

IACCM 10<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference and 3<sup>rd</sup> CEMS CCM / IACCM Doctoral  
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**CULTURAL ASPECTS OF CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION:  
Cometences and Capabilities**

**A SEMIOTIC AND CRITICAL APPROACH TO TEACHING INTER-CULTURAL  
MANAGEMENT**

Roger Bell

**Abstract**

Inter-cultural communication requires not just cognitive and conceptual knowledge but also attributional knowledge to grasp how values relate to behaviour in real life situations. Static value models aim to predict behaviour but in reality multiple inputs must be taken into account. Understanding behaviour requires richer knowledge in which specific “emic” knowledge of cultures plays a key role.

Apart from generalized references to power distance, traditional value dimension models systematically overlook power relationships and interests within societal cultures and to a large extent in organizations. To explore this area we use a critical approach with special focus on semiotics, including pragmatics, a systematic study of meaning in context (Levinson, 2000). These approaches aim to tap into the specific “emic” meanings of codes and signs and help us interpret how people frame situations, form schemata and act on scripts. Semiotics can be seen as a means of interpreting power and status relationships in society through the meanings of signs, thus informing the critical approach to cultural studies. It acts as a bridge between ethnographic or emic observation and etic structural interpretations, which in turn inform a critical analysis of status and power relations. We illustrate this through teaching points and selected cases.

Meaning is constructed, dynamic and constantly under review (Magala, 2009) in the light of one’s strategic purpose in transactions, cultural baggage on multiple levels and repertoires from which we select our behaviour. Individuals are concerned with behaviours that further their own interests (Watson 2001), creating a mix of strategic, cultural, personal and inter-personal influences. Organizations constantly strive to construct and manage meanings in the light of their interests.

As teachers, our objective is practical, using cases mediated by academic, critical and pragmatic analysis to help students gain a rich understanding of multi-cultural business realities and avoid over-simplification in interpreting cultures. Our role is also and crucially to make clear that neutrality may not be as neutral as it seems; at the end of the day teachers may have to take sides on cultural and ethical issues.

**Keywords:** attributional knowledge; emic etic dichotomy; critical management; semiotics; negotiating meaning; de-briefing cases.

**Introduction**

Inter-cultural communication requires not just cognitive and conceptual knowledge but also attributional knowledge to grasp how values relate to behaviour in real life situations. Static value models aim to predict behaviour but in reality multiple inputs must be taken into account. Understanding behaviour requires richer knowledge in which specific “emic” knowledge of cultures plays a key role.

In this paper we aim to share with fellow members, teachers and students our experience of various approaches in the classroom and address some of the

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weaknesses of the traditional static approaches to cultural comparisons focusing narrowly on a few dimensions regarded as reliable predictors of behaviour.

To enrich our students' understanding of attributional knowledge in cross-cultural communication and management we must emphasize the complexity of the relationship between values and behaviour: students may face frustration in using simplistic sets of explanations often resulting in paradoxical observations (Bell 2006, Osland & Bird 2000)

By defining culture as the set of forces which influence members of communities through their collective experience we are creating a construct which may lead us into the trap of "culture as essence" (Holden 2002). The use of rankings also leads easily to conceptual confusion between culture as statistical distribution and culture as social force: on the one hand a statistical measurement and on the other its meaning, or at least an interpretation of its meaning.

When striving to understand cultures for whatever purpose we need to make use of more tools than the value models based on imposed dimensions on which cultures are ranked and ordered as if they were unitary blocks permitting predictive interpretations. This approach overlooks emic specific phenomena which appear in writers as diverse as Richard Lewis, an English consultant and popularizer of culture and Philippe d'Iribarne, a French social scientist. Lewis for example talks about "cultural black holes", which are obsessive concerns about specific issues such as the American Dream, Australian tall poppies syndrome or French intellectualism: these clearly are in the "emic realm and fruit of history and the popular imaginative" (Lewis 2000).

The emic/etic dichotomy has been extensively used in the literature (Boisot 1995; d'Iribarne, 2009, Geertz 1975, Hofstede 2001; Triandis 1994 etc) and is the epistemological and methodological distinction between participant meanings and observer categorization and comparison. Emic analysis is key to enriching the sterile rankings resulting from the use of etic value dimensions alone, in which comparisons or even measurements are attempted using a concept selected by the researcher such as individualism / collectivism (e.g. Hofstede 2001) or close / distant proxemics (e.g. Hall 1976). As d'Iribarne points out, this approach to national cultures tends to lead to a static undifferentiated perception in contrast for example with the individual diversity of corporate cultures which are recognized to emerge from multiple inputs over time (d'Iribarne, 2009). D'Iribarne is interested in whether in spite of the tendency to use blanket national generalizations we can usefully speak of national cultures: he concludes that one can, but only by recognizing that we must shift from "generic ways to give meaning" to "a dimension much more local given concretely to singular situations". In other words while there are collective forces on national - and sub-national – levels, individuals, with their specific agendas, power relationships and strategies always mediate between culture and behavioural outcomes; d'Iribarne describes this as a question of agency; cultural influences and a multitude of others act on people who in turn have attitudes, make choices and take actions.

The nexus culture/behaviour is often complex to understand and interpret cross-culturally; we need to take into account a complex of inputs, many reflecting interests arising from the social dynamic of the situation and the power relations involved. This suggests that a critical and pragmatic approach might be helpful in thinking about power relationships and a semiotic approach to interpret signs that actors apprehend.

