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Understanding Otherness and Discord: A Necessary but Insufficient First Step Towards Generating Complementarity and Synergy from Cultural Diversity

Christoph Barmeyer and Peter Franklin

1 COMPARATIVE MANAGEMENT STUDIES: THE TRADITIONAL ETIC APPROACH

The pioneering culture-comparative studies of management preferences and practices in different countries by Hofstede (1980 and 2001, 1991) and Laurent (1983) first directed the attention of management scholars and practitioners to the insight that management was not—as seen up till then—a cultural universal, something “done” in the same way the world over. These studies made clear that management is indeed a culturally influenced artefact, which may differ from national culture to national culture (d’Iribarne 2002, 2009). Management was thus no different from many other practices and behaviours within a group, driven by culturally influenced values and preferences and oriented to culturally influenced norms.

It was only a short and perhaps too easy a step to make such otherness responsible for dysfunctional communication, discord and ineffective cooperation across national cultural borders (which indeed they may be but need not be). This attention to the way cultures differ and the difficulties the differences may cause in communication and cooperation has stubbornly continued to this day, although both research and management practice have moved on to tackle other more pressing questions such as how to handle the difficulties—a topic dealt with in the part of this book entitled Applying Competencies and Resources—and how to leverage them, a subject addressed in Part 3, Achieving Complementarity and Synergy.
These pioneering studies – and those published later by Trompenaars (1993) and House et al. (2004), for example – have been found especially useful by those interested in international management as a result of their *etic* nature: they are empirical; they are quantitative; they are contrastive; and they use a set of concepts which the investigators believe to be common to all cultures and which quickly become familiar to the users of the studies. They assume that all cultures can to a certain extent be described by “measuring” them with the same yardsticks and by placing them at a certain position on descriptive bipolar continua.

Hofstede’s original empirical research, published in 1980 in his book *Culture’s Consequences: International Differences in Work-related Values* and based on a matched sample of more than 116,000 IBM employees from more than 50 countries, together with subsequent smaller surveys by others, provides the interculturalist, whether scholar or international manager, with insights into differences in work-related values or preferences and the ways in which these values are expressed in behaviour and practices in the organizations and societies to be found in the various country cultures surveyed. Hofstede names the poles of the four basic dimensions he identified in his research: small power distance as opposed to large power distance; collectivism contrasting with individualism; femininity as opposed to masculinity; and weak uncertainty avoidance as opposed to strong uncertainty avoidance. In subsequent publications, Hofstede, using the results of the Chinese Values Survey (Chinese Culture Connection 1985; Hofstede & Bond 1988) adds a fifth dimension, namely long-term orientation as opposed to short-term orientation. And most recently, Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov (2010) have added a sixth dimension, indulgence versus restraint. The peculiar power of these studies is intensified by the presenting of their results in tables listing scores and indicating positions from highest to lowest and in Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov (2010) by placing national cultures in global regions leading to an occasional clustering effect.

Since the publication of his work, no examination of a cultural issue in international business or management is complete without at least a mention, either positive or negative, of Hofstede. His quantitative approach has gained many supporters among scholars and HR developers alike – it seems to offer security in a field notoriously subject to the perverting effects of stereotypes and mere individual experience and anecdote. Sometimes, indeed, this interest in applying his results is so dominant as to exclude other insights. Criticism of his insights (for example, by McSweeney (2002), Smith (2002) and Franklin and Spencer-Oatey (2011) and by international managers themselves) has grown in the last decade or more, for example, for being outdated and based on data derived from a single organization, for suggesting a no longer (if ever) current cultural homogeneity, for ignoring the dynamic nature of cultures and for promoting stereotypes.

Building on the work of Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961) and Parsons and Shils (1951), Trompenaars (1993), in his *etic* study of international managers at Royal Dutch-Shell, generated a set of seven dimensions of cultural variability: neutral versus affective in the disclosure of feelings; ascription versus
achievement in the assigning of status; diffuse versus specific in the range of interpersonal involvement; collectivism versus individualism; universalism versus particularism in behaviour in relationships with others; and the management of time (sequential versus synchronic; and past, present and future). Although criticism, possibly justified, of the soundness of his data and of the conclusions he has drawn from it has been made by some, in particular by Hofstede (1996), Trompenaars’ insights into the dimensions of cultural variation to be found in business and management have also established themselves firmly in the field, particularly when it comes to consultancy and training.

Expanding and refining Hofstede’s dimensions, The Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness Research program (GLOBE) (House et al. 2004) more recently investigated the relationship between culture and societal, organizational and leadership effectiveness. Some 170 scholars questioned more than 17,000 middle managers in 62 cultures. Though based on a much smaller sample, it meets some of the criticism levelled at Hofstede’s pioneering work: the data was collected in companies in three industries (financial services, food processing and telecommunications) and not just one; the study was the work of a multicultural team of investigators bringing with them all the benefits of multiple, culturally influenced perspectives; and the study’s insights are more recent than Hofstede’s – work began on the investigation in 1994 and was published in 2004. Strangely, perhaps, despite these obvious merits, the GLOBE study has still not superseded Hofstede in the favours of many scholars, HR development specialists and trainers. And, of course, the study has been the butt of criticism, not least by Hofstede (2006) himself.

2 CRITICISM OF THE ETIC STUDIES AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

These later etic studies can be criticized in certain respects in much the same way that Hofstede’s work is: the bipolar continua of the “national cultural model” attempt to describe national and organizational cultures which in their nature may contradict the tacit assumption of the studies that such cultures are homogeneous and static. As McSweeney (2009:936) remarks:

Culture is not a pre-established monolith. An acknowledgement of internal divisions, gaps and ambiguities inserts an essential element of distance at the heart of tradition and thus the possibility of critical interpretation, action variation and unpredictability within a country.

The “national cultural model” also assumes that cultures are delimited units which reject and fail to influence each other, as if, as Wolf (1982:6) describes, they were billiard balls which merely bounce off each other:

By endowing nations, societies, or cultures with the qualities of internally homogeneous and externally distinctive and bounded objects, we create a model of the world as a global pool hall in which the entities spin off each other like so many hard and round billiard balls.
This metaphor contrasts starkly with how national cultures, especially, are commonly experienced, appositely summed up by Hannerz (1992:266) as dynamic entities which influence and are influenced by others:

(T)he flow of culture between countries and continents may result in another diversity of culture, based more on interconnections than on autonomy. It also allows the sense of a complex culture as a network of perspectives, or as an ongoing debate.

Hannerz (1992:266) borrows a term from linguistics when he goes on to speak of the creolization of culture in which:

a creole culture could also stabilize, or the interplay of center and periphery could go on and on, never settling into a fixed form precisely because of the openness of the global whole.

Precisely the failure to consider this hybridity in the national cultural model is criticized, for example, by Brannen and Salk (2000). In common with others, they point to both structural and contextual factors, and also to individual cultural identities different from a putative group norm, as being critical in the development of hybrid, culturally diverse work-setting cultures and organizations. It seems to be the case that the cultural identities of individuals engaged in intercultural interactions undergo development and are redefined. Static and decontextualized notions of culture are scarcely fit for the purpose of describing and analysing intercultural processes (Primecz et al. 2011; Romani 2008; Søderberg & Holden 2002). National cultural models thus lose their significance as a result of increasing cultural complexity (Hannerz 1992; Romani 2008), increasing intercultural complexity in international management and work settings and the increasing tendency towards multiple membership by individuals of a number of different cultures (Bjerregaard et al. 2009; Zander & Romani 2004), which may in turn vary from core to peripheral membership (Wenger 1998).

Taking account of these considerations, Sackmann and Phillips (2004) distinguish three streams of research in international management:

- **The Cross-National Comparison stream** assumes an equivalence of nation-state and culture. Cultural identity is considered as a given and immutable individual characteristic. Therefore culture is tractable. Generalizations and clustering, as well as cross-national testing of organizational theories, processes and practices, are possible.

