

The hidden side of cross-cultural management
A study agenda on absent perspectives in
cross-cultural management research, education and management training

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Cross-cultural management investigates the influence of culture on management across countries. The discipline is well established, with several ranked international journals, and numerous international cross-cultural training associations. It is also a mandatory topic for elite students in Europe's top business schools, and large organisations are appointing "diversity managers". However, in this successful development, it seems that only a certain range of perspectives were taken into consideration, and this is now viewed by some as a lethal limitation. This paper aims to investigate the limitations voiced by critical, post-colonial and gender/power perspectives against cross-cultural management research and education, in order to constructively contribute to further developments.

Background

Cross-cultural management research, in its infancy, was said to be parochial (Boyacigiller & Adler, 1991) since most research was building on the internationalisation experience of North American companies (Sackmann & Phillips, 2004). In addition, it was dominated by the functionalist paradigm illustrated by the seminal work of Hofstede (1980) measuring culture with cultural dimensions (e.g., Individualism/Collectivism). For the last decade however, a larger diversity of research has complemented the picture offered by North American scholars. Today, cross-cultural management builds on strong

theoretical frameworks, supported by large scale international investigation using the forefront of statistical techniques (Hofstede, 1980; Schwartz, 1994; House et al; 2004). It also builds on interpretive in-depth investigations of meanings and how people make sense of culture and management (Gannon et al., 1994; d'Iribarne 2009). With the help of criticisms and key contributions, cross-cultural management has continuously been enriched since its parochial beginning, and is now a multi-paradigmatic stream of research.

Cross-cultural management training, likewise, has developed into a well established industry, resting on international institutions and conferences. The Society for Intercultural Education Training and Research (SIETAR) is a worldwide network with sister organisations on all continents. It is the largest community of cross-cultural management training. SIETAR organisations are forums of exchange of training, knowledge, practices and perspectives on how to do cross-cultural management. In addition to local conferences, SIETAR organises global meetings with several hundreds of participants. Multiple other web forums promote dialogue between researchers and consultants. These communities participate to the spread of views on for example, “how to do business” in different countries and across countries, for consultants, trainers and eventually managers in international corporations.

Problems

Recently, new critics to cross-cultural management have risen. Originally, criticisms were mainly concerned with the improvement of the scientific aspects of cross-cultural management research or education, and asking for less paradigmatic hegemony (e.g., Redding, 1994; Scandura & Williams, 2000; Dahlén, 1997). But now, the critics are from a different kind. Cross-cultural management discourse is accused of setting, in disguise, western norms as *the* normality, leading to normative solutions for both research and management.

In research, cross-cultural management is said to impose an implicit western view of science to the rest of the world (Lowe, 2001), with the search for (measurable) truth, “amoral rationalism and affective neutrality”. It is suspected to have only rhetorically changed the concept of “race” with the one of culture, thus perpetuating dichotomies, exclusions, and discriminations (Woong, forthcoming 2010). The Dominant position of one view (functionalist) on culture is problematic for a discipline which is supposed to deal with and (hopefully) embrace diversity. Although several research paradigms are present, the absence of multi-paradigmatic studies seem to reveal that adopting multiple perspectives in cross-cultural management is not a given.

In training, despite a well-intentioned agenda, cross-cultural management training is said to involuntarily perpetuate certain colonial practices. Taking the example of teaching videos, Jack and Lorbiecki (2003) show how these videos can conflate countries with national and unitary culture (culturally and socially), thus simplifying social and cultural identities of the “other”. In these videos, the perspective of Euro-North American is

most often taken. The Other is represented, but it has no voice. In addition, cross-cultural management practices often use the perspective of the Euro- North American perspective (in teaching cases, examples, or teaching books) and the others are portrayed in what they differ from this perspective –thus not portrayed for themselves. Cross-cultural management teaching books tend to implicitly favour western perspectives (Kwek, 2003; Fougère & Moulettes, 2006). This leads to reproduce the power inequalities between developed and developing countries (e.g., in terms of knowledge development) that can contribute to western imperialism (Westwood, 2006; Jack & Westwood, 2009). These accusations are very serious for a discipline and a community that praise mutual understanding, respect of differences and non imposition of ethnocentric views, neither in research nor in management (see for example SIETAR mission statement).

But there is more to this. We believe that cross-cultural management tends to marginalise the impact of gender/power relations in organisations. Thereby it can involuntarily reproduce inequalities, and especially between women and men (see e.g., Acker & Van Houten, 1974; Hearn & Parkin, 1983; Calàs & Smircich, 1996; Wahl, 1992; Höök, 2001). In cross-cultural management, employees are foremost considered for their cultural background. It is generally “forgotten” that the employees are gendered, and thus, they are implicitly talked about as men. When gender is addressed, it is often seen as “a problem”, for example, in the cases of female expatriates sent to an Islamist country, or in the readings pointing to the multiple stereotypes endured by females in their international career (e.g., Adler, 1984; Caligiuri & Cascio, 1998). Then again, gender tend to be seen as an essential/genetic difference applicable to the homogenous groups of all women (and sometimes all men).

Simultaneously there is a growing fields of feminist research addressing management and national culture ranging from cross national comparisons of women managers (see e.g. Omar & Davidson 2001), studies on cross-cultural mergers and gendered management practices (see e.g. Tienari et al, 2002), comparisons of gender equality discourse and practice focusing managers (see e.g. Tienari et al 2009) as well as cross-cultural studies on the gendering of consultants and banking sector (see e.g. Tiernari et al 2002, Meriläinen et al 2004), to critical studies on transnational organisations and business practices (see e.g. Hearn 2004, Reis 2004). However, it seems that cross-cultural management research and education is slow in integrating the feminist research perspective.

Are gender/power, culture and management an impossible ménage à trois? In other words, is the simultaneous consideration of gender, power and cultural differences too much for management studies? Gender is either overlooked in international and cross-cultural management or treated as an essential category having nothing to do with nationality, ethnicity and/or sexuality. Simultaneously, feminist management research still suffers from a dominant western and US perspective, resulting in a tendency of letting US, and to some extent UK studies, represent the general knowledge on managers.

The absence of gender/power perspective can lead to overlook important aspects useful to deepen our understanding of organisations and management. For example, when

hierarchy, gender and nationality are conjointly considered, cross-cultural management is pushed to a new intersectional level of analysis and reach conclusions of a strategic and political nature (see e.g., Janssens, Cappellen & Zanoni, 2006).

Furthermore, both in the literature on diversity management and cross-cultural management, there is a tendency to adopt a perspective in favour of “harmony” between the differences, to develop “cultural synergies”. This is argued to be for the collective benefit of all stakeholders of the organisation. However, these “cross-cultural management” or “diversity management” discourses tend to build on the perspective of the management level (Prasad et al., 1997, 2005; Höök, 2003; Janssens & Zanoni 2005; Wahl & Höök, 2007). This means that both cross-cultural and diversity management literatures tend to marginalise unequal treatment and uncritically reproduce stereotypes. Their focus on the managerial perspective favours the business case for gender and nationality, ethnic or racial origin; instead of the perspective of for example, the human rights, or power relations.

In sum, we see limitations in the implicit imposition of one (western) normality as *the* normality, as well as in the place given to gender and power. We plan to voice these perspectives, and investigate how they can constructively contribute to cross-cultural management research and education.

Theoretical Frameworks and research questions

The theoretical positioning of this research project is “critical” and “post-modern”, in the sense given by Deetz (1996) or Alvesson & Deetz (2000). We aim at “dissensus” with the prevailing discourses in cross-cultural management research and education. In other words, we believe that the reality of cross-cultural management is socially constructed and perpetuated, by discursive power relations between various views on for example science, culture and management. Our research aims at challenging status quo, in an attempt to reclaim the voice of the unheard, and the power relations crossing the discipline. We believe that challenging for example, guiding assumptions, and social practices in cross-cultural management research and education can serve as a generative capacity to reveal fuller potentials than the current situation (which has received severe criticisms). In sum, we see the questioning of status quos as a potential for further improvements, in line with the constructive tradition of critical studies (Carr, 2006).

We will apply a critical management research agenda (e.g., Alvesson & Deetz, 2000; Alvesson & Willmott, 2003) and pay attention to the social construction and reproduction of the reality of cross-cultural management research and education. For example, which are the categories used to organise cross-cultural interactions and discourses, and which implications do these categories have? How are categories such as “culture” (“race”), “management” and “leadership” constructed? Why is gender an absent category in cross-cultural management dominant discourse? Which are the implications of the use of such categories, and the absence of other? For example, by

ignoring gender, research is said to have reproduced male dominance by picturing male managers as the norm and women managers as inadequate exceptions (Collinson & Hearn, 1994; Wahl 1996; Holgersson, 2003). Today there is a growing international stream of research on managers and leadership focusing on gender, encompassing several theoretical positions (e.g., functionalist, structural, radical- and post structural approaches). We will investigate the contributions that these views bring to cross-cultural management, in their challenge of the established discourses and practices around leadership, and how they complement the dominant discourses. The category of culture will also receive special attention, how it is constructed and used, and its implications for management and organisations.

We will also use a post-colonial theoretical viewpoint. It pays attention to the essentialisation of the “Other”, the imposition of discourse and orthodoxy, the reproduction of unequal power relationships and imperialism. In particular, we will build on the works of Westwood (2006), Prasad (2003), Westwood and Jack (2009) which are specifically addressing international management. They show for example the essentialisation of non-westerners as the Others, such as in teaching books, where implicit references (in the sense of what is implicitly seen as the normality) are the western Europeans or North Americans. Here too, special attention will be given to gender. Partly due to a growing post colonial feminist critique (e.g., Ong, 1987; Nkomo, 1992; Nkomo & Cox, 1996), there has been an increasing awareness and focus on intersectional gender analysis, which means that several societal power relations are addressed conjointly, such as gender, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation or social categories. We therefore wish to support intersectionality (Lykke, 2005; Mulinari, 2005) in cross-cultural management research and education.

In sum, we endeavour to address and challenge guiding assumptions, social practice and routines in cross-cultural management research and education, to help foster creative tensions that can lead to further developments. We will especially use gender/power and post-colonial approaches and research agendas. Specific research questions will be: Which discourses and practices are presented as the orthodoxy? Which are the categories used (or not used) to organise cross-cultural interactions and discourses, and which implications do these categories have? How is gender (re)presented in cross-cultural management discourse and practices?

Research Design

This research project will investigate cross-cultural management in two major expressions: research and education. These two expressions are influential for the reality of corporate practices, since managers are trained in cross-cultural management or are using the services of cross-cultural management consultants. For each expression, we will proceed in three steps: (1) identify the practices and their underlying assumptions (2) identify/voice criticisms and limitations (3) investigate possible improvements.

Cross-cultural management research

Investigating cross-cultural management research will mostly be based on the analysis of academic texts and the construction of academic discourse by books, academic journals and conferences. It will therefore mostly build on academic publications, and participant observation to conferences, and be completed by interviews of editors of ranked cross-cultural management journals.

The second phase will investigate the criticisms. Cross-cultural management research has recently attracted the attention of the post-colonial critics, but not the one of researchers using a gender/power perspective. There is a wide open gap from feminist perspectives on cross-cultural management, despite the strong references to social constructions of gender used in the dominant cultural frameworks (Hofstede, 1980; Hofstede et al., 1998; House et al., 2004). This research project will not only investigate the post-colonial critics addressed to cross-cultural management research, it will also adopt a gender/power perspective to the discipline, and the discourses that are promoted and spread.

In a third phase, the project will consider how, in view of the established practices and ambitions of cross-cultural management, the criticisms can serve a constructive agenda (Carr, 2006). The ambition of this research project is not solely to raise awareness of problematic aspects, but also to work on proposing tangible improvements that respect the different positions present in cross-cultural management research. These improvements can take the form of new research agendas, new theoretical frameworks or revised categories. We will use the works by Schultz and Hatch (1996), Harris (2000) and Romani (2008), who provide examples of interplays between various research positions that lead to constructive outcomes.

Cross-cultural management education

The practices of cross-cultural management training will be investigated at the level of management high education, executive training and consultancy, performed in schools or organisations that serve as reference in their industry. In 2008, Europe best ranking Master (Financial Times ranking: CEMS Master of International Management) established cross-cultural management training as compulsory. In consequences, 23 top business schools (19 of them in Europe) have a Master level cross-cultural management course. The teachers of these courses are organised by the international CEMS faculty. The investigation of practices of management higher education can focus on this CEMS network. It can do so by content analysis of the syllabus, cases thought in class, course books, participant observation of several CEMS cross-cultural management courses, and to faculty annual meetings. The study of consultancy and executive training in cross-cultural management will require joining SIETAR and doing participant observations to several local and international annual meetings. In addition, participant observation of executive or MBA education in cross-cultural management will be performed. We plan observations at major European management schools, and the Stockholm School of Economics. The project also aims to witness several occasions in consultancy from different sources.

Field studies will therefore be multi-sited in depth qualitative investigations (Hannerz,

2003) and will also present elements of autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) since one of the researchers is a CEMS faculty member. The analysis of the cross-cultural management education practices will be performed with the gender/power and post-colonial perspectives, applying our specific research questions.

Unique contributions and expected outcomes

Currently in cross-cultural management, gender diversity and power inequalities tend to be left out of the analysis, when they constitute an important aspect of the intercultural interactions and cultural discriminations. Consequently, the first major and most innovative contribution of this research project is the anchoring of gender/power perspectives in cross-cultural management research and education. This perspective is novel for example, for cross-cultural leadership. Although leadership is studied both in critical management (e.g., Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003) and in feminist research (for an overview see Holgersson, 2003), these views have not hitherto been applied to cross-cultural leadership. Leadership or female managers are investigated across countries (e.g., Davidson & Burke, 2004; Adler & Izraeli, 2004), but this is very different from a gender/power perspective on cross-cultural leadership, which centres on discourse analysis and challenge the orthodoxy and its reproduction of social dominance.

The second major and unusual contribution of this project is its critical investigation of cross-cultural management education, in the practices that are transmitted to managers. When research has been subjected to constructive criticism since its infancy, cross-cultural education has received less attention (exceptions are e.g., Dahlén, 1997; Jack & Lorbiecki, 2003, Tipton, 2008). Our project will contribute to empirically investigate similarities between cross-cultural management education and research, whether they present similar limitations, the orthodox practices and discourses that cross-cultural trainings have developed, and if post-colonial and gender/power perspectives can contribute to further developments. This presents implications for practitioners, in the sense that it investigates which discourse is used in management education, which are the routines reproduced in management consulting and thus, which is the orthodoxy that influences cross-cultural management in practice.

A third major contribution will be the adoption of post-colonial perspectives for a tangible constructive agenda, for cross-cultural management research. Post-colonial critique is very recent, and has gained a true presence in the field, however, it has hitherto not presented a constructive agenda. This research project will aim at working on improvements for cross-cultural management research and education, with the constructive agenda of respecting and building on several perspectives, and thus not solely on the gender/power and post-colonial ones, but identifying possible venues for interplay between the various theoretical positions in the field.

Specific theoretical contributions are expected to support intersectional research to better understand the dynamics of cross-cultural management in practice.

Specific empirical contributions will be a presentation of the field of cross-cultural

management training, especially in Europe.

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