

# The Hofstede factor: the consequences of *Culture's Consequences*

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## Abstract

For many scholars and practitioners in the field of cross-cultural management, Hofstede's work has provided a foundation for theory and practice. In this chapter, we briefly describe its main characteristics, explore its impact, and critically discuss its limitations. We then sketch the outlines of a critical, interpretive approach to studying national culture and cultural differences in organizational settings which is more sensitive to culture change and conflict; individual agency and social context; as well as power issues and organizational politics. After offering an illustration, we close our chapter with a few reflective thoughts and ideas for future directions.

## Introduction

In the field of cross-cultural management, Geert Hofstede's work has had an "extraordinary command in shaping both thought and practice" (Ailon 2008: 886). According to Google Scholar, Hofstede has over 100 thousand citations, making him one of the most-cited social scientist worldwide. His work, and his landmark book *Culture's Consequences* in particular, has greatly influenced how social science scholars – particularly social psychologists and management scholars – subsequently theorized and researched national culture; how practitioners viewed and approached intercultural communication in (inter)organizational settings; and how those familiarized with his thinking experienced and framed cultural differences in everyday settings. Hofstede's work, and Hofstedeian thought in general, did not always get a warm reception. In fact, it has met with, some oft-cited, somewhat chilly, critiques, questioning its conceptual underpinning, empirical groundwork, practical usefulness or political consequences (e.g., McSweeney 2003; Ailon 2008). In recent years, in the shadow of Hofstede's imposing edifice, interpretive and critical approaches to studying cross-cultural management emerged. Ontologically and epistemologically in opposition, these studies present a paradigmatic alternative to Hofstedeian principles, models and methods.

In this chapter we explore various consequences of Hofstede's *Culture's Consequences* (Holden 2002). First, we briefly discuss the influence of Hofstede's work on cross-cultural management theory and practice. We then sketch some of the limitations of, and objections to, a Hofstedeian approach by listing some of the central concerns and critiques levelled at his (and similar) research. Seeking to further a critical, interpretive assessment of cross-cultural management in scholarly thought and research, we then sketch the outlines of an alternative approach to studying national culture and cultural differences in organizational settings. After offering an empirical example, we close our chapter with a few reflective thoughts. We critically discuss our own practice of 'othering' Hofstedeian approaches and we introduce the term 'culture work'.<sup>1</sup>

## I. Hofstede

Geert Hofstede's work can be credited for making 'national culture' popular amongst academics and practitioners, sensitizing them to the impact of national cultures on organizations with a culturally

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<sup>1</sup> For parts of this chapter, we draw on Nyíri and Breidenbach (2013) (section I in particular) and Ybema and Byun (2009) (sections III and IV).

diverse work staff or operating in a globalizing world. His canonical work proved to be extremely influential in the theory and practice of international management, contributing to the establishment of the field of cross-cultural management and intercultural communication. Between 1967 and 1973, Hofstede conducted a survey of work-related values among 88 thousand IBM employees in over fifty countries, published in his classic *Culture's Consequences* in 1980. Claiming that "data obtained within a single MNC [multinational corporation] does have the power to uncover the secrets of entire national cultures" (Hofstede 1980a:44), Hofstede, trained as a social psychologist, proceeded to develop a system of "cultural dimensions" that identifies and quantifies "value orientations" – a concept originally developed by Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961) – in different societies. In a frequently quoted definition, he saw culture as "the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others" (Hofstede and Hofstede 2004:4). This "programming" is acquired through socialization in a particular country (Hofstede 1980b:14).