- **The Intercultural Interaction stream** considers culture as socially constructed. Nevertheless, national culture and identity are of importance; context and subcultures, as well as organizational culture, may be salient, even if at the moment of interaction new cultures emerge and are negotiated. This stream is based on anthropological theories and interpretive methods.

- **The Multiple Cultures stream** sees culture as a socially constructed collective phenomenon that recognizes the complexity of personal identity in organizational settings, e.g. the multiplicity of cultures. The salience of any
cultural group depends on the particular case. The research focus relies on sense-making as well as taking into account cultural differences and similarities. This offers possibilities to achieve synergies by building on similar cultural identities.

In short, Sackmann and Phillips’ model makes clear that the role concepts and work practices of managers and staff are increasingly shaped not merely by a single, static (national) culture. New dynamic forms of cooperation and work-setting culture result from hybrid meanings and actions (Brannen & Salk 2000) which are constructed and negotiated (Spencer-Oatey & Franklin 2009) by interactants from the various cultural groups involved.

In a controversy among scholars started by Hofstede (1996) and in accordance with this notion of dynamic negotiated culture, Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars present the more static, Hofstedian notion of culture and cultural dimensions and contrast it with their own more dynamic concept:

Instead of running the risk of getting stuck by perceiving cultures as static points on a dual axis map, we believe that cultures dance from one preferred end to the opposite and back. (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars 1997:27; see also Hampden-Turner 2000 and Trompenaars 1993)

3 THE EMIC APPROACH TO CULTURAL OTHERNESS IN INTERNATIONAL MANAGEMENT

The etic studies described above and typified by Hofstede’s *Culture’s Consequences* and the GLOBE study are quantitative and tend to be positivistic in nature (Romani 2008). They contrast with qualitative and, on the whole interpretative, emic studies. Like the term etic, the term emic is derived from the field of ethno-linguistics and describes a methodological, culturally adapted research approach in which the researcher takes up a position within a system (Pike 1954). What is to be investigated are system-immanent contextual features. To collect data, researchers use concepts and instruments which to the members of the culture to be investigated appear to be appropriate, relevant and reasonable (Headland et al. 1990; Triandis 1995). Triandis (1994:67–68) appositely compares the two approaches, underlining their usefulness to each other:

Emics, roughly speaking, are ideas, behaviours, items, and concepts that are culture-specific. Etics, roughly speaking, are ideas, behaviours, items, and concepts that are culture-general – i.e., universal. […] Emic concepts are essential for understanding a culture. However, since they are unique to the particular culture, they are not useful for cross-cultural comparisons. […] More formally, emics are studied within the system in one culture, and their structure is discovered within the system. Etics are studies outside the system in more than one culture, and their structure is theoretical. To
develop “scientific” generalizations about relationships among variables, we must use etics. However, if we are going to understand a culture, we must use emics.

Not only methods but also the results and insights of research can display emic, that is to say, context-specific, features. International management research has yielded numerous publications which supply insights into the specifics of organizations and management. Examples are those by Barmeyer and Davoine (2013), Barmeyer and Mayrhofer (2014), Chevrier (2009), Davoine et al. (2014), Delmestri and Walgenbach (2005), Ebster-Grosz and Pugh (1996), Heidenreich et al. (2012), Jackson (2011), Primecz et al. (2011), Stewart et al. (1994), v. Helmolt (1997), Winch et al. (2000) and Witt and Redding (2009).

The French management scholar Philippe d’Iribarne (2003, 2009) and his team have developed a particular emic and contextualized approach to their management research, an approach which interestingly (but unsurprisingly as significant publications are not available in English) has scarcely found its way into the Anglo-American research literature. D’Iribarne (1994) criticizes the fact that much research into the functioning of organizations tends to stress scales of attitudes and values (Hofstede 1980, 2001; Parsons 1952), interactants’ strategies (Crozier & Friedberg 1977), or the role of institutions (Maurice et al. 1986; Sorge 1996) and the fact that such studies ignore phenomena which generate continuity in cultures.

