred universally to all learning contexts has rarely been discussed in the literature on trainings. The answer actually depends on the question of the universality or cultural boundedness of the conceptual, methodological and didactic repertoire of intercultural learning in general. Are ideas, formats, and models of training that have grown in the US-American context universally applicable – or are they rather a reflection of their original culture?

In the United States, the problem of the cultural boundedness of intercultural trainings was addressed quite early. In a paper presented in 1978, Robert Kohls formulated seven practice-oriented theses on the cultural specificity of intercultural trainings and laid open the implicit assumptions in US-American training formats which he called 'Western' or 'American'. Among these assumptions are, for example, the responsibility of the trainees for their own success in learning, the high value of the learning-by-doing method as well as a preference for experiential learning directed at emotions over cognitive intellectual learning. The first edition of the 'Handbook of Intercultural Training' still contained an article on the 'Westernness' of the sociological approaches in intercultural research, but there are no consequences drawn for trainings. In the third edition of the same handbook, Fowler and Blohm make an attempt to look at the applicability of various training methods across cultures. "Does It Work Across and About Cultures", they ask, but

for most methods they come, strangely enough, to the conclusion that they are very well transferable into other cultural contexts; they make an exception only for self-assessment exercises and simulations.

So far we can rely only on the practical experiences of intercultural trainers who have worked internationally and who have paid attention to the aspect of the 'Westernness' of training methods. Due to their experience they know intuitively about the cultural coloring of the contents, the models, and the methods of trainings. But as long as there are no systematic studies the thesis of the 'Westernness' of intercultural learning methods remains an assumption. In view of the global diffusion of teaching formats and contents, however, the question becomes even more urgent. In case the thesis of the 'Westernness' of extant training methods should be confirmed, intercultural trainers will have to make an effort to adapt their trainings: if they want to work in an ethically responsible way, they must always be aware of the implicit cultural specificity of their teaching in order to adjust the process of culture learning to the needs of their trainees and their cultural environment. This is a demanding procedure for which there are as yet no models.

Until then one can add a few more questions to Kohls' theses and by answering them can try to elucidate the cultural relativity of the basic principles of trainings: Should trainers be moderators or rather transmitters of "correct" knowledge? Does the perception of difference always strengthen the motivation for intercultural learning, as Gudykunst's AUM-theory implies? Can one always lead a rational discourse about cultural differences in the way which Habermas postulates in his discourse ethics? Is intercultural learning possible without self-reflexivity? To each of these questions there will probably be a 'Western' and a 'non-Western' answers. An ethically responsible trainer should know both answers in order to find the best fit between his training design and the cultural orientation of the trainees.

### **3. Concluding remarks**

The discussion about the renewal of intercultural trainings is only in its beginnings. Meanwhile it has become clear that the European perspective on cultural diversity and intercultural interactions makes it expedient to critically assess the findings and practices derived from the US for their applicability to the present social reality in Europe and to integrate the present state of sociological and anthropological research. My presentation has attempted to direct your attention to some very sensitive matters. I have to stress, though, that I have addressed only those topics which are – in my view – of greatest importance. I am well aware of the limitations of my paper, but hope to have given an impulse for systematic studies of the questions raised above.

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## **Introducing identity negotiation in intercultural trainings involving Central Eastern Europe<sup>27</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

Intercultural trainings on the East-West European interface look back at a much shorter history than other culture-specific trainings. They started being requested only after the political opening of Eastern Europe, and empirical evidence suggests that they differ from the better known formats: the examples in the article of Marjeta Novak in this issue can serve as a case in point. All the same there is still little research on their specifics, that may concern core issues such as the underlying theory, content, methods, etc.

This article is concerned with the factors that influence the process of intercultural communication in encounters between individuals from (generalised) Eastern and Western Europe. The insights can be utilised in trainings. The author does that by assuming an identity negotiation perspective. After a brief summary of the conceptual framework, proposals for its practical application in trainings follow. Personal and group identity negotiation – both in its present and historical dimension – is discussed as an essential prerequisite for establishing effective communication. Central to the argument is the need to consider each communicative situation in its own context and apply theoretical concepts and practical knowledge only when observation merits their relevance. Descriptions of three training activities based on the identity negotiation perspective conducted with students and adult professionals are included.

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As this paper emphasizes the importance of identity negotiation, it is useful to be clear about the background of the author, as far as relevant to the topic of the paper. I am native of The Netherlands, descendant from ethnic Dutch parents, one of whom was raised in the Dutch East Indies, a former colony of The Netherlands, now Indonesia. From the age of 20 I visited Hungary regularly, learned Hungarian, and studied there a year at the age of 23 (1982-1983). Later on I migrated to Hungary and lived there between 1992-1999, fairly well integrated into a sub-stratum of Hungarian (Budapest) society. During this time my primary identity could be described as “Dutchman, living in Hungary” – in other words, partly overlapping, partly distinct from prevailing Dutch and Hungarian identities. From 1999 I live again in The Netherlands, albeit close to the borders.

## 1. Introduction

With the opening up of Central Eastern Europe from 1989 onwards, international contacts between this region and Western Europe have been increasing enormously in all domains: in international business, in and around international organisations (such as the EU and the NATO), in science and educational settings. This article is concerned with the process of intercultural communication involved in these encounters, and how this communication can be advanced by intercultural trainings. This can be achieved by taking an identity negotiation perspective. This approach is relatively new when dealing with intercultural communication in international contexts. The argument is therefore definitely a starting point for further work, both in research and application to trainings. Contributions and exchange with colleagues in research and training would be greatly appreciated.

The paper consists of two main parts: a brief summary of the conceptual framework that builds upon earlier work (Swaan 2007) and its application to intercultural trainings. Section 1 discusses the question whether Central Eastern Europe can be considered as a region. Section 2 discusses the importance of identity negotiation in general in intercultural communication, and section 3 applies this to the historical context of Central Eastern Europe. Section 4 discusses a number of training activities. The paper ends with a conclusion in section 5.

Central to the argument is the need for 'mindfulness', that is, the need to consider each communicative situation in its own context and to apply concepts and prior knowledge only when observation of the concrete situation merits its relevance. Accordingly, identity negotiation as set out in this paper is not proposed as a *predictor* of intercultural tensions that will *necessarily* occur, but as a helpful tool in understanding frictions *if* they occur and as a stepping stone towards effective intercultural communication, taking into account the individual and group based responses to these frictions. Mindfulness has been introduced in intercultural communication by Ting-Toomey (1999), inspired by, among others, Thich Nhat Hanh (1978, 1990), and has recently found wider application in intercultural studies and intercultural training (Nagata 2004, Thomas 2006, Swaan, Teunissen, Hommes 2006, Teunissen, Van den Bossche, Gijssels 2007).

### 1. Central Eastern Europe as a cultural region?

As Central Eastern Europe is considered the region that is „squeezed“ between Germany and Russia, that is, those countries West of Russia, which between 1948 and 1989 shared the state socialist system. Although an identity negotiation approach could very well be applied to intercultural relations involving Russia (cf. Holden, Cooper, Carr 1998), Russia is left out in this paper. Its size, history and aspirations as a super power distinguish it strongly from the countries in Central Eastern Europe, and identity attitudes towards Europe have traditionally been there much more complex and detached (cf. Verpoest 2004).

Ultimately, the topic of the article has a paradoxical twist, as it actually strongly argues *against* viewing Central Eastern Europe as a uniform and distinct region. As far as it can be considered a cultural region at all, it is partly overlapping with other regions, regarding historical backgrounds, current institutional environments and dominant cultural values and practices. At the same time it shows considerable intraregional differences (cf. Arts, Halman 2004, Vossestein 2006). Cultural differences between, for instance, Bulgaria and Estonia are possibly at least as large as and possibly even larger than those between Spain and Sweden. Similarly, cultural distances between neighbouring countries across what is conventionally considered as the Western European and the Central Eastern borderline (Czech Republic-Germany, Finland-Estonia etc.) might in some cases well be smaller than those of neighbouring countries within a particular zone (The Netherlands – Belgium, France- Germany).

These are all arguments in favour of considering supra-national cultural regions as fuzzy, with wide border zones, rather than divided by strict border lines. This might raise the question why write about Central Eastern Europe as a region, if it is a controversial concept, and if it can only be delineated by fuzzy border zones, if at all. Three points warrant this approach:

- a. Implicitly or explicitly Central Eastern Europe is perceived as a region, especially by outsiders (although in a variety of alternative designations, such as “The new member states”, “Eastern Europe”, the “former communist countries”, the “former Eastern block”, the “Eastern countries” etc.).
- b. These perceptions are likely to have an impact on communication, even if mostly in a subtle, implicit way, that is, not explicitly verbalized, but communicated through nonverbals and mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. If anything unites inhabitants of Central Eastern Europe, amidst all differences, contrasts and controversies, it is a collective dislike of being set aside as Central Eastern Europeans.
- c. Explicit attention, de-composition and transformation of these subtle, implicit identity-related elements of communication might ultimately lead to improved effectiveness of communication.

## **2. Identity negotiation and intercultural communication**

The approach proposed in this paper builds upon the seminal work of Ting-Toomey (1999) who argues in favour of identity negotiation perspective to intercultural communication. From this perspective, situations of intercultural communication are analysed by simultaneously looking at potential mismatches on the levels of:

- content meaning (both verbally and non-verbally),
- relational meaning (implicit or explicit views on the kind of relation between communicative partners), and
- identity meaning (implicit or explicit views on in-group/out-group boundaries and perceived relations between groups).

Both relational meaning and identity meaning are typically communicated implicitly, for instance by differences in eye contact intensity, intonation, word choice. This approach is an extension of the well known model of Watzlawick et al. (1967), who introduced the distinction between content meaning and relational meaning in communication studies, while the additional impact of identity meaning builds upon Wilmot and Hocker (2001).

From an identity negotiation perspective identities are considered as subjective, socially constructed, and not as “objective”, demographic categories (although they may be influenced by the latter).

It was argued by some readers of earlier versions of this paper, that intercultural work and research based to identity negotiation can be vulnerable to the danger of unintendedly veiling issues of power, privilege and uneven access to resources. It is therefore indispensable to surface these issues explicitly. At the same time, an identity negotiation perspective provides an excellent opportunity to approach issues of power and privilege from all sides involved. While definitely extremely challenging, this is to be preferred to the comfortable extremes of either ignoring issues of privilege and power or of exclusively looking at issues of privilege and power from the perspective of accusation or blame. Looking deeply at identity issues facing all sides are potentially long and painful processes, that require patience and stamina (cf. Focus 1991, Rothman 1997, Wieringa 2000, Rich, Cargile 2004, Ely, Roberts 2008, Thich Nhat Hanh et al. 2003:193-200, 217-220, 221-228).

While identity-based approaches have not been uncommon when dealing with domestic diversity (cf. Hoffman 2002), they have so far been largely neglected when dealing with intercultural communication across national borders. For some reason or another, approaches to intercultural communication in an international context seem to have been focussed on differences in values and practices. This focus has actually been facilitated by an increasing number of very detailed macro-sociological value surveys, ranging from Hofstede’s well known study (2001), to the recent GLOBE project (Bakacsi et al. 2002, House et al. 2004), the European Values Survey (Arts, Halman 2004) and the cultural standards approach (Brück, Kainzbauer 2002).

Obviously, the importance of values can hardly be denied in intercultural communication. The point is that the value-based and the identity-based approach shouldn’t be seen as juxtaposed, but blended and integrated with attention to the particular situation, conforming thus to the requirement for mindfulness - since otherwise frictions on the two levels could easily reinforce each other. In training settings, moreover, approaches exclusively focussing on value differences might inadvertently fuel identity frictions by creating mindless stereotypes, by legitimizing latent aversions between cultural groups or by projecting certain non-desired values on particular nations, ethnical groups or other cultural groups. This holds all the more if participants in the training are encouraged to connect particular values to specific ethnic groups, nations or even groups of nations. On the other hand, approaches exclusively focussing on identities, shy away from looking at potential differences in values and communication styles out of fear of stigmatizing, will deprive participants from opportunities for bridging between different styles and might inadvertently stimulate assimilationist attitudes (“We are all the same, aren’t

we, it is just that we should respect each other”).

Integration of the three different paradigms (values, identities and mindfulness) can be facilitated by viewing *culture as a system of meaning* that enable people to bridge differences. From this perspective, cultures are not homogeneous systems: on the contrary, they frequently are organized around long standing antagonisms (north versus south, social democrats versus conservatives, catholics versus protestants, urban versus local tradition etc). Actually, within any group or social setting, people are confronted with (sometimes extreme) differences in attitudes, preferences, interests. Culture is not a system for the creation of *uniform* personalities, tastes, and life styles. On the contrary, it is a system that evolves so as to facilitate very *different* people to communicate and deal with these differences, without necessarily becoming uniform. In this perspective the cultural difference is not between *individuals* espousing particular values, but rather between *environments* favouring particular ways of viewing the world (cf. Markus, Hamedani 2007). While acknowledging the enormous impact of values and communication styles, also in conjunction with ineffective identity negotiation, the remainder of the paper will exclusively concentrate on identity issues.

### **3. Identity frictions in intercultural communication involving Central Eastern Europe**

Given the observation that identity related approaches have hardly found their way into studies of intercultural communication across national borders, it is not surprising that empirical studies are basically absent. A notable exception is the work of Ruiz Jiménez et al. (2004), who consider the character of identities prevailing in a variety of European nations, including the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland. Their work looks at *distinct* national settings. Explicit studies on how frictions regarding identity perceptions actually have an impact on communication in *mixed international* settings are a topic for future work.

At the same time, there is a wide body of literature based on historical discourse analysis that has extensively studied identity perceptions across Europe, especially in relation to Central Eastern Europe. This might provide a first approximation of how mutual identity perceptions can have an impact in day-to-day cross-national communicative settings. This discourse analysis is for the greater part based on sources from literature (fiction), studies by historians and other academic sources, and has been situated at the crossroads of disciplines such as literature studies, history, political philosophy, international relations, and symbolic geography (cf. Todorova 1997, Neumann 1998, Kovács 2001, Vermeersch 2004, Kolstø 2005). When approaching these studies from the perspective of intercultural communication, a serious limitation could be that the discourses analysed represent only the views of highly educated people and academic professionals. Yet, even if this substratum is demographically extremely small, it is safe to assume that it has had - and still has - a major impact on dominant social representations, for instance through education and the media, and reversely, that the views represented in their work reflect views existent in society. What's more, the representations provided in

these works seem to match well with observations of day-to-day exchanges.