Starting from the assumption that national cultures imprint a value-based, mental program or collective 'software' in peoples' minds, Hofstede suggests such cognitive models can be represented through a small set of variables (for similar approaches, see, e.g., House et al. 2004; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1998). The six cultural dimensions, measured on a scale from 0 to 100, are "power distance," collectivism/individualism, masculinity/femininity, uncertainty avoidance, long/short-term orientation, and indulgence/restraint. (Hofstede added the last two later.) To focus on one of these variables, the "collectivism" dimension means an orientation towards the expectations and norms of the we-group (such as kin) and strict differentiation between it and outsiders. By contrast, in individualistic societies, individuals are expected to be concerned primarily about themselves and their immediate family members, and the distinction between the in- and the out-group is weak. "Power distance" denotes acceptance of hierarchy versus preference for egalitarianism. Thus, Americans are individualists with a small power distance; Chinese, collectivists with a large power distance.

Not all authors in intercultural communication use Hofstede's 'categories, but most popular texts (Chaney and Martin 2004, Gudykunst and Kim 2002, Jandt 2006, Lustig and Koester 2005, Martin and Nakayama 2003, Samovar, Porter, and McDaniel 2009, Varner and Beamer 2005) operate with a similar set of dimensions and values. Beginning in the late 1980s, academic and corporate interest in the economic success of the so-called "Asian tigers" and, later, China led to a proliferation of cultural explanations inspired by Hofstede. A Chinese Values Survey, conducted in 23 countries by social psychologist Michael Harris Bond, came up with a set of values described as Confucian Dynamism, on the basis of which Hofstede developed the dimension he called long-term orientation and which Hofstede and Bond (1988) directly linked to economic growth.

By the late 1990s, the interest of some theorists and practitioners in cross-cultural management began shifting away from determining group characteristics and towards measuring, and, through various trainings, expanding "cultural" or "intercultural competence," a set of skills that defines an individual's ability to work with cultural difference. The Intercultural Development Inventory, developed by Bennett and Hammer, for example, locates individuals at one of six stages of intercultural sensitivity, from "denial" to "integration" of cultural difference, on five different scales corresponding to particular cognitive mechanisms. Leading authorities on diversity management such as Cox, tend to focus on differences in perception, influenced by the relative social status of two individuals as much as their "core values." Thus, Cox (1994:142ff) discusses the differing evaluation of a promotion policy by black and white American employees in a company and interprets them primarily as a result of minority-majority power dynamics. Nonetheless, Cox's discussion of culture

relies on “dimensions” as developed by Hofstede, Hall, Bond, and others. Even among those IC scholars who do not use “dimensions,” Hofstede’s influence is visible in the naturalisation of nations as the unit of culture and, further, the widespread assumption that national culture can be captured, measured, and counted in numerical terms.

## II. Critique

Critical scholars have argued that, by contrast with functionalist and managerialist notions, “culture is not a conventional social science variable in the sense that it can immediately be observed, counted, dimensionalized, yoked to a set of norms, or directly manipulated” (Van Maanen 1984: 243). Yet, while other fields of study have long moved on to alternative approaches, cross-cultural management is lagging behind. Despite criticism, Hofstede’s approaches in particular have proved to be resilient to change, perhaps because a dimensional approach to studying national cultural difference offers a lenient framework which easily absorbs alternative interpretations. It “appears to have created an extremely flexible interpretive space” (Ailon 2008: 896). As an all-explaining symbolic order, it is tempting to stay within its framework. Even where the intention is to zoom in on people’s day-to-day dealing with, and manipulating of, cultural difference, scholars often fall back on the schematic world of “cultural dimensions.” For example, a study of U.S.-Mexican joint ventures showed that, contrary to predictions made on the basis of Hofstede’s (and Trompenaars’) dimensions, Mexican workers welcomed participatory management techniques introduced by the Americans, but attempts to explain these reactions within the framework of those dimensions (Rao and Teegen 2001). For those adopting a Hofstede’s approach, its heuristic flexibility seems to make it difficult to step outside its framework, and subject its truth claims to critical examination.