D’Iribarne (2009) chooses an ethnographic and interpretive approach and his notion of culture is anthropological in nature. Only by means of an ethnographic-type thick description (Geertz 1973), i.e. the most comprehensive collection of features from multiple perspectives which can explain a situation, is it possible to arrive at a comprehensible interpretation of interculturality. (Inter)cultural action is embedded in systems of reference, according to Geertz (1973), that enable interactants to make sense of the world in which they live and of their own actions:

All cultures denote, classify, identify, evaluate, connect and order. They establish criteria for distinguishing good from evil; the legitimate from the illegitimate. They define the principles of classification by means of which society can be seen to be made up of separate groups. They provide interpretative systems that give meaning to the problems of existence, presenting them as elements in a given order that have therefore to be endured, or as the result of a disturbance of that order, that have consequently to be corrected. (1994:92)

In the same way, action is located in a context and moreover can be derived historically from societal framework conditions. Here, d’Iribarne finds explanations for culturally typical behaviour in the social history of a culture (much as Thomas (1996a, 1996b) does in explaining culture standards). Using corporate case studies, d’Iribarne (2003) impressively shows how interactants in “third-world countries” such as Argentina, Cameroon, Morocco and Mexico
who are not able to apply US management methods develop and successfully employ their own contextually adapted management techniques. The interac-
tants d’Iribarne describes question what is customary, are open to what is old and has worked in the past and to what is new and have adapted to the context. They dare to take up contradictory positions which do not accord with the decontextualized, mainstream and so-called success factors such as the best practice of US management models (d'Iribarne 2002).

4 THE CASE STUDIES

Where differences exist, difficulties can be predicted and when difficulties exist, differences can be assumed to be the cause. Those at least are the convenient conclusions which have been drawn from etic and emic studies by scholars and practitioners for many years and which indeed have some foundation in reality. Unfortunately though, this conventional approach rather leaves users of the insights in the lurch: how are they to tackle the difficulties they experience and which – thanks to the studies – they now understand better? Although the cases studies in this part of the book use these contrastive (and to a lesser extent emic) studies to explain the occurrence of cultural differences and difficulties, they in fact go one step further and offer various concepts, models and tools to handle them. The underlying assumption is that cultures are not a source of intractable problems but, indeed, are tractable (Sackmann & Phillips 2004) and that the differences and their consequences are susceptible to being handled effectively and appropriately by the use of the models and tools presented.

The US–Chinese case written by David A. Victor and Christine R. Day, “Harmonizing Expectations: NSF International’s Experience in Shanghai”, not only explores power distance, one of the cultural dimensions described by Hofstede in his pioneering etic study, but also – particularly crucial in this case – the contrasting behavioural orientations with respect to communication style as described by Hall (1981) in his anthropological studies. However, readers are not simply expected to discover that cultures may differ in certain categories of behaviour and to name these categories. The simple but effective tool that readers are provided with for analysing the cultural aspects of international cooperation also takes due account of the significance of broader contextual factors when it comes to explaining problematic international cooperation.

The case “Planning a Sino-British Workshop: Negotiating Preferences and Achieving Synergy” by Helen Spencer-Oatey also features power distance as a crucial cultural dimension in Chinese–Western intercultural cooperation but in addition devotes attention to the task–relationship dimension, which is well-established if under-researched in the intercultural management literature. These two dimensions (or perspectives as the author refers to them) are interestingly complemented by a discussion of how learning styles may differ across cultures (Barmeyer 2004; Hofstede 1986), with attention here being devoted to two contrasting concepts: on the one hand, that learning consists
in knowledge transfer and, on the other, that learning results from a process of co-construction (Jin & Cortazzi 1998; Watkins & Biggs 1996). Borrowing further from Moran (2001), the author introduces the 3Ps (Products, Practices and Perspectives) model as a tool to analyse the dysfunctionality described in the case and to enable the reader to generate a solution.

Taking a step towards correcting the relative lack of attention given to the GLOBE study in the literature, “Intercultural Challenges in International Mergers and Acquisitions: A German–Bulgarian–Romanian Case Study” by Petia Genkova and Anna Gajda uses the results of the GLOBE study to help readers to explain the different expectations and experiences of the various participants in the merger/acquisition (M&A) concerned. Connections are elicited not only to the cultural dimensions results generated by the study but also to its taxonomy of leadership styles. Besides placing the case described against the background of a conventional stages model of M&A, the case also uses Nahavandi and Malekzadeh’s (1993) acculturation model to anticipate the cultural change likely to be preferred by the various parties to the M&A.

The Anglo-French case “How to Implement Change in a Post-acquisition Multicultural Context: The Lafarge Experience in Britain” also deals with an M&A. Against the backdrop of a picture of management and working practices perhaps more reminiscent of pre-Thatcherite Britain than the turn of the century when Lafarge’s acquisition actually took place, the authors, Evalde Mutabazi and Philippe Poirson, illustrate the difficulties and the confusion which a top manager may experience with diverging managerial approaches in a foreign context (manufacturing, working class, legal framework). They present their own procedural model, which helps to build up “something new” using different organizational and managerial cultures and practices and to guide the M&A process from searching for a suitable partner to integrating two companies. After conducting a cultural analysis readers trace the change process implemented by the French acquirer in the British company and are requested to make further suggestions of their own.

A further tool for handling interculturality and its potential for dysfunctionality is described by Volker Stein and Tobias M. Scholz in “The Intercultural Challenge of Building the European eSports League for Video Gaming”. The case describes a truly multicultural cooperation, taking place in the undeniably demanding conditions of virtuality. International teams of the sort described here have to cope with the dual challenge to transactional effectiveness posed not just by its interculturality but also by its virtuality and the impediments this brings, in particular to communication. The virt.cube framework (Scholz 2000) presented makes it possible to assess a virtual team’s progress on its way to an optimally functioning virtuality.

Just as virt.cube takes account of factors apart from interculturality which may result from international cooperation, the Cross-Cultural Kaleidoscope™ model described in “Leading Change in Mergers and Acquisitions in Asia-Pacific” by Jenny Plaister-Ten pays due attention to cultural factors but also to the organizational structure of the parties to an M&A and the external
environment in which it takes place. The Cross-Cultural Kaleidoscope™ model provides both a macro and a micro view of what contributes to the formation of the values and beliefs that motivate behaviours and influence decisions in organizations operating in culturally complex contexts.

Given the cultural complexity of international work settings, the concept of trust with its function in reducing social complexity (Luhmann 1989; Rousseau et al. 1998) takes on a special significance. The role of trust as a tool for handling interculturality features in one of the case studies in this part of the book.

In the German–Russian–Japanese–Egyptian–Argentinian case “Smart Spacing: The Impact of Locations on Cross-Cultural Trust Building and Decision Making”, written by Fritz Audebert, Thilo Beyer and Veronika Hackl, the reader is familiarized with Hall’s insights into culturally influenced behavioural orientations with respect to time and space (Hall 1959/1990, 1990; Hall & Hall 1989) and requested to consider how these may trigger business relations and be connected to the building of trust through relationship cultivation. In the context of international business travel, the case illustrates culture-specific spaces and diverse local perspectives on when and where decisions normally take place.

The theme of ethnocentrism plays a role in “IKEA’s Ethical Controversies in Saudi Arabia” by Christof Miska and Michaela Pleskova. The case study illustrates both the challenges of ethical variation across cultures and societies, as well as the potential opportunities for positive change that these differences might provide. The case focuses on the removal of women from the Saudi Arabian edition of IKEA’s catalogue – a step which was held by some to stand in stark contrast to IKEA’s corporate culture and core values. The dispute exposed IKEA to considerable public criticism, but pointed out the responsibilities of multinational corporations (MNCs) in addressing ethical differences across cultures and societies.

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