Taking the foregoing into account, some propositions will be set forward of how identity frictions might play a role in relation to Central Eastern Europe. More examples are given in Swaan (2007). These are definitely propositions. It is matter of further research to investigate to what extent and in what contexts the identity frictions actually occur and how they have an impact on communication.

Probably the most important source of identity friction is when persons or organisations from Central and Eastern Europe are explicitly or implicitly approached as being *new* to Europe, and *hence* not familiar with the prevailing values and practices, for instance those related to parliamentary democracy and / or a market economy. Alternatively, they might be considered as not (yet) *really* „Western” or not (yet) *completely* „Western”. People or organisations from Central Eastern Europe, on the other hand, mostly consider themselves as full fledged Europeans, actually already for centuries, and hence do not feel respected in their identity if approached in the way described (cf. Neumann 1998, Todorova 2000). Todorova (2000: 226) elucidates how the mere usage of the term “Eastern Europe” or “Central Eastern Europe” is already an indication that marks the “otherness” of the respective region. After all, similar qualifications are usually not applied to regions as South Western Europe, or North Western Europe, at least not in every day parlance. In other words, using “marked” categories is in itself already an indication of being treated as “different”, not belonging to the core, to the mainstream.

It should be emphasized that the foregoing representations do not necessarily operate on the level of the region as a whole, but rather on a national level. That is, individuals do not consider themselves in the first place as “Central Eastern European”, but rather consider their own nation, and hence their own person, as natural part of the European space, and feel surprised, disappointed and frustrated when they are not treated in an appropriate manner, but as “different”, “other” or even “inferior”. Understandably, this is coupled with the feelings of humiliation, frustration and alienation. Even if the actual historical perspectives *within* the region vary a lot, these experiences can be encountered throughout the whole region.

Similarly, identity perceptions vary a lot within nations. Sometimes they are even central to national political controversies, as reflected in attitudes that are presented as pro- or anti-Western, pro- or anti-European, pro- or anti-Russian, etc. frequently combined with arguments to the effect that political opponents would not be “true to their nation”.

Identity frictions abound within the Central Eastern European region as well. In quite a number of countries representations are widespread as that the nation involved has at times acted as the last stronghold of Europe, saving it from negative „barbarian” influences from farther East, implying that nations farther South or East (mostly neighbouring countries) would be „less” European (Kolstø 2005). While in Western Europe too identity perceptions vary a lot, I’d anticipate that across Western Europe the “otherness” of Central Eastern Europe is shared to a large degree, taking the time of “communism” as a frame of reference.

Ultimately, the main sources of the identity frictions involving people from Central Eastern Europe are the different (implicit) historical perspectives. In most countries of Central Eastern Europe there are strong, dominant representations of the

nation at some point having been at the core of European civilization, that stretch back to more than 500 years (e.g. in Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic) or even more than 1000 years (e.g. in Romania and Bulgaria) (cf. Todorova 1997, Vermeersch 2004). In Western Europe, few people seem to be familiar with these perspectives at all, nor are they considered as extremely convincing. Instead, in Western Europe, most people might consider the time of “communism” as the frame of reference, to the extent that this sometimes almost becomes a cultural category, dominating over all other elements.

#### **4. Application to intercultural trainings – preliminary findings**

How could mindful identity negotiation be facilitated through intercultural training? Below I will give some examples of useful activities and point to some potential pitfalls and caveats. This section is based on my own training experiences and insights developed over the years. It would definitely be useful to couple this with experiences of other trainers. At this point I am not aware of other trainers explicitly applying identity negotiation in trainings related to countries, regions or individuals from Central Eastern Europe. I suspect however, that some trainers might use approaches similar to the examples given below, although possibly referring to other concepts. Responses and feedback of colleagues would therefore be greatly valued, so as further develop the practical application of identity negotiation in intercultural trainings.

Let me first set out some general principles which I used in trainings:

- a. Activities aimed at surfacing mutual identity perceptions were coupled with activities about differences in values and communication styles. This is in line with the argument put forward in section 2 to integrate value-based and identity-based approaches to intercultural communication. Although some exercises regarding values and communication styles were newly developed (I won't discuss them here, as the general idea is sufficiently familiar to intercultural trainers, cf. Storti 1999, Hofner Saphiere et al. 2005). Discussion of values and communication styles was also used among Western European audiences to illustrate the differences *among* Central Eastern European countries, so as to dispel the idea of an uniform cultural region.
- b. Attempts to bridge or reconcile identity frictions will only work if there is sufficient awareness about prevailing identity perceptions and tensions that might occur. Actually, this is a basic principle for reconciling any difference, intercultural or not (cf. Trompenaars, Woolliams 2003 in their approach to value differences). Side-stepping the recognition stage, or proceeding too fast will ultimately be counterproductive. In the trainings at hand, activities did actually not go beyond the stage of creating awareness. Very few participants had prior intercultural experience in Eastern European - Western European encounters and none of the audiences were an actually existing team.

- c. The ultimate challenge is to stay mindful in your own attitude as a trainer. The goal is to create awareness of *potential* friction, ways of handling it *when* it occurs, or even better, avoiding it to occur. The impression should be avoided that conflicts are indispensable, or that negative identity images will necessarily occur (paradoxically, this would be a negative identity image itself). An open attitude should be maintained towards the preferred identities of the participants (cf. the argument presented in section 2: since identities are never *determined* by demographic characteristics, but should be approached as responses of an individual to social representations and identity pressures prevailing in their environment).
- d. As should be clear from the discussion in section 3, that it should be absolutely avoided to organize separate intercultural trainings *on* Central Eastern Europeans for mixed international groups. If this happens (as it has happened to me), then trainers should be aware that a construction like this is set up by governing bodies and is beyond the possibility of introducing change: a viable way out is to conduct these trainings as a *general* communication skills trainings, instead of the required *intercultural* skills training with a focus on Eastern Europe, to make the trainings completely optional, and steer them along the lines of topics the participants have selected themselves as especially important or interesting.
- e. Obviously, as with any training, activities should be attuned to the background of the participants, their intercultural development and previous intercultural experiences. As is well-known, preferred training methods vary a lot across individuals and cultures. Novak (2008) argues (in this issue) that interactive training methods typically favoured in North America and in North Western Europe are met with resistance in Slovenia and other Central Eastern European countries and need therefore to be transformed - if applied at all. Trust building with the audience is extremely critical, and requires a delicate balance between showing expert knowledge as a trainer, confirming participants in their competencies and being open to their experiences.

Below I will present three training activities. They were used in a variety of training and education contexts, vary in duration (from a 2 hours introductory lecture to a 2 day training), background of participants (from students to professionals in various settings) and prior general intercultural experience (from virtually none to substantial experience). None of the trainings involved an actually existing team. The composition of the groups in terms of national background varied a lot too. Most audiences were very mixed, however mostly with a very strong bias towards Western Europeans (with participants from Eastern European countries) or Central Eastern Europeans (with participants from Western Europe). Some participants were from outside Europe. I will also reflect upon how the activities were perceived by the participants of the activities. The reflections are based upon a combination of:

- formal evaluations,
- informal feedback from participants,
- my personal impressions as a trainer on the responses of the group (compared to other activities in the same group and comparing groups to each other).

a. Lecturette on the three historical regions in Europe, following Szücs (1983, 1988)

*Duration:* 30-45 minutes

*Participants:* professionals in an international organisation, trainings for other professionals, MBA students, undergraduate and graduate students from a wide variety of backgrounds

*Method:* Power point presentation including animation

*Frequency of execution:* 15-20 times

Szücs (1983, 1988), an influential historian from Hungary, considered two major historical borders in Europe. First, the Eastern border of the empire of Charlemagne at the time of the emperor's death in 814. This line is surprisingly similar to the division line in Europe during the time of the Cold War. The other line is the division line between Western and Eastern Christianity, following the Great Schism in 1054. While both borderlines are well known and often referred to, most authors only consider one of them. Szücs' contribution has been to consider the dynamics between the two lines, showing how cultural-institutional influences have been shifting back and forth, implying that the region "in between", Central Eastern Europe has been successively been influenced (if not dominated) by empires and social institutions both West and East from them: after 814 mainly the West, then after the 15<sup>th</sup> century more and more from the East (especially by the Ottoman and Russian empires). Later on, influences from the West gradually increased over time, but frequently Eastern influences bounced back. The Soviet influence in the period 1948-1989 was an extreme example of this.

While Szücs' argument has gained considerable influence in the literature, his emphasis on the historical continuity of the 1054 line has been criticized for exaggerating differences across this line and ignoring changes East of it, especially in later centuries (cf. Bideleux, Jeffries 1998: 16, Neumann 2000: 210-212, Kovács 2001: 5-6). Others have argued that the border hasn't been strict from the very beginning. According to Font (2005), a relatively wide area has continued to receive both religious and cultural-institutional influences from both sides, even after the formal schism. This reinforces the argument put forward in section 1 in favour of border *zones*, rather than borderlines.

In trainings I use to present the core of Szücs argument in a lecturette, as a metaphor of identity perceptions. Experiences can be summarized as follows:

- For most Western participants, who had been unaware of the identity aspect in communication and related historical knowledge concerning Central Eastern Europe, the argument appeared to be an eyeopener, and proved a very convincing illustration of Central Eastern European identity perceptions. Its convincing power lays in the fact that identity needs are grounded in an

empirical approach to history, and are not only based on subjective feelings of belonging. The visual presentation with maps and power-point animation worked very well. Only an extreme small minority signalled familiarity with the argument. In trainings for professionals, many participants explicitly referred to this lecturette when asked about learning points at the end of the training.

- A minority of participants indicated that they found the argument too complicated and too abstract. These were mainly professionals with a non-academic background. Although I did my best to leave out unnecessary detail and make the argument accessible to a general audience, the lecture definitely requires some feeling for argumentation from the social sciences and history. My impression is that this does not necessarily require an academic background: it is rather a matter of interest and “mindset”. Moreover, the core of the argument could be well conveyed through the use of maps.
- Responses of participants from Central Eastern Europe varied. In two very different settings (an international organisation and an undergraduate class at the university), the (very) small minority of participants from Central Eastern Europe responded (very) positively, also by contributing to the discussion with additional information and viewpoints. Among the undergraduate students, various participants from Hungary, Poland and the Eastern parts of Germany showed their appreciation afterwards through email or personal contact. In a training for public administrators in Hungary, however, the lecturette hardly raised any enthusiasm or response, much to the surprise of myself and my Hungarian co-trainer who had been very positive about integrating this item into the training. We haven’t been able to figure out the reasons of this response. I suspect that it might have been related with the preferred learning styles of the participants, and insufficient ability of the trainers to link the lecturette to the experiences of the participants.
- Participants from outside Europe frequently indicated difficulties with following the argument or were simply not “turned on”. Undergraduate exchange students from the US and Asia were either overwhelmed by the argument, or were unable to connect to it. The use of maps obviously requires some (very) basic knowledge of European geography. Moreover, the lecturette presupposed some very basic knowledge of major turning points in 20th century European history (the “Iron Curtain”, the role of the Soviet Union, the demise of Communism and the fall of the Berlin Wall).

In sum, this lecturette can be evaluated as a useful training activity for creating awareness, especially among participants from Western Europe with little or intermediate knowledge about Central Eastern Europe. Applying the item requires good knowledge of history, including the main lines of the history of individual countries, so as to be able to respond to questions, criticism and feedback from participants. Feeling for the historical discourses in various countries is also important. It is important to embed the argument firmly in an identity negotiation

perspective; to point at the relativity of any historical argument as an explanation for current identities; and to emphasize that identities and boundaries are social constructions and not objective categories (cf. Kolstø 2005). Dependent upon the audience or the contacts the audience is expected to have, more specific attention can be given to prevailing boundary and identity views in particular countries. Augmentation is indispensable as far as countries from South Eastern Europe are concerned. Boundary issues have been more complex here and have not been fully covered by Szücs (cf. Kolstø 2005, Todorova 1997, 2000). It should be emphasized repeatedly that the historical argument is used as a metaphor and illustration for identity perceptions and nothing more. A majority of participants should be open to abstract, historical argumentation.

b. Historical maps of Europe

*Participants:* professionals in an international organisation, trainings for MBA students

*Method:* Work with maps of Europe with different constellations of nations: either without almost none of the present nation-states (map of Europe in 1815), or with some Central Eastern European nations (Hungary, Bohemia, Poland-Lithuania) as a relative large regional power (map of Europe in 1500).

*Frequency of execution:* 10 times

A map of Europe of 1815 can be enlightening for people from countries with a long standing national sovereignty. I'd show the map and ask: which countries existing today in Central Eastern Europe can be found on the map? There is only one to be found, and a tiny one at that: Montenegro. Some maps show part of Poland as a semi-autonomous part of the Russian empire. Then I ask the reverse question for the rest of Europe: which countries existing today did *not* exist in 1815? On the respective maps Finland and Norway are usually shown as a semi-autonomous parts of Russia and connected to Sweden respectively. Germany and Italy were yet to be united, but were not subject to foreign domination as all countries in Central Eastern Europe were. On the map of 1500 drives participants see Hungary, Bohemia, and Poland-Lithuania as major powers in Europe. Maps of earlier centuries show Bulgaria, Croatia and Serbia in a similar way: almost all these empires were at times covering much larger areas than their today's nation-states.

The maps are used as a starting point for reflection and a short discussion about national feelings, historical consciousness, the impact of centuries of foreign domination and the "luxury" of many Western European nations to have been sovereign for centuries to an extent that this has become self-evident. For most participants from Western Europe this was new information, and provided deeper understanding of the importance of identity negotiation.

c. Lecturette on identity negotiation and the levels of communication as set out in section 2 (content, relation, identity)

*Duration:* approximately 1 hr.

*Participants:* professionals in various settings, trainings for MBA and undergraduate students

*Method:* Video of a TV discussion on the accession of Central Eastern European countries to the EU

*Frequency of execution:* 10 - 15 times

The lecturette addressed the argument of section 2, extended with various examples. The video served as an illustration in two ways: firstly, participants in the TV discussion from Central Eastern Europe gave very clear examples of perceptions in their country on the process of European integration and how this process did not always match prevailing identities and feelings. Secondly, the discussion itself provided some extreme examples of identity frictions between the Western European interviewer and the participants.

Experiences with this exercise were mixed:

- For most participants, the video provided a clear illustration of how identity perceptions differ across Europe and how people in Central Eastern Europe do not always feel respected in their identity as belonging to the core of Europe.
- At the same time, I have to conclude that the conceptual framework was not really grasped by the participants. Although the reflections in the discussion following the video were to the point, few people related them to the conceptual framework. This was different to what I had hoped. Even when explicitly asked to apply the concepts, response remained low. I was also surprised that not much response occurred when participants were asked to relate the TV discussion or the conceptual framework to their own experiences. Different from other activities in the trainings, the conceptual framework did not return in end-of-training feedback of learning points, other than the actual message of the activity, which clearly came across. These observations hold true for all audiences, including those that were trained to apply academic arguments, such as the MBA students and the undergraduate students in economics and business. One reason might be that the argument is rooted in psychology and the humanities, which are not quite core disciplines in economics and business curricula.
- The only occasion where a lively discussion arose, and where participants made abundant connections with their own experiences, was at a workshop at the SIETAR Europe conference in Sofia in 2007. Yet obviously, this was not an average audience: not only did all participants have extensive experience as professional interculturalists, many of them had lived both in Western Europe and Central Eastern Europe.

In sum, the concept of identity negotiation appears to be too advanced to be introduced in a 10- 15 minutes lecturette. One solution could be to spend much more time on working with it, by decomposing the three layers (content, relation and identity) by providing examples, exercises and role plays. This might easily take two to three hours, if not more. In the settings I was working, time constraints made this

impossible. An extended approach could be combined with introducing the results of advanced discourse analysis as an example of identity negotiation (cf. Todorova 1997, Neumann 1998, Kolstø 2005). When working with audiences not trained in the social sciences and the humanities, however, the argument definitely needs to be restyled and transformed, probably at the cost of the complexity and the sophistication of the original arguments. So far, I haven't experimented with these approaches. As argued in section 2, issues of uneven access to resources and power also ought to be integrated in ways relevant to the participants of training, cf. income differences, labour migration from Central Eastern Europe to Western Europe, visa requirements or lack of scholarships for students from outside the EU. Although an extended introduction of identity issues and identity negotiation as proposed here would in principle be suited for participants of all levels of prior experience, it might be especially useful for experienced practitioners from Central Eastern Europe, as these are likely to be familiar with the basic knowledge as introduced in the activities a. and b.

## **5. Conclusion**

This paper proposed to include an approach of identity negotiation to intercultural communication and intercultural training with a focus on Central Eastern Europe. It was argued that although the region cannot be considered as culturally uniform, many of its inhabitants face similar situations of identity frictions in communication with outsiders and sometimes also with inhabitants from other countries in the region. This makes it indispensable to introduce identity issues in trainings and go beyond the traditional focus on values and communication styles. Some training activities were presented which might contribute to such an approach. The presented activities focussed mainly on creating identity awareness.

The issues presented in this paper provide a lot of scope for further work, both in research and training. Identity negotiation is a fairly new approach to intercultural communication, especially when international intercultural encounters are concerned. While there certainly is a necessity for further general development of the approach, empirical evidence shows that there are many specific interfaces that need to be addressed: from my own experience I can cite the frictions in the Polish-German relations, the negative experiences of Bulgarian students in Western Europe, team relations in an NGO with predominantly Dutch Serbian, Bosnian and Macedonian employees, team relations in the Czech, Slovak and Hungarian subsidiaries of a German multinational company etc.). Several research tasks can be derived here:

- To investigate how, to what extent and in what contexts identity frictions actually occur; to seek for comparisons or relations to other sources of cultural difference, such as values and communication styles.
- To gain deeper insights into how these identity frictions impact communication; again to seek for comparisons or relations to other sources of cultural difference,

such as values and communication styles.

Further desiderata for future work can be:

- To develop training activities for interactive work on identity issues in the European context, especially activities aimed at advanced practitioners and existing multinational teams.
- To extend the issues of identity negotiation to other international settings (for instance to countries with a postcolonial past, with troublesome history of wars or with substantial ethnic minorities).

I will highly welcome exchange of ideas and advice on this topic.

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# **May Concern About Substitution Between Understanding and Trust Add to the Efficacy of Intercultural Training?**

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## **Abstract**

The paper assumes that most difficulties and problems in inter-cultural exchange stem from the lack of understanding, acceptance, trust or confidence on one or both sides in an intercultural relation. Many models of intercultural training aim, by way of various pedagogical methods, at the facilitating of the interplay between actors through learning about or experiencing inter-cultural contact. Still, scientific evidence about the efficiency of many approaches to inter-cultural training is scarce. The paper introduces a new theoretical perspective based on the psychological phenomenon of substitution between understanding, and trust with subsequent effects on acceptance and behaviours. From this perspective the paper elaborates on the psychological and situational requirements for substitution to occur in normal and recurring situations and relates such requirements to goals and needs in training.

## **1. Introduction**

In this paper I shall not review the wide spectrum of intercultural training models, nor evaluate the efficiency of such models. Instead I shall apply a general perspective highlighting a few basic psychological elements or aspects that may be involved in, or even be the cause of most problems in intercultural contacts. These aspects and some phenomena associated with them will then be related to possible training efforts insofar as their goal may be a smooth and non-problematic handling of intercultural contact. First, however, the aspects to be treated should be derived from the fundamental psychological functions filled by the social phenomenon of culture in monocultural settings.

## **2. Psychological functions of culture**

Culture is normally defined as a set of norms and underlying values that is shared and used by some group of people (Berry et al. 2003). Norms generally denote to a person what works best, what is preferred or what is normal in situations of a recurring or common type, i.e. in situations that are often faced or met by one or by many individuals. (Thus, for a totally unforeseen situation there may be no norm.) Cultural norms as the term is used here denote what typically applies in specific

situations within a national context. Cultural norms govern behaviours and interpretations among people in some, but not all respects. Besides cultural norms there are, for every member of a culture, group norms, e.g. organizational norms, and furthermore strictly individual norms that govern behaviours in situations where cultural norms do not apply. Thus, although the frame of reference of any individual to some extent reflects his or her culture, national culture does not govern all behaviours of its members, but only behaviours in some situations. Nor do the members of a culture constitute the culture itself, only the norms they adhere to do so.

A culture fills several important functions. At a social level it coordinates behaviours among people at a given point in time, and over time it coordinates across generations as new members internalise or get socialised to cultural norms. Here it is evident that cultures favour smooth and efficient interaction among members and represent an accumulation over time of experiences and knowledge. At an individual, psychological level culture fills three major functions. One function deals with *cognition*, that is the selection and interpretation of environmental information. Insofar as there is a cultural norm available, this means that the situation requires no problem-solving, and perhaps even that it may be handled in an unreflected manner. Here culture favours efficiency in a persons handling of situations by supplying norms for appropriate actions and interpretations. Further, as regards *appraisal* or the assessment of situations, cultural norms may supply standards for judging what is good or bad, important or unimportant, acceptable or not, what to prefer or give priority to, etc. Cultural norms also fill important functions in terms of personal *identity*. Having access to internalised norms on how to handle situations helps an individual to experience familiarity with, confidence or trust in one's capacity to successfully handle a context ("mastery aspect"). Further, cultural identity denotes to a person who he or she is and who is somebody else. This may be relevant in situations concerning acceptance or trust associated with "me-us" or "us-them", ingroup vs outgroup relations, etc.

### **3. Intercultural contact**

Based on the social and psychological functions of culture it is easy to conclude that these may be disturbed or fail in situations of intercultural contact, i.e. when cultural norms on one part are confronted with differing norms held by another part. This may generally cause unexpected, unwanted or problematic outcomes, and the more so as encounters may be of a bilateral kind, i.e. misunderstandings, non-acceptance, mistrust etc. may go for any of two parties. Theoretically the situation may be further complicated insofar as the relation in terms of cultural norms of the two parties is non-reciprocal, i. e. what is seen as important or relevant by one party may not be seen so by the other. Generally seen, it is proposed here that many problems regarding intercultural encounters may reflect bias due to well-known psychological factors emanating from three kinds of sources:

- = cognitive sources: not understanding/seeing/knowing / disregard from relevant options
- = appraisal sources: misinterpretations / false attributions / stereotyping  
acceptance / non-acceptance / ethnocentrism / standards / values /  
priorities or relevance in one culture may not hold in the other culture
- = identity related sources: – mistrust before what is different / unfamiliar / strange  
(we vs them dimension)  
– lack of confidence in handling situations  
(mastery dimension)

The biases above only refer to what may be due to real differences between cultures among the parties in contact. That is, problems due to clashes between other than cultural norms, e.g. group- or individual norms are not caused by the intercultural character of the situation. Still such clashes are often wrongly attributed to cultural differences as these may be more apparent. In the case of real cultural differences it should be evident that the biases might cause unexpected or problematic outcomes or consequences. The identity aspect may here be relevant in terms of support or confirmation, challenge or denial of a persons conception of self. The relational aspect of this should be about *trust* as experienced by each person involved. In intercultural settings the aspect of cultural identity is somehow always there but may be more or less “called into” a situation at hand. Bias may here come from lack of understanding on one or more sides or from we-them attitudes (in- vs outgroup) or lack of confidence in coping with (mastery of) an unfamiliar situation. For this paper it shall be assumed that most problematic aspects of intercultural contacts directly or indirectly refer to the biases described. Still, a general assumption underlying the perspective adopted here is that most such situations, be there bias or not, come out as unproblematic, i.e. have positive outcomes. This assumption may hold particular relevance for intercultural training efforts.

#### **4. Intercultural training**

There is a great variety of training methods and pedagogical models in the intercultural field. Most of them involve, refer to, address, or somehow touch on the aspects of cognition, appraisal and identity laid out above. Thus some models focus on cognitive aspects like attribution training and sensitivity (Bhawuk 2001; Cushner, Landis, 1996) or on awareness and mindfulness (cf. Ferdman, Brody 1996) and some refer to identity or trust in terms of reduction of fear or stress (Gudykunst, Nishida 2001), face-negotiation (Ting-Toomey, Kurogi 1998) etc. Although the focus of approaches may differ most of them aim at bringing about a smooth and efficient handling of intercultural situations. Thus Cushner and Brislin (1997) specify four common goals of most training efforts as promoting confidence, positive relations, task fulfilment and coping with stress.

Training efforts may deal with learning about a specific, a fictitious or general

alien or “other” culture, they may deal with awareness about own cultural norms, or with contrasts between own and other culture(s). They may involve interpersonal exercises like role-playing referring to experiential emotional learning or they may be strictly didactic or documentary referring to cognitive learning processes (cf. Gudykunst et al. Hammer 1996. Berry et al. 2003). Ultimately they all aim at promoting appropriate reactions, behaviours and skills in intercultural situations.

Kealy and Protheroe (1996), Kealy, Protheroe, MacDonald and Vulpe (2005) find in their thorough reviews that most models aim at bringing about change in the individual in terms of capabilities or individual characteristics and thus in some sense disregard from what may be done to situations, environments and contexts. May it be so that the word “training” in itself refers to changing persons? Then, as regards the potential efficiency one might generally ask what change may training possibly achieve in respect of a persons cognition, appraisal and identity as discussed above? And how much may measures designed to affect situations of intercultural contact facilitate positive or unproblematic outcomes. Here Kealy et al. (2005) suggest measures at both individual, organizational and environmental levels in order to reach success in international projects.

Further, most intercultural training efforts aim at individual change through learning at a different time, duration and speed, in a different place or context (physical and social) and sometimes in a different way or manner than where what is learned may be used in reality. Thus, this author has suggested that expatriates or sojourners may not be receptive to some content of pre-departure training and that such content may better be learnt after some time in their host-culture. Some of what is learnt before departure is by necessity interpreted in terms of an inappropriate frame of reference, a mindset that may not be changed enough during short training sessions which, further, may not correspond to the “total situation” represented by living in a new culture. Pre-departure training should thus focus on “survival material” of a general and salient relevance for living in the specific target culture. After some time here the mindset of the expatriate may have become diffused by contradicting and inexplicable experiences to the extent that it may be restructured into appropriate for the local scene. Here a person should be susceptible to learning about more subtle or less apparent facets of the new culture (Torbiörn 1982, Selmer et al. 1998).

Considering the great variety of approaches, methods and targets of intercultural training efforts it should of course be difficult to establish reliable evidence of efficiency in a general and conclusive sense (cf. Blake et al. 1996). Thus a few overriding reviews report low predictability of success (Berry et al.2003, Kealy, Protheroe 1996, Kealy et al. 2005) while some report positive evidence, e.g. Deshpande and Viesvaran (1992), Mumford Fowler (2006). Regarding specific approaches there is evidence in favour of culture assimilators (Bhawuk 2001) being the most widely used method, but also for experiential training (Goldstein, Smith 1999), intervention (Nesdale, Todd 2000) , documentary methods (Early 1987), etc.

Kealy et al. (2005) discuss possible methodological reasons of why training may appear efficient or not in terms of unclear targets (and evaluative criteria), bad designs (no controls; no assessments before training or assessments directly at the end of training), lack of reliable and valid criteria for evaluations, etc. Yet a number

of measures of intercultural capacity of individuals have been developed over time, such as the Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory (CCAI) Kelley and Meyers (1987), the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) (Hammer et al. 2003), and the behavioural indicators characterizing the “interculturally effective person” (IEP) developed at the Centre for Intercultural Learning in Canada (2000). Insofar as such criteria are robust and valid they may be used for more precise evaluations of relevant skills provided by intercultural training.

Let alone the methodological problems in establishing efficiency of intercultural training but considering the situational constraints regarding where what is learnt may be applied and regarding constraints on efficiency from various facets of training administration, one may generally ask how effective training may be? This may hold in particular where training aimed at individual change is targeting understanding, appraisal and trust. This paper suggests that in many instances these aspects may not be directly amenable to training efforts. Instead I shall suggest below as a complementary perspective the usefulness of an indirect approach, that of substitution between understanding and trust.

## **5. The everyday phenomenon of substitution**

Generally seen it may be assumed that people normally want every contact or situation in which they are involved, be the situation intercultural or not, to have a positive or unproblematic outcome (in terms of what each person means by positive). In order to achieve this it may also be assumed that a person will not normally accept what he or she does not understand, nor accept what he or she does not trust or has confidence in (e.g. signing a contract without having read the terms or eating some very strange-smelling dish).

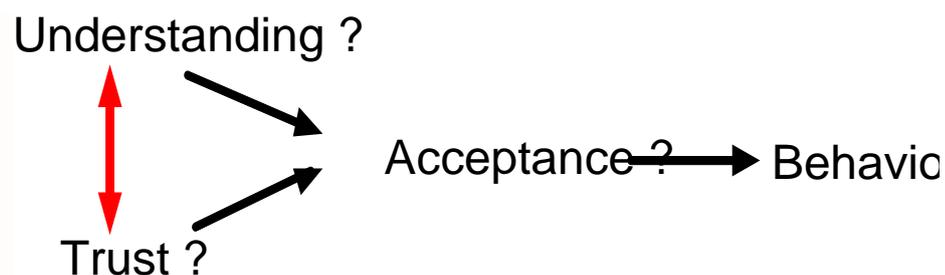
Also, it may be assumed that in many instances it is not possible for the parties involved in intercultural contacts to understand, trust or feel confident. Normally however, most such situations will have positive or unproblematic outcomes due to what here shall be termed *substitution*. The term simply refers to the interplay between understanding and trust suggesting that when one of these is not at hand a person may sometimes have to rely on the other. This also implies the assumption that many problems in intercultural contacts are due to *lack of substitution*, and that measures (e.g. training) that facilitates substitution might favour positive outcomes.

Some basic social and psychological functions of culture were specified above. It was suggested that these functions may fail in cross-cultural contacts due to bias in cognition, appraisal and aspects of cultural identity. Such malfunctioning may imply risks of unwanted or negative outcomes. As a matter of fact such situations cannot be fully avoided in cross-cultural meetings. Thus it is a fact that one sometimes, not only in intercultural contexts, accepts what is beforehand in a situation without understanding it, or that one accepts what one would normally not have accepted based only upon one’s understanding. As far as one may feel confident that the outcome of the exchange will be positive or unproblematic one may leave it to the counterpart to supply what is missing with oneself, e.g. understanding, skills, etc. Thus trust may here be a substitute for understanding

and/or, what would have been the normal case, for non-acceptance. Conversely, sufficient understanding of a situation may be enough for acceptance where trust is low.

Although substitution is an everyday phenomenon it is held here that it is more often called for in situations of intercultural contact than otherwise, and that it is more relevant or important here for the appropriate coping with situations and for the outcomes of them. Thus, from this perspective the absence of or lack of substitution where it would have been appropriate may produce problems, failures, tensions or breaks in the exchange insofar as they are due to the biases previously discussed. Heterocultural work groups, for example, need more time to function effectively than do homogeneous groups (Milliken, Martin 1996, Watson et al. 1998). This may be accounted for by insufficient substitution among members of groups in initial phases of collaboration. Insofar as substitution here may contribute to positive outcomes the concept offers a more precise and possibly manageable explanation of what is often called *process-losses* in group functioning.

Figure 1. (see original at the end!)



The basic psychological model proposed is illustrated in [Figure 1](#). It assumes for every situation a tradeoff between on one side understanding (i.e. how much one understands of the situation), and on the other side how much trust or confidence one has in it. The resultant of this tradeoff concerns acceptance (or non-acceptance) of what one faces. This, together with what cultural or other norms may promote, will guide subsequent behaviours intended to bring about a positive or unproblematic outcome. The phenomenon of substitution generally facilitates acceptance of what one would otherwise (i.e. without substitution) not have accepted. Substitution and consequent behaviours may here mean:

- acceptance due to trust where understanding is low.
- acceptance due to understanding where trust is low.

The phenomenon of trust plays a central role in the model above. Some traditional definitions of trust in general mean that it holds three components, a risk of being hurt or harmed in some way, a dependence of the other part or of the situation, and

the expectation that the outcome will be positive (cf. Golembiewski, McConkie 1975, Jones, George 1998). Thus Rousseau et al. (1998) specify trust as “a willingness to be vulnerable”. According to the model trust may be a matter of initial trust in a situation or of reflected trust as it interacts with understanding in the process leading to acceptance (or non-acceptance), or it may result from repeated experiences of unproblematic outcomes where substitution has occurred. The cases where neither understanding nor trust is at hand such as where situational demands may force consent or acceptance, and the case where acceptance may be based on gullibility or naivety do not imply substitution.

For training purposes the general and simple principle derived from the model would be:

- where either of understanding or trust is low or hard to achieve through training efforts, add training efforts in support of the other in order to facilitate possible substitution.

Thus, insofar as training through an indirect approach may be a complement to what is the direct target of training, e.g. understanding or appropriate behaviours this may possibly favour efficiency of training.

## **6. Situational preconditions for substitution**

Generally seen it is the situation that determines whether substitution (or no substitution) may promote positive outcomes. Thus, for intercultural exchanges where the need for substitution may be more pronounced than otherwise, it should be worth investigating into what situations or aspects of situations would (or would not) require or promote substitution, and what kind of substitution might help. Assuming that there is some beforehand knowledge about an intercultural situation there may be two options for trainers (and decision-makers in organizations), to influence or support the situation itself and to prepare trainees for the situation, where both options may consider needs or possibilities of substitution. Generally seen such an approach corresponds to what Kealy et al. (2005) suggest regarding training for success in international projects.

For many commonplace or recurring contexts it should be easier to influence the situation than to influence what is culturally determined in the cognitive frameworks of individuals. The option to influence or handle situations of intercultural contact may be more available to organizations than to individuals. Some types of situations or contexts may be frequent or standardized, e.g. international negotiations, leadership across cultural borders, heterocultural work-teams, etc. For training purposes, trainees may be helped, based on the trainers knowledge of what substitution is possible or needed, to adapt to specific prerequisites in order to cope successfully with situational requirements. Some general facets of intercultural situations that relate to substitution are exemplified below.

*Saliency* or importance to one or both of the parties involved. Here, generally seen, the more salient the less readiness for substitution among the

parties but the more need for it to promote unproblematic outcomes. Could the situation itself be adapted?

*Reciprocity.* The degree of reciprocity may affect substitution as regards what norms are salient to each of the parties of an intercultural relation. High reciprocity may disfavour substitution as salient or valued norms are involved, but favour substitution in more peripheral aspects. Low reciprocity may generally favour substitution as it may offer more opportunities of it.

*Time,* duration of contact, and processes of adaptation are central for the phenomenon of substitution. In the initial phases or first turns of an intercultural exchange substitution or the lack of substitution are most relevant due to insufficient feedback and learning. A prolonged exchange allows for the sharing of information, adaptation and possibly convergence toward mutual understanding and trust (Kincaid 1988). Time may reduce the risk of unwanted outcomes by allowing for substitution. However, time also makes the phenomenon of substitution less relevant for the outcome of the exchange.

*Anxiety* before what is strange, unexpected or unfamiliar may call for the use of psychological defences due to lack of understanding, mistrust and low confidence. These defences may concern the effectiveness of communication (Gudykunst, Nishida 2001) and hinder substitution where it would otherwise have favoured unproblematic outcomes. Here reduced uncertainty may favour substitution.

*Cultural barriers* require more substitution insofar as they are high, i.e. as the difference between cultures involved in an exchange is perceived as large by some or both parties (Torbiörn 1988). Here, although sometimes necessary, substitution may be more difficult to attain. Thus Sarbaugh (1988) suggests that communication requires more energy and that the likelihood to achieve an intended outcome decreases. Low cultural barriers generally favour substitution but make it less relevant for outcomes of exchanges.

*Setting* or the context where a cross-cultural exchange takes place should affect substitution. Familiarity with a corresponding context from the parties own cultures, e.g. restaurants, sports arenas, etc. may favour substitution.

*Similarities in salient non-cultural characteristics.* This could mean that substitution may be facilitated if counterparts in intercultural contact share other demographic characteristics that may be more prominent than cultural differences. e.g. similarities in age, gender or profession (Tsui et al. 1992).

*Prestige or face-work* implicit in the context. The situation at hand may require more or less of face-work, i.e. the saving of ones own "face" or that of ones counterpart (Ting-Toomey, Kurogi 1998). This should affect individual readiness for substitution.

Besides the facets of situations exemplified above, other factors of possibly less particular relevance for intercultural encounters should affect substitution. Issues of power and dependency, of a common purpose or goal, of whether a situation is of a win-win or win-lose type should be generally important. Insofar as situations or contexts of intercultural exchange may be influenced, concern about substitution may reduce the likelihood of problematic outcomes e.g. in international negotiations, strategic and operational decisions in international organizations, leadership of heterocultural groups. Taking the latter instance as an example concern about what may facilitate substitution may mean that a leader allows time for relational trust to appear, cares about defining a clear leader-role (to promote institutionalised trust), about clear definitions of coworkers tasks (mastery aspect) and about empathy in individual relations with group members.

### **7. Individual change and substitution**

In applying the perspective of substitution on training efforts intended to bring about change in individuals the general question would be: may one learn through training to accept what one does not understand or trust? The answer is that even in familiar settings in one's own culture we substitute one for the other, and that normally, except for the case of naivety or forced consent, it works well.

In the case where the trainer has knowledge about the particular context where what is learnt should be applied, training efforts may favour substitution either by supporting the situation, as discussed above, or by supplying culture- or context-specific tactical skills related to the particular context. In the case of generalized intercultural training focus may be on the assessment of generally unfamiliar situations regarding what and when substitution may be appropriate. Here one may ask what such a general capacity or competence would be in terms of an individual attribute or characteristic. Clearly such skills may be generalized across occasions and situations, and clearly they do not only apply in person-to-person situations nor only in intercultural situations, as substitution is also common in everyday life. The position taken here is that part of such a capacity goes with personal traits and that part of it may be acquired through training efforts that favour substitution where appropriate. So is also the case regarding several existing training approaches, experiential or didactic, which touch on mindfulness, awareness and sensitizing. Thus, generally seen, conclusions based on reasoning in terms of substitution lend support to the hypothesis of effectiveness in several existing approaches to intercultural training. It is suggested here, however, that such reasoning might form a complement to training that directly targets understanding and appropriate behaviours. Here "substitution training" may widen the repertoire of trainee responses in intercultural contacts. Generally seen, the capacity to assess intercultural situations in terms of what substitution is required or not required, desirable or not desirable, may be an essential component of what may be denoted *intercultural competence*.

### **8. Discussion and conclusions**

This paper has argued that problems and bias in intercultural contacts may be derived from basically the same basic psychological functions of cognition, appraisal, trust or confidence and that problems may follow from subsequent behaviours based on the result of such processes. The simple psychological model proposed to explain and handle such problems builds on the everyday phenomenon of substitution. It assumes for every situation a tradeoff between on one side understanding of the situation, and on the other side how much trust or confidence one has in it. The result of this tradeoff concerns acceptance (or non-acceptance) of what one faces. This, together with what cultural or other norms may promote, will guide subsequent behaviours intended to bring about a positive or unproblematic outcome. Although the model should be universally applicable in explaining outcomes of contacts in general, it may bear particular relevance for intercultural training.

It should be pointed out here that the central role of *acceptance* in the described model only refers to what may favour unproblematic or positive outcomes, not to some generally adopted paradigm of cultural relativism. Rather, the paradigm as regards application of a substitutions perspective in intercultural contexts is universalism (cf. Berry et al. 2003). This implies that for some or most everyday intercultural situations outcomes are normally positive but problems may arise unnecessarily due to lack of substitution. On the other hand, where situations, if substitution would occur, may imply danger or risk of unwanted or negative consequences to the parties involved, training may focus on the avoidance of substitution. This would be of general relevance for safety management in high reliability organizations (Torbiörn 2006). In intercultural settings organizational decision-making involving what appears to be substitution may even be associated with some serious disasters (cf. Donaldson 1996). Thus, the phenomenon and the perspective of substitution may be relevant for explaining also adverse cases and be fruitful in training efforts to avoid such cases.

The theoretical focus on substitution only introduces a *perspective* but as such it may point to *indirect* and *complementary* options for intercultural training. Thus it may help to shift focus from dealing primarily with understanding and to include trust. Here, measures to promote trust may be relevant where understanding may not easily be attained, e.g. in the leadership of heterocultural groups, in conflict prohibition and resolution. Also, many approaches in intercultural training focus directly on doing the right thing or not doing the wrong thing. Here an unbiased understanding may be difficult to achieve as an individuals cultural framework may be deeply rooted and slow to change. Training efforts might perhaps gain effectiveness from adding the purpose to improve trainees capacity to assess situations in terms of what and when substitution would be helpful. In a generalized sense such a skill may be a central component of what may be called “intercultural competence”.

Further, the perspective of substitution may help to widen the scope of training beyond individual change to include situations. For training purposes this may concern typical or recurring situations or contexts where measures may be adapted according to the salience of the context to the involved parties, and to the reciprocal

or non-reciprocal character of the situation. Thus, it might be easier to set or influence the situation than the actors in it, as these represent deeply rooted individual mindsets. Although more research is needed on the interplay between understanding and trust in terms of substitution as well as research on the interplay between substitution and situational qualities, trainers may consider situational requirements and constraints concerning substitution in designing training efforts. Therefore, information on qualities of situations combined with a substitution's perspective may be helpful in promoting efficacy of intercultural training.

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Figure 1.