Hofstede’s dimensional approach to national cultural differences probably derives its popularity partly from the appealing simplicity of a description in terms of dimension scores (Ybema and Byun 2009). Such a graphic representation promises to provide a useful grip on a complex phenomenon, apparently providing easy and affordable answers to existing corporate needs. Searching for “countable, graphable elements that could be statistically manipulated”, Hofstede appeared to be “dedicated to the project of producing a vision of order in the world” (Ailon 2008: 893). The downside of such a reductionist approach is that it overlooks or ignores, and thus fails to capture, the complexities of culture. It promotes a perspective in which culture is treated as aprocessual, acontextual, and apolitical. A description of national cultures based on dimension scores provides at best a minimal, static and monolithic sketch of national cultures and, at worst, a false and misleading representation (e.g., Ailon 2008; McSweeney 2002). Instead of offering an account of empirical studies working with, or from within Hofstede’s approach (for such a discussion, see Kirkman, Lowe and Gibson 2006) or a detailed rendering of Hofstede’s research methodology and analysis (see McSweeney 2002), we list some of the central concerns and critiques levelled at his research (and that of similar research) from outside a functionalist paradigm. We focus on four issues in particular: its poor conception of change and conflict, agency, context, and power.

First, a cultural dimension score, postulated as an unchanging core, is ill-equipped to deal with internal conflicts and change, whether political, social, or organisational. The measurement of national culture differences on a small set of value dimensions is premised on the assumption that national culture manifests itself in organizations through stubbornly distinctive patterns of thinking, feeling and acting. The world is conceptualised as a mosaic of distinct national societies, each of which has a set of value

orientations that are, at their core, resistant to change. Culture is thus 'reified into something uniform, contradiction-free, and unchanging' (McSweeney 2013: 8). Moving towards a processual view of culture brings along a different conception of culture. As the anthropologist James Clifford, turning radically against Edward Hall's culture concept (a major inspiration for Hofstede's work), wrote, culture was "neither an 'object to be described' nor a 'unified corpus of symbols and meanings that can be definitively interpreted'" but "contested, temporal, and emergent" (Clifford 1986:13, 19). Cultural anthropologists now broadly agree that cultures previously depicted as static and monolithic entities have in fact always incorporated outside influences, and that beneath their facades of homogeneity and stability lie conflicts between individuals and groups who had quite different views on and uses for common cultural practices. Similarly, linguistics "have long since moved away from structuralism with its emphasis on discrete units" (Piller 2011:32), which continues to be influential in intercultural communication. Some cross-cultural psychologists have also been critical of national cultural dimensions failing to pay attention to individual variation, conflicts within groups and historical change (Gjerde 2004). Aside from problems with the assumptions underpinning this disregard, the focus on national cultures runs into very practical difficulties when, for example, nations split, and the new entities suddenly portray themselves as culturally very different: a not infrequent occurrence.

Second, and related to the previous point, the conceptualization of culture as "collective programming of the mind" (1980b: 25) which constitutes a true and timeless cultural essence also marks a disregard for individual agency. A few general characteristics are considered to be deep-rooted determinants of behaviour. It advances an image of an individual as "merely the passive embodiment of a predetermined cultural template" (Ailon-Souday and Kunda 2003: 1074), locking individuals "within the boundaries of mental softwares", incapable of reflection and change (Ailon 2008: 894-895). The only changeable aspect of their collective mental software is their cross-cultural communication skill set, and, with a little help from managers and consultants, Hofstede's book can help the pre-programmed individuals to improve these skills. So, the Hofstedeian approach casts individual actors in the role of puppets who dance to the pulling of their national culture's strings. Even if individuals indeed routinely follow cultural scripts in their doings and sayings, the question is whether Hofstede's research deciphered the scripts. Dimension scores are factor-analytic extrapolations of respondents' answers to questionnaires. They are primarily based on respondents' own perception of cultural habits; that is, not on what they actually do, but on what they say they do. He thus put a lot of faith in members' knowledge of the cultural scripts dictating their behaviour. Apparently, the individual is assumed to be reflexive enough to read the script and inform the researcher about its details, but not enough to write or revise it.

Third, culture as located in nationally constituted actors ignores not only individual agency, but also the social context in which individual agents and cultural encounters unfold or are embedded. Surveys fail to capture the influence of situational dynamics, politics and the historical moment on people's sayings and doings (Breidenbach and Nyiri 2009). Restricting respondents to answering predefined questions without any reference to a specific situation or intercultural relation, suggests culture exists in a social and political vacuum. Even if the variance that is measured in survey research captures cultural essence as experienced by its members, it does not represent the actualities of everyday work situations, isolating culture and its experience from its social context. Consequently, the question of how organizational actors draw on, and deploy presumed cultural differences in specific intercultural contexts remains unanswered. Taking account of both context and agency, involves treating culture and cultural identities as situational constructs; that is, as products of strategic agency enacted within a specific power figuration. Culture and culture members shape, and are shaped by, social processes.

More critically, a Hofstedeian approach does not take into account possible political effects of its own, seemingly neutral, representation of cultural differences. As Ailon (2008) points out, scores on value dimensions all appear to be “equally legitimate, representing a neutral variation to be analyzed in neutral terms.” However, analysing the political subtext of Hofstede’s work, she shows how the definition of the dimensions, as well as the links with other values, are hardly neutral, leading Hofstede to call ‘large Power Distance countries’, for instance, ‘less developed’ or ‘developing’, or linking high or strong uncertainty avoidance to rigidity, racism, aggressiveness, and dogmatism (Ailon, 2008: 891; 894). Insofar Hofstede’s depiction of national cultures is neutral, his typifications may reinforce stereotyping nonetheless. In spite of his caution against it (Hofstede 1991: 253), straightforward characterizations of cultures in terms of dimension scores and correlations with other variables invite to adopt fixed ideas about oneself and others (Piller 2011). So, Hofstede’s work can be celebrated for making a contribution to making both scholars and practitioners more reflexive of the impact of national culture and cultural difference in organizational settings, but it tends to be un-reflexive of its own cultural biases and stereotyping effects on cross-cultural practices.

Scoring cultural differences on a small set of continua thus offers a static, massive, and potentially skewed representation of national cultures and cultural differences. Can it be useful nonetheless? The enduring appeal of a Hofstedeian analysis lies in the fact that it responds to a practical need to “deal with cultural difference” within and across organizations in a way that appears concrete and easy to comprehend in the course of, say, a weekend training. In addition, as Hofstede’s questionnaire invites respondents to reflect on their own cultural values and practices, it does tell us, if not much else, how members of organizations at the time of the research see the way they are or the way they wish to be. Such a Hofstedeian analysis can be useful to an organisation, as long as the analysis is limited to behaviour within the organization itself. For all its pitfalls, there are few alternative “products” that cater to this need. However, it would need to take into account local, contextualised data of organizational actors’ lived experience of cultural differences and day-to-day work. Hofstede did not ask respondents to describe their culture in their own terms, but rather extrapolated dimensions from the questionnaire data. So, we do not know whether respondents concurred with these typifications and also found that the dimension scores provided an accurate description of relevant cultural differences. In the following section, we will discuss an alternative approach to studying national culture and cultural difference which takes actors’ own views as a starting point.

### **III. An interpretive approach**

Compared to, for instance, intercultural education, cross-cultural management as a field has been slower to change. Still, while the dominant ‘Hofstedeian’ approach in cross-cultural management research is firmly rooted in the orthodoxy of functionalist, “normal” science (Burrell and Morgan 1979), there is an emerging tradition of interpretive research in the field that is sensitive to situated sensemaking practices (e.g., Ailon-Souday and Kunda 2003, Brannen and Salk 2000, Byun and Ybema 2005; and Birkinshaw, Brannen and Tung 2011). These studies often emerge from the fields of intercultural linguistics or intercultural education, and operate on a tangible scale of day-to-day encounters which allows to see how individuals deploy cultural difference (or similarity) strategically to achieve their aims. Instead of adopting a view in which cultural identities carry a pre-given meaning that people passively reproduce, such revisionist scholars assume that “culture” or “cultural differences” are discursively enacted depending on the multiple situatedness of individuals in various social categories and on their choice of which available discourse to deploy (Scollon, Scollon and

Jones 2012). Their studies explore how culture and cultural identity become infused with meaning in organizational actors' interpretations within specific social settings. They show the significance of culture as a symbolic resource where social actors draw on to set boundaries, to draw distinctions, and to distribute power and status.

Seen from this theoretical vantage point, studying cross-cultural communications essentially means shedding light on symbolic classifications, which are generally built on putative differences in national or ethnic culture. Sociological and anthropological studies of collective identity have shown processes of appropriation and mobilization of culture for the purpose of constructing collective "selfhood" and distinctiveness through cultivating a discourse of common culture and, simultaneously, casting the "other" as "strange" (e.g., Cohen 1985; Elias and Scotson 1965). Instead of treating culture as a historically based "given", these studies focus on processes of social categorization and distinction drawing (Barth 1969) and the symbolic construction of community (Cohen 1985). It is assumed that culture, within the bounds of institutional conditions and constraints, can be invented or invoked by culture members in order to present an identity, to establish a truth, to enhance status and self-esteem, or to defend an interest (Eriksen 1993). Cultural identities should thus not be understood as coherent, stable entities, but as shifting social constructs that are dependent on specific interests that are at stake at a certain moment in a certain situation.

In a similar, albeit more critical vein, postcolonial studies, drawing inspiration from the work from Said, Spivak, Bhabha and others, highlight the exercise of imperial power through representational strategies that build binary oppositions between self and other to denigrate and diminish "the other" whilst empowering the self (e.g., Jack et al. 2008; Prasad 2003; Westwood 2006). Rather than understanding or allowing others to construct themselves in terms of their own codes and categories, the other is abstracted and reified in negative terms. Ultimately seeking to produce and perpetuate power asymmetries (Westwood 2006), members signal how they like to see themselves while, at the same time, disciplining newcomers and excluding "deviants" (Bhabha 1989).

An intrinsic part of the enactment of an "identity" involves the symbolic separation of "self" from the "other" by establishing and signifying "sameness" and "otherness" (Ybema et al. 2009), usually through invoking stark contrasts – good versus bad, black versus white, the west versus the Orient, management versus staff. Such discursive positioning is often utilized to establish or maintain a sense of moral or social respectability of the self and to position the other not merely as different, but also as less acceptable, less respectable and, sometimes, less powerful (Hall 1997). Identity construction may thus be a far from neutral process, colored by emotions, moral judgments, and political or economic interests. Identity discourse appears to be instrumental in attempts to establish, legitimate, secure, or challenge the prevailing relationships of power and status. It implicates social manoeuvring and power games. Exploring culture and cultural boundaries as being constituted in organizational actors' "self-other identity talk" (Søderberg and Holden 2002; Ybema et al. 2009), thus allows to bring into view how "culture" is "mutable, negotiated, and infused with contestation and power relations" (Jack et al. 2008: 875). It focuses on the micro-politics of everyday sensemaking in multicultural contexts (Clark and Geppert 2011; Dörrenbächer and Geppert 2006), asking the question "Who makes culture relevant to whom in which context for which purposes?" (Piller 2011:172) (for a similar, highly critical and deconstructivist approach to "culturalism", see, e.g., Dervin, Gajardo, and Lavanchy 2011).

Some in-depth studies found that organizational actors of a Dutch NGO involved in building and maintaining partnerships with Asian, African and Latin American counterparts may attempt to bridge "cultural distance" by denying, trivializing or upending differences between themselves and their

“partners” (Ybema, Vroemisse and van Marrewijk 2012). Others found that conflicts or misunderstandings attributed to cultural difference stem not from ethnic fault lines, but from conflicts of interest or differing central values held by subgroups within an organisation, as in the case of a high-tech company operating in Germany and India (Mahadevan 2007). Still other studies highlight the situational and strategic use of national culture differences or ethnicity (e.g., Barinaga 2007; Dahler-Larssen 1997). Koot (1997) provides an ironic illustration when he describes how employees of a Shell oil refinery on the Dutch Caribbean island of Curaçao were keen to express their affinity with Latino culture when in the 1960s and 1970s the management of the Shell plant was Dutch, while the same Curaçaoan workers started to dissociate themselves from Latino culture when the refinery was rented out to a Venezuelan company in the 1980s, instead calling upon their Dutch roots and praising the old Shell culture. Such instances of cultural identity talk testify to the importance of socially situated use of culture, illustrating the significance of power asymmetries for intercultural relations. Organizational hierarchy is a crucial factor influencing how people perceive and present themselves and others. In line with this idea, Watanabe and Yamaguchi (1995) found that locals with higher ranks from British subsidiaries of Japanese firms were likely to perceive Japanese expatriates more negatively than locals with lower ranks, due to greater frustration generated by the lack of promotion and authority (see also Byun and Ybema 2005; Hong and Snell 2008). Inequality in terms of political influence, rewards, and advancement opportunities is often a characteristic of cross-cultural cooperation in multinational corporations, joint ventures, mergers, acquisitions, or any other intercultural setting. Studying cross-cultural collaboration should thus take into account how national or ethnic culture is related to power asymmetries between partners from different cultural backgrounds.

In an ironic sense, Hofstede’s research may remain salient from an interpretive point of view. Insofar social actors internalized Hofstede’s typifications in their own interpretations of national cultures and cultural difference, his findings ‘materialised’. Due to the popularity of Hofstede’s research in management practice and consultancy, nations’ dimension scores may have become incorporated in “the native’s point of view”, turning etic categories into emic classifications. In the eyes of members of, for instance, a country that scores high on Power Distance, their culture is hierarchic and authoritarian, because “Hofstede said so”. Through intercultural training and popular publications, national culture typifications may thus start a life of their own in members’ everyday parley. In this way, Hofstede’s theory becomes a self-perpetuating truth once (and insofar as) it gets abroad. It may be seen as an example of social-scientific categories entering into wide use in society. Everyday ‘lay’ concepts and social scientific concepts thus have a two-way relationship, something Giddens (1987) referred to as the “double hermeneutic” typical of social science. However, because people can think, make choices, and use new information to revise their understandings (and hence their practice), they can use the knowledge and insights of social science to change their practice as well. So, it remains an open question exactly how Hofstede’s characterizations of cultures and cultural difference are used in everyday intercultural practice.

To conclude, an alternative, interpretive approach to studying cross-cultural communication in (inter)organizational settings acknowledges the situated, constructed and strategic nature of cultural identity discourse. Cross-cultural relations are often marked, not by cultural differences per se, but by cultural identity formation within contexts of specific power-constellations. While such studies may reflect the complex causes of conflict more accurately, it is as yet unclear whether they can take the place of Hofstedeian approaches, which appear to provide easy and affordable answers to existing corporate needs.

#### IV. Empirical example

To illustrate an interpretive approach to cross-cultural management as an alternative to studies that insist on measuring and dimensionalizing culture, we present a brief summary of our research into Japanese-Dutch work relations in multinational corporations (MNC's) (see Byun and Ybema 2005; Ybema and Byun 2009; Ybema and Byun 2011). Drawing on data derived from interviews and ethnographic case studies in MNC's in Japan and the Netherlands we analysed differences in cultural identity talk in two different power contexts: Japanese management-Dutch staff and Dutch management-Japanese staff. Both parent country and host country nationals cultivated cultural differences, actively drawing on 'national culture' to discursively erect symbolic boundaries between 'self' and 'other'. The Japanese, for instance, tended to underline putative Japanese virtues, such as loyalty and devotion, perseverance and a long-term orientation, respect, and tactfulness. Despite occasional praise, they also pointed to the imprudence and impoliteness of the Dutch, which they saw as proof of their ineptitude. They used these images to justify that Japanese held all important positions or, in the case of Japanese working under a Dutch regime, to explain why they should play a pivotal role in client relations or should be consulted in decision-making processes. Likewise, Dutch managers and staff members also made self-praising (and other-depreciating) comparisons, emphasizing their cultural distinctiveness vis-à-vis the Japanese by portraying themselves as efficient workers, clear communicators, or flexible decision-makers. Although the Dutch (Dutch managers in Japan in particular) admitted to admiring Japanese politeness, for instance, the major issues they brought up were, for instance, Japanese inefficiency in decision-making and filtering of information, and, from their viewpoint as subordinates in a Japanese firm, an overly hierarchic attitude and lack of interest for subordinates.

Interestingly, Hofstede's (1991) classifications of Japanese and Dutch culture in terms of, for instance, a difference in 'masculinity' (Japan) versus 'femininity' (the Netherlands) or 'collectivist' (Japan) versus 'individualist' (the Netherlands), were taken up by participants in our research as issues that were relatively open to subjective construction and political contestation. Cultural characteristics like 'consensus-orientation' or 'hierarchy' were interpreted quite differently by Japanese and Dutch (see also Noorderhaven et al. 2007) and Dutch participants claimed, for instance, that Japanese decision-making was not consensus-oriented at all. And, while variance on the 'power distance' dimension between Japan and the Netherlands in Hofstede's research was rather small, this very issue constituted one of the most salient resources for drawing cultural distinctions for both Dutch and Japanese research participants. Ironically, both usually claimed their own culture was consensus-oriented or egalitarian while they depicted the cultural other as hierarchic or top-down oriented. Working together within a context of unbalanced power relations apparently turned 'power distance' into a significant and disputed identity-defining cultural characteristic, which further testifies to the importance of a context-sensitive and power-informed perspective on culture and cultural identities.

To illustrate the constructed, context-specific and legitimising nature of cultural identity talk in more detail, we also analysed small but significant differences in the ways in which management and staff members of the same nationality talked about their national culture and cultural differences. Dutch staff working under Japanese rule claimed to find their efforts to build closer contacts with the Japanese unreciprocated, which fostered feelings of relative deprivation and resentment about 'unfair' treatment and an inclination to resist rather than reciprocate Japanese efforts. From this position, they portrayed egalitarianism and a consensus-orientation as 'typically Dutch' while describing top-down, inefficient and inflexible decision-making and a submissive attitude towards superiors as typical of Japanese culture. Dutch top managers 'ruling over' Japanese, on the other hand, never mentioned



Dutch egalitarianism, nor did they criticise Japanese submissiveness. In a similar vein, Japanese managers acknowledged that their culture was 'hierarchical' in comparison to 'Dutch egalitarianism', while Japanese subordinates instead criticised their Dutch managers' decision-making style for being 'top-down'. The Japanese subordinates' complaint echoed Dutch subordinates' claim that top-down decision-making was typical of their bosses' (Japanese) culture. So, in unequal relations, subordinates (whether Dutch or Japanese) marked cultural distance by claiming that the national culture of their superiors (whether Japanese or Dutch) was hierarchical or top-down oriented. The political context appeared to be crucial for what people found culturally salient in a specific situation. By presenting particular cultural distinctions rather than others they attempted to legitimise or de-legitimise the existing distribution of power, status and resources.

Like other interpretive studies in the field (e.g., Koot 1997), this case shows the significance of 'context' – the unequal power relation between national groups – and 'situated agency' – the use of cultural characteristics to discursively legitimate or oppose the power asymmetry – for the analysis of cross-cultural communication. Apparently, culture is not only a code for, or a mode of communication; it also serves as a discursive resource drawn on to articulate cultural identities that serve to sustain or resist power and authority relations. Within the often politicised context of transnational (inter)organizational settings, actors may play up or play down, praise or dispraise, or even ignore or invent culture and cultural differences. The type of culture work and identity talk that we find may depend heavily on context and situation. Contrary to the pattern described above, for instance, we found Dutch members of a humanitarian NGO responsible for establishing and maintaining partnerships with 'Southern' locals depolarizing differences by adopting a 'thin' notion of cultural identity; depicting one's self as 'strange' and in need of adjusting to 'normal' others; levelling out hierarchical differences; and constructing an inclusive 'we' in talk of personal relationships across cultural divides (Ybema, Vroemisse and van Marrewijk 2012). As attempts to buttress or break down the social boundary, organizational actors' cultural identity talk may thus become infused with the social dynamics of contestation or coalition-building between the actors involved.

## **V. Interpretive science in search of meaning**

To end on a critically reflexive note, we turn the focus of 'self-other talk' on ourselves and our presentation of ideas in this chapter. In some roundabout way, what we say about 'others' tends to refer back to ourselves or, as Ailon (2008: 573) put it, "the things we say about 'others' are often bound up with what we want to see in ourselves". For that reason, as we explained in this chapter, self-other talk often sets up an unfriendly hierarchy which values the self at the expense of others. Our chapter is not any different. We have tried to be fair in our treatment of Hofstede's work, and we hope having offered a valuable alternative. Yet, inevitably, we pursued our own agenda. In a self-critical sense, we used the Hofstedeian approach in the field of cross-cultural management as a 'take-off board' to launch our own interpretive ideas. Of course, criticism is inherent to scientific debate and, in a field where Hofstede's ideas have become the touchstone for much theorizing, they deserve critical discussion. Yet, perhaps it is time to move on and pursue an interpretive agenda independent of the functionalist orthodoxy and, analogous to the fundamental changes in cultural anthropology of the 1970s and the 1980s, start seeing the field of cross-cultural communication no longer as "an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning" (Geertz 1973:5).

In this chapter, we have outlined what such an interpretive search of meaning might entail for studying culture in transnational contexts. It would place processes of culture construction and distinction drawing centre stage. As Ailon (2008: 900) argues:

Besides questions relating to the essence of difference – what distinctive substances the ‘us’ and the ‘them’ supposedly contain – there are questions relating to what the ‘us’ and the ‘them’ actively make of this difference while orienting themselves toward each other. Which elements of difference do people articulate as important and when? Which facts do they highlight? What values do they attribute to difference? What is the discursive impulse that underlies their preoccupation with it? For a field of study that seeks to further crosscultural dialogue, there seems to be logic in devoting theoretical energy not only to objectifying difference (measuring it, drawing it, defining it) but also to examining why and how difference comes to carry particular baggages of meaning by various global discourses, including cross-cultural research itself.

Shifting towards “the native’s point of view” and placing emphasis on embedded agency involves a theoretical move similar to the one in, for instance, institutional theory. Rather than studying institutions per se, institutional scholars shifted focus towards exploring the agential and processual ‘institutional work’ of individual and collective actors (Lawrence, Suddaby and Leca 2009). Similar developments can be observed in the theorization of identity or emotion and the introduction of the concepts ‘identity work’ and ‘emotion work’. We believe theory and research in cross-cultural management would profit from a similar development. We may adopt the term ‘culture work’ or ‘cross-culture work’ for the study of individual and collective actors’ embedded agency aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting ‘culture’ and ‘cultural difference’. Analysing actors’ culture work in everyday life would allow us to obtain a more grounded understanding of the various ways in which social actors actively and creatively draw on national, ethnic, organizational or any other type of culture as symbolic resources for pursuing an interest, promoting an identity, negotiating boundaries, and distributing power and status in cross-boundary collaboration.

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