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The term “pragmatic” has a strongly linguistic derivation. David Crystal defines pragmatics as the study of “factors that govern our choice of language in social interaction and the effects of our choice on others”, (Crystal, 1987) hence as a major element of discourse strategy, with a key role in cross-cultural communication studies. For Saussure and in communication studies “pragmatic” supplements the semantic and syntactic; for Shannon & Weaver, who are concerned with a process approach to communication, it is distinguished from the technical and semantic in the effective achievement of communication: the receiver should understand and react in the way the initiator of the communication intended (Shannon & Weaver, 1949).

### **Semiotics**

It is interesting that semiotics has not really entered the international mainstream of cultural research but remained within a linguistically focused, politicized tradition of class-based power relations, centring on French thinkers, particularly Roland Barthes. However, there seem to be valuable potential applications for us because it concerns itself with the creation of meaning and the nature of communication, both of which are central to the interpretation of cultures.

Semiotics, described by Saussure (1983) as “a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life” and for Roland Barthes, as interpreting “the props, the actors, the music, the colours in Brechtian dramaturgy” (Barthes, 1957), is about signs as carriers of meaning. “Signs” are key in giving clues to cultural meaning; the nexus observer/sign makes the construction of meaning possible, as a co-construction of transmitter and receiver. The relationship between his concept of “parole” and “langue” enables us to examine specific “emic” communication situations (“parole”) and draw general comparable etic conclusions (“langue”) (Saussure, *ibid*)

Signs are “artefacts or acts that refer to something other than themselves; that is, they are signifying constructs. Codes are the systems into which signs are organized” (Fiske, 1990). This suggests intention on the part of the sender and “social interaction through messages” (Fiske, 1990), in the tradition of Shannon and Weaver’s (1948) communication theory. However, we are also concerned with communication as the “production and exchange of meanings” (Fiske, *ibid*), which is also subject to management (Magala, 2009). This sense of the word is useful for our interpretative efforts in making sense of cultures, as well as in interpreting conscious messages as in typical cross-cultural study scenarios. Organizational semiotics studies the coding of artifacts as carriers of espoused values (Schein 1999) and deciphers them in terms of underlying values. Thus from a critical point of view we are constantly faced with social and corporate messages which aim either to preserve or change the status quo.

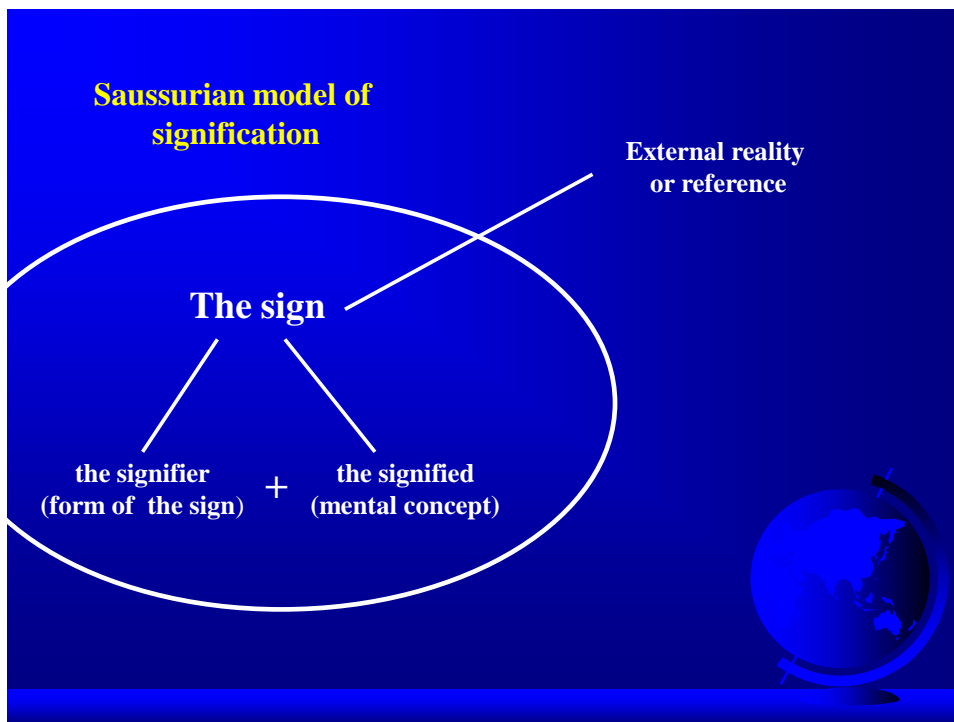
A semiotic approach seeks to understand the key relationship between actor, “signified” and “signifier” to use Saussure’s terms (Saussure, 1983). In our own cultures we instinctively understand the complex set of meanings embedded in communication; as the anthropologist Clifford Geertz wrote: “the concept of culture I espouse is essentially a semiotic one; believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be

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those webs, and the analysis of it ... an interpretative one in search of meaning. (Geertz [1973] 2000).

For Saussure the essential feature is the relationship between signs which creates meanings by distinguishing between words, gestures and so on within a given code. At the same time the context gives meaning to the specific message - (see Figure 1). Signs take their meaning from the context in which they are used; all interpretation requires contextualization.

**Figure 1: Saussurian model of Signification**



As external observers we may seek significant meanings in the symbols of for example Coronation Street (an English “soap”), breaking down the experience semiotically by analyzing the role of the pub or the living room, the accent and the social roles of the characters. Depending on the observer’s frame this could be interpreted semiotically as a Marxist text about keeping the working class subdued and distracted by their local disputes and relationships: such an analysis requires one to step out of identification with the programme as member of working class northern English culture; a greater effort is required in cultural settings of which one is a part; analyzing one’s own culture can be difficult.

By bringing cultural knowledge and experience to bear on the codes and signs that make up the “text” of events we negotiate the meaning. A cross-cultural encounter consists of the observed situation (the signs), the observer’s experience frame (schemata and scripts) and the reality constructed from these. My presence and participation in cross-cultural events are inseparably part of them; the event involves all of us, the context, the time and place, the feeling and the shared understanding.

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Fortunately for us there is considerable redundancy in communication which helps in interpreting communication and events in cross-cultural and multi-cultural situations. When waiting at a bus stop I hear a sentence beginning “how long....?” I predict the enquiry will continue “have you been waiting” (and not: “are your shoe laces?”) and we often do not even listen to the words because they are so predictable. Context, connotations, non-verbal clues, knowledge of the actors and a tendency to use language to repeat information in different forms helps in the task of understanding the points of view, interests and values of our counterparts. Moving outside our familiar cultural environment, however, entropy is likely to be higher and predictability low.

Entropy refers to low predictability of information in a message, that is, the information content one would miss by not understanding a word, gesture or other sign (Shannon & Weaver, 1948). The greater the entropy in messages the more signs have to be attended to carefully to grasp meaning. Thus in cross-cultural situations signs have to be studied for context, connotation, intention and cultural embeddedness: there are more possible surprises. Entropy obviously varies hugely depending on the observer and the situation: it is likely to be high in poetry, listening to non-native speakers, dealing with professionals in a field with which one is not familiar, and of course in cross-cultural encounters.

From a methodological point of view a semiotic approach bridges the dichotomy between the emic and the etic, addressing an issue that has long troubled researchers seeking to show how these apparently mutually exclusively approaches can be reconciled. The main generator of the concept, Kenneth Pike (Pike, 1967), and subsequently John Berry through his notion of derived etics, have suggested that study of the specifics of one culture can be comparable and thus etic if the functional equivalence of the features can be demonstrated (Berry, 1989). In a similar way semiotics studies specifics of transaction, signs and meanings in cultures and interprets in structuralist terms the patterns into which the meanings can be fitted and how they are related to each other and a general communication system (Saussure, 1983). Thus from observation of specific use of words or behaviour one can extrapolate power relationships, sense making myths, conservative attitudes and other comparative generalizations, that is: etic statements, though not in terms of the familiar dimensions or pattern variables used by Hall, Hofstede, Parsons, Schwartz and others

### **Critical approaches**

Individualistic values, conventional gender roles, brevity as an ideal in business communication, low context communication style, rigid time, status by achievement and other cultural norms, whilst seemingly neutral in fact commonly have an asymmetrical impact on different groups within society. Young males in business for example are more likely to benefit than other groups such as single mothers and retired people from the conventions of business discourse.

Socialization into one's cultures involves acquiring preferences that reflect power relationships. Basil Bernstein wrote extensively on how the inculcation of restricted or elaborated codes in children profoundly influenced their likely career

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paths and social success, and what they see as “normal” professional prospects. This superimposes a class analysis on what is seemingly a neutral cultural and linguistic contrast. (Bernstein, 1971)

In corporate culture, communication is in varying degrees manipulated by powerful actors in the interests of dominant interest. We acknowledge this as soon as we argue as do Scollon & Scollon (1995) that discourse is the carrier of ideology and serves to preserve power relationships. Members of dominant classes encourage “preferred forms of discourse (which) serve as banners and symbols of memberships and identity” (Scollon & Scollon, *ibid*, P98).

This is widely documented in the literature on corporate cultures (Alvesson, 2002; Martin 2002; Schein, 1992; Schultz, 1994; etc). Clearly it is crucial to seek the meanings that lie behind the symbols and declarations. Schein using the concept of espoused values suggested that the declarations of organizations can over time become distanced from their real values developing veiled interests as explored in the critical management literature (Alvesson & Willmott, 2003; Magala, 2009).

Alvesson points out that “frequently powerful agents make a difference for how meaning is developed and a group relates to the social world. Power relationships thus matter for the shaping of culture; ... a view of reality is then to a significant degree the result of negotiations between actors involved in asymmetrical power relationships” (Alvesson, 2002). Whilst culture is often referred to as shared values in reality there may be internal struggle before dominant ideology becomes embedded in the culture (Martin, 1995).

All organizations are political in the sense that power is disputed by different groups; this is most obviously true in corporations where management, professional groups (sales, marketing, R&D etc) and unionized labour develop their own discourses within the same organization. The culture is held together by some more or less real “social glue” offering shared identity in spite of the perpetuation of conflicting interests. This was investigated in depth by Joanne Martin with her three perspectives on organizational culture, in which she analyzes the same corporate cultures from integration, differentiation and fragmentation points of view (Martin, 1992; 2002).

Alvesson’s and Martin’s approaches suggest that the most effective power is that which is internalized by the subordinate or other object of persuasion: “when A wouldn’t have to get B to do things because B would do this kind of things anyway. Simple empiricism would not be sufficient to reveal this” (Clegg 1989 quoted in Alvesson 2002). The only way to try to access these power dynamics is by critical analysis into the values and meanings acquired by members of a culture: an “emic” ethnographic approach.

Power is not simply a domination issue but embedded in the culture of the organization: “ideologies and mechanisms may exercise power beyond the intentions or control of the elites...” and “forms of knowledge may involve the exercise of power through the capacity to define what is real true and normal and thus regulate and constrain people...” (Foucault 1980, quoted in Alvesson 2002), which is pretty close to our working definition of organizational culture. Alvesson’s metaphors for culture in the same book suggest culture should be seen as a control system, echoing Geertz’s view (Geertz, 1973) and implying that it is concerned with the preservation of a status quo and existing power and status relationships.

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I do not feel inclined in my classes to go too far down the CMS (critical management studies) road; the line of thinking emerging from Marxist related origins through the Frankfurt School is not something to “push down students’ throats”. This loose school of thought basically questioned “managerialistic assumptions of the legitimacy and efficacy of established patters of thinking and action” (Alvesson & Willmott, 2003, P1). In the extreme form of the argument they believe that people involved in organizations are “developed to fit into the demands of mass production and mass consumption” and consequent standardized forms of individuality” or “reduce human beings to parts of a well-oiled machine (ibid, P2). HR management in particular is seen as having a role of “regulation of the human subject in the workplace” (ibid P3).

A major issue that arises as a result of these reflections is to what extent we as teachers and writers can be neutral with respect to socialization and reinforcement through discourse systems. We are of course more aware of this in international business ethics where a considerable school of thought has been extremely effective in promoting environmental, sustainable, class sensitive, diversity inclusive positions (Aspen, 2009). When we argue that no one system of culture is better than another, which we sometimes do, we are obviously taking a morally relativistic position. As teachers are we only supposed to consider mechanisms and processes or should we evaluate outcomes too? In the current multi-cultural tensions across the world this question becomes daily more important and I do not believe we can as teachers maintain a neutral stance on power, inclusiveness and social implications of cultural norms.

Cultural patterns are concerned with the maintenance of social and organizational power relationships, as noted below in the section on discourse strategies and we should not “skate over” this ideological function of culture (Scollon & Scollon 1995). Analyses of cases should thus embrace a consideration of the partly concealed power dynamics in analyzing organizational events.

With these ideas in mind we can use at least three basic approaches in analyzing any case, as follows

- a. The etic dimensions analysis, noting comparisons on dimensions but remaining non-judgmental and neutral.
- b. The emic meanings and symbols analysis which becomes more politicized if we apply semiotic analysis. Semiotic ethnography can then be interpreted as etic structuralist comparative generalization.
- c. The “pure business” analysis, which involves the analysis of power relations and can be considered from a critical viewpoint. This also bridges the emic-etic divide. It also involves elements that are universal or circumstantial and not cultural in nature.

A non-neutral stance is implied in b and c and we can choose how far we recognize this in our class analyses. As teachers working with cultural issues I have suggested we cannot be neutral; this does not mean that we have to be neo-Marxists in the spirit of the Frankfurt school with its weighty political implications; it does mean we have to raise issues and adopt positions if we feel these are sufficiently

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important. I will deal with these arguments in a practical analysis of our teaching under 6 sections followed by the analysis of particular cases which I use in cross-cultural management classes.

**Analysis of selected class issues**

1. Cross-cultural communication: the culturally relativistic position is sometimes naïve and partially irrelevant to our students' needs; the Gudykunst view of unconditional accommodation is questionable (Gudykunst, 1998)
2. Depths of culture: some issues are neutral; some are not. We distinguish between eating with chopsticks or knives and forks and freedom of choice of marriage partners for example.
3. Stereotypes and how they are formed: what is the social and economic significance of specific stereotypes?
4. Cross-cultural ethical stance: Buller style decision trees in which the first column is "moral importance" and in which a major option is "education" are pragmatic rather than engaged with values.
5. Discourse strategies and their political and ideological implications in preserving the status quo. Is cross-cultural conversational implicature a neutral issue?
6. Corporate culture: embedding by management, espoused values, power implications of management messages and the power relations lying behind these.

**1: Cross-cultural communication**

In cross-cultural communication seminars we emphasize tolerance and even go so far as to contemplate what Gudykunst describes as "unconditional constructiveness". (Gudykunst, 1998). This means trying to be fair and rational in spite of provocation or attitudes we find distasteful on the part of others: we are advised to avoid emotional traps, seek understanding and communication even if they don't listen, being reliable even if they seek to deceive, using a non-coercive mode even if they try to coerce us, accepting them even if they don't accept us and applying Fisher and Ury's principle of separating the problem from the person (Fisher & Ury, 1981).

This is excellent advice as far as correct behavior goes but there are many situations in which the nature of the conflict in reality is asymmetrical, such as some involving management and labour, landlords and tenants, big v small company negotiation and so on. Very few situations in reality are neutral with respect to power and our "constructiveness" should take this into account. It may be appropriate and legitimate to recommend that issues should be made public, argued in favour of one or other party, appeal suggested to higher authority, direct action recommended, company reputation affected and so on. This is widely recognized as desirable in diversity, environmental and sustainability issues but we can also choose to take a critical approach to power issues such as colonial discrimination policies, unacceptable work conditions, personal abuse of power, respect for local cultures,



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exploitation of resources and many others. Some of these issues are seen in the cases below.

## **2. Depths of culture**

We frequently represent depths of culture as visual metaphors such as icebergs, pyramids or onions to show, typically, three levels or depths. These are distinguished in descending order by their accessibility, learnability and how far they are subject to change. The debate about culture often confuses these three levels. (see Fig 2)

### **Figure 2: depths of culture**

Symbols, rituals, artefacts, behaviour, communication style (visible but needing interpretation; can be learned / learned about). So-called “objective culture”

Meanings of artefacts, beliefs, values: (inference and interpretation: time and experience needed). “subjective”

Collective sense of identity (subjective, ineffable, largely inaccessible and unlearnable)

Culture is seen as residing on these intimately inter-connected levels: the visible “objective” outer level of artefacts, names, rituals, customs; a second level in which the meaning of these symbols are located for members of the culture (values such as family, independence, freedom, building the future, protecting the young, strengthening our community), and a third level which is largely ineffable where collective identity and sense of community reside. The first of these is negotiable and may be relatively trivial; the second is negotiable but rarely trivial, the deepest may not be negotiable even over generations.

In semiotic terms the first level is that of signs and the second “the signified”, that is, the symbolic meaning carried by the artefacts and behaviours on the first level. Semiotics seeks clues both in societal and organizational cultures to explain what lies behind artefacts by examining rituals, celebrations, stories, texts, buildings, seating arrangements and many others, and to investigate the cultural meaning system which sustains these.

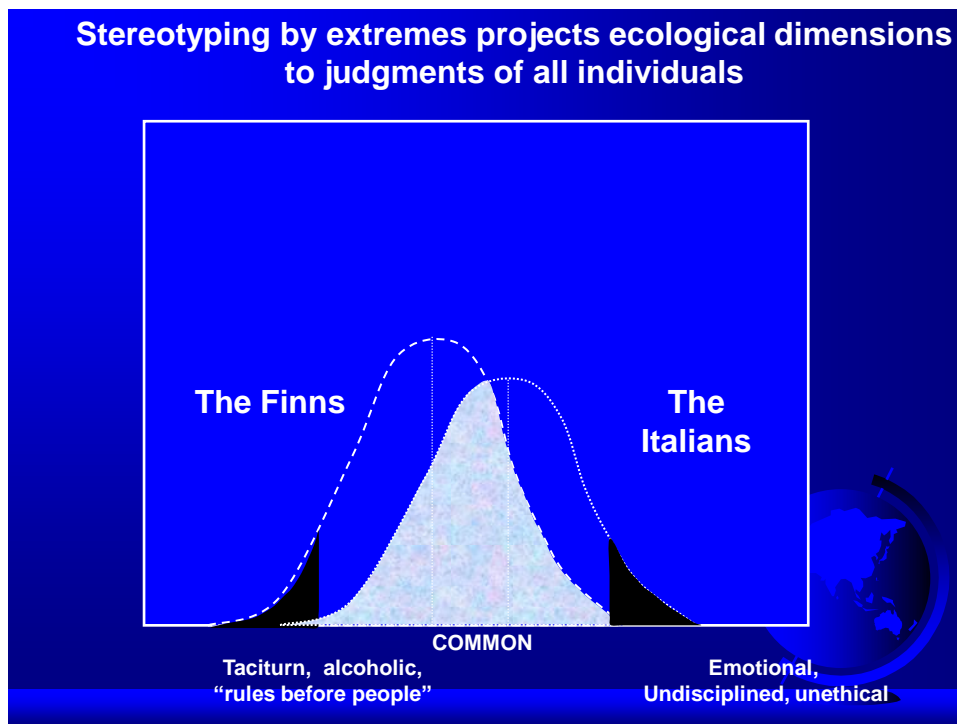
All cross-cultural issues require negotiated solutions that distinguish non-essential symbols that can be traded, social imperatives and family traditions needing long term acculturation, and group identity. When discussing for example UK Moslems we must be careful to distinguish manifestations on the visible level such as eating and drinking customs, use of the hijab, family pressure in choosing marriage partners; values associated with this cultural configuration such as loyalty to family, hierarchal relationships or in-group relationships on the second level; and sense of identity (Moslem, British, Pakistani family roots for example). Successful outcomes to cross-cultural issues require negotiation, meaning dialogue, communication and movement on both sides taking into account the depth of feeling associated with each level. Negotiation is the alternative to violent means of expressing differences.

## **3. Stereotyping is not neutral**

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When we show our students the familiar diagram below (see Fig 2) we take no position on the relative merits of positions on the continuum nor do we need to if we are using an etic value dimension approach. Such models (Hofstede, Trompenaars, Schwartz and others) tend to be more or less self-consciously neutral and non-judgmental. Only the GLOBE study makes a claim to evaluate because it is concerned with leadership efficacy: even then there are a range of competing implicit leadership theories (Javidan et al, 2006). GLOBE also explicitly concerns itself with practices “as are” and values “as should be”.

**Figure 2: stereotyping, the ecological fallacy and prejudiced communication**



Our students should be aware that the non-judgmental “normal distribution” presentation ignores the historic and social creation of this stereotyping or, if using dimensions rather than crude predispositions, “sophisticated stereotyping” in Osland and Bird’s phrase (Osland & Bird, 2000). We need to encourage students to research the historical relationships between cultures to explain the perceptions, attitudes and prejudices that emerge socially over time through association, innuendo and manipulation in turn explicable by power relationships such as colonial, class and gender based power relations.

Commonly members of a stereotyped culture we have met are non-representative (if we have met any at all), for example economic immigrants from the poorest, least educated groups, whose lack of social skills and awareness is generalized to the whole of the culture in question. Thus stereotyped Chinese were once as ignorant hawking peasants whose kids defecate in the streets because the contact we had was with a poor un-educated rural class; a similar argument applied to the perception of Irish labourers in UK or English “lager louts” in continental seaside towns, with associated perceptions as beer (or whiskey) drinking, bar (or

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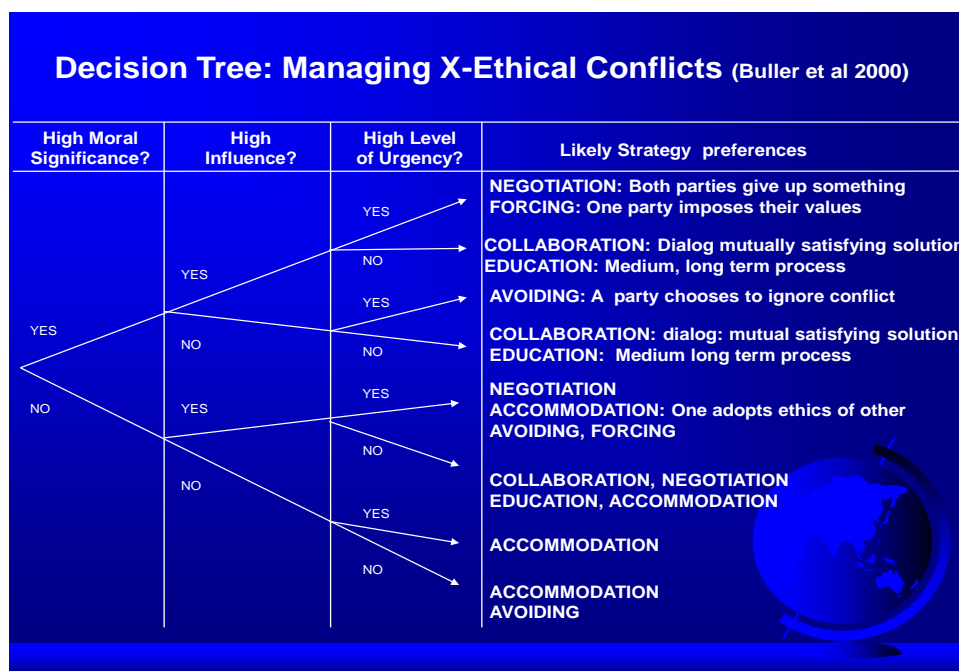
disco) fighting, potato (or fish and chips) eating, foul-mouthed in conversation and so on (Ruscher, 2001). In all these cases we would be guilty of false generalization (see Fig 2).

The critical argument focuses on the dominant culture's interests in maintaining such stereotypes: the target group may be used as cheap employees or gullible customers but contact with them avoided in any other circumstances. What does society make of undesirable immigrants who use their small children to rifle through rubbish bins? It marginalizes them even more according to this argument in order to preserve their subservient role. The diagram suggests societies attribute extremes when in fact the distribution is likely to be normal with median values (however estimated) slightly different; groups are then labeled with these extreme characteristics.

**4. Cross-cultural ethical values and decisions**

When we present ethics to our students as the tension between universalism and particularism we are using a “sophisticated” euphemism for the balance between seeking individual advantage from professional resource power situations and applying rules impartially as in the case of the official with the power to issue or refuse a licence to open a business. A well-known ethical scenario was made popular in Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner’s “Riding the Waves of Culture” using the example of the friend asked to cover for a colleague responsible for an accident. The writers are neutral with regard to the decision, using it to demonstrate that on the value dimension of universalism national samples responded with different average scores and also that there are a range of arguments that might justify particularistic behavior (see Fig 3)

**Figure 3: cross-cultural ethical decision tree**



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In class, however, we consider the ethical validity of decisions as noted below in the section on cases. We apply models such as the Buller algorithm (Buller et al, 2000), (Fig 3), which has highly pragmatic elements since it takes into account the influence at the decision maker's disposal and the urgency with which the immediate decision has to be taken

The "likely strategy preferences" are pragmatic in the case of accommodation and forcing since they depend on the power balance between the parties. The first column, referring to the perception of high moral significance, also turns out to be pragmatic since it does not address the issue of the difference in moral importance for the different parties; this is therefore a contingent model that depends on outcomes rather than seeking intrinsic value in the decision making process; behaviour is thus still guided to a large extent by interest. The issue for the teacher is how far to seek morally justified solutions rather than simply stating alternatives.

### **5. Discourse strategies**

A major issue in cultural analysis is the use and choice of discourse strategies and to what extent these need to be modified in cross-cultural situations, based for example on the insights of Scollon and Scollon. The function of discourse strategies is to maintain and reinforce the face system, that is, the socially and politically correct status relationships in society (Scollon & Scollon, 1995). Communication implies constant choices of such strategies in order to demonstrate recognition of social status relationships.

Membership of a culture implies intimate and instinctive familiarity with these but in cross-cultural situations we cannot be so sure of the unspoken rules that govern inter-personal encounters; misunderstandings can lead to resentment and emotional reactions can easily appear, as when a person's behavior is perceived as too intimate or too distant. When dealing with discourse strategies we are reinforcing the status quo and power relationships, and hence the dominant ideology that legitimizes these. The status norms we maintain are by implication conservative; no thought is given to dynamic mechanisms for change; expression of social tensions, protest or social resentment are socially deviant. In many cases apparent neutrality is not as neutral as it seems since the dominant ideology and power relationship are embedded in the status quo.

The convention of "clarity, brevity, sincerity" as a communication model (Lanham, 1983) is a minimalist, egalitarian, direct, low context style much admired in the Anglo business world. This convention is seen as most effective and crucially most respectful of the parties involved: in fact, the best way! Nonetheless even Anglo business people may admit that this style could be considered cold and impersonal so there is already some admission of the need for cross-cultural accommodation "because it makes the receiver feel better about doing business with the company" (Scollon & Scollon, *ibid*, P 94). This statement suggests "we know our way is the best but we have to make concessions to get what we want".

When new members join an organization they learn the conventions of communicative style and who is to be treated how: this discourse system serves to

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legitimize a person's place in the community's culture. Discourse is an essential component in the process of being recognized and accepted and is therefore confirmatory of existing power and social relationships. If you want to get on you have to know who to look after and how to look after them. This is a pragmatic and essentially amoral position, seeking acceptance and belonging in society, regardless of the moral status of behavior expected. Thus if all the salesmen cheat on expenses a newcomer will do so too in order to be accepted and enjoy in-group benefits; in this way unethical behaviours are soon rationalized.

The Scollons suggests that our basic ideology is Utilitarian (Scollon & Scollon, 1995, P 104), a society that seeks individual happiness (or the sum of individuals' happiness), progress, is egalitarian, individualistic, sees technology as source of wealth, and values quantitative measurements, making for a competitive, rationalistic innovation seeking culture. This is effectively the modernist view, which is questioned by the critical literature as narrowing choices and forcing members of society into a conventional consumerist mould (Alvesson, 2002). The Utilitarian discourse - anti-rhetorical, empirical, deductive, individualistic, egalitarian - and politically correct - is thus seen as imperialistic (Scollon & Scollon, 1995, P 111); many writers also see gender role implications as a corollary (Magala, 2009)

## **6. Corporate culture and espoused values.**

Schein is probably the best known proponent of the view that founders and leaders seek to embed corporate values through mechanisms such as well-publicized measurement and control (punctuality, output, client attention etc), defining critical incidents (delays, bad climate, losing orders), allocation of scarce resources, role modeling, rewards and status allocation and recruitment and promotion policies (Schein, 1992). These are reinforced by secondary mechanisms such as physical space and buildings, stories and myths, and statements of philosophy and values (Schein, *ibid*). Nonetheless he is not thought of as taking a critical management view.

In today's business world such acculturation is the realm of marketing consultants and web page designers. The purpose is well-known: to "massage" or manipulate opinion inside and outside the organization in order to maximize loyalty and contribution from employees and maximize sales in the market. These realities are widely recognized in the business world and have led to steadily increasing pressure from organizations and academics - and increasingly practitioners - aware of the dangers of cynical manipulation, concerned to monitor corporate behavior and foster corporate social responsibility and convince business to "do well by doing good".

Studies using interpretative content analysis have examined web pages (Knoppen et al, 2006) and suggested dimensions of value revealed by the discourse they use: moving images, language and imagery to cater for customers' tastes whether teenage, retired people, female or male special interests etc. A semiotic analysis of artifacts and messages is invaluable in bringing out such aspects in product branding highlighting issues such as gender and assertiveness. (Floch (2005); Oswald, 2007)

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Outside the world of the corporation the media, arts and bloggers of various hues are all involved in producing and disseminating opinion intended to make us more aware of the dangers of manipulation and discrimination.

**Parallel case analysis**

This section describes ways we can de-brief selected cases with an emphasis on semiotic, pragmatic and critical approaches, enabling teachers and students to go beyond a purely neutral and relativistic interpretation. The first case has been treated with more detail to demonstrate the analytical technique

**Case 1: Socometal: rewarding African workers** (Mendenhall et al, 2007, pp 246-248)

This case, taken from an excellent international human resource management case book, is set in Senegal and deals with how a Senegalese engineer (Diop) with French grande école higher education works with the local tribal chief's son (N'Diaye) to motivate the work force to push up productivity by 30% in return for a 2 hour pay increase in the face of the skepticism of the Western managers. He is successful but met with the angry rejection of the French expat boss (Bernard). In this case an etic value analysis shows the contrast mainly on the dimensions of materialism, goal orientation and diffuseness in the form of more work for more money and preference for a good working relationships and respect.

The emic analysis identifies tribal loyalty and trust and Western management skepticism on the other and conservative extrinsic motivation attitudes of the French boss. Semiotically these attitudes are interpreted as being the result of neo-colonial racial stereotyping with a view to maintaining European control and justifying the discriminatory attitude to tribal organization of the workers. Some examples in the text to illustrate this approach:

- Use of word "unusual" suggests it is not normal for highly educated engineers to chat with a factory worker But this worker is "model", which explains his respect for the status quo and the management.
- N'Diaye was not a union member or official rep but was influential in spite of this outside the organigram imposed by the majority French management.
- "While multinational" it's a JV 52% French owned. The "while" in the sentence suggests the multinationality is subordinated to the French majority ownership....
- A model of Africanization of management policies: this is something Western companies are proud of and admired for but top managers are still European suggesting a paternalistic policy.
- N'Diaye "said with a smile" that he could achieve the production increase because it was not Bernard who asked for it. This is apparently a smile of local trust and mistrust of management.
- The French schools referred to are "elite" and "prestigious": in the status structure it is clearly better to have studied in these school than in a Senegalese institution for example.

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- Bernard organizes the work with flowcharts and “tells Diop exactly what is required” then disappears to his home in Marseille where he clearly prefers to be. Diop passes on his instructions and keeps Bernard from having to have contact with the local staff.
- No mention of empathy or interest in the staff, only the number on the chart: this is a job to do and then get out as quick as poss. France is more desirable than Senegal to spend the time.
- He is also sceptical about promised results implying that Africans could never achieve so much. The same view was shared by an Italian HR manager: this is the European expectation.
- Diop himself is cautious but open to accepting with suitable evidence that the output increase is feasible. Diop thus sounds both professional and sensitive to local people. He is the good guy in this operation and runs the risk of losing credibility if it fails.

Our de-briefing detects the value structures behind the case. It also suggests that a more successful business case would be to make diversity management and inter-group respect pay off since failure to accord importance to key groups leads to disastrous performance outcomes. Thus the de-briefing of the case situates it in a meaningful and complex cultural context rather than maintaining carefully non-judgmental positions.

**Case 2: The Virtual Team.**

This was a video commercially produced by Big World Media, Boulder, CO available on internet. See [http://www.tfc.nl/pdf/9052\\_preview.pdf](http://www.tfc.nl/pdf/9052_preview.pdf) for the script of this film.

Diane King is the American manager of an internet retailer who has difficulties leading her virtual team consisting of Chinese, Latin American, Indian and West African members. Process and task elements such as communication, timing, response time, progress reports and deadlines are constantly a source of frustration to Diane, who is the archetypal US time-conscious goal driven manager, with resulting irritation in dealing with the other members of the team.

Firstly the case can be approached as a pure value dimension contrast in which Diane King, the US team leader epitomizes:

- ✚ Individualism
- ✚ Low power distance
- ✚ High task orientation
- ✚ Low context communication style
- ✚ Preference for codified and factual information
- ✚ Sequential rigid time preference
- ✚ Specific (separate business / leisure) approach to work
- ✚ Need for transparency

This is the pure etic value dimension contrast and so far there is no judgment.

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However, she “says what she means and she means what she says”, suggesting a certain superiority: this is the “clarity, brevity, sincerity” discourse strategy mentioned earlier and she clearly regards it as the most efficient way and a sign of respect towards the people she is working with. Diane obviously believes that her way is the best. She is not (at least initially) ethno-relativistic; she believes it is a universal business truth that her way is more efficient and her team should be more open, up-front and informative with respect to problems in their territories for example. Semiotically the value contrasts show that she epitomizes the high performance team values made popular notably by Jon Katzenbach in the US in the 1990s: task first and people “as people” second (Katzenbach, 1993). Her writing style is epitomized by a series of initials “RSVP, ASAP, D” The signifier here is a tight brief alphabetical code; the signified is “please concentrate, pull yourself together, have a sense of time”; the external reference signification process is “you need to do something about the bad debts in your territory for example. She expects clear factual immediate answers as an indication of their respect for the American way of doing business.

Her team, on the other hand, are from collectivistic, high power distance, family centred, high context, synchronous time, diffuse opaque cultures. They consider her brusque, cold and informal (in the sense of having little respect for people’s family relationships, titles or qualifications), with no appreciation of their pride in their work (for example a Latin American assistant who plays the role she expects of an answering machine). She is unsympathetic to Chinese language problems and infrastructure problems and cost structures which make it difficult to keep up the pace and constant connectivity demanded by this smartly dressed time-kept executive with her laptop in the airport. A reading of the signs in the case suggests that the functioning of a team is a matter of universal “efficiency” as symbolized by Anglo cultures and in particular the US while the developing world is struggling to keep up: the Anglo way trumps the relationship- oriented way.

In fact we should see that conditions are different around the world and not that their way of doing things is less effective. The attempt to impose on others can be regarded as seeking best results at the expense of cultural variability: essentially a colonialist approach. Our in-class analysis is that this has to be dealt with cross-cultural sensitivity in which efficiency and efficacy are not regarded as the same thing: effectiveness depends on the ability of the parties to accommodate to each other and respect the demands of the other and thus maximize the output of the team.

**Dr Ahmad and Carlos Noguera in Malaysia (in-house case)**

In this case, originally inspired by a scenario in Richard Mead’s “International Management” (2004), a Canadian business man is pitching his sale of management training services in Malaysia; Dr Ahmad is his potential client, a highly respected hospital administrator; the long term contract goes to Carlos Noguera, a small and culturally more sensitive Spanish firm with local offices and greater knowledge of the market and culture.



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In dimensional terms we identify high/low context (the Canadian is portrayed as factual, up-front, straight talking, standing by the letter of the contract etc), time orientation (scarce to plentiful), formality (the Malaysian is more status conscious than the Canadian) and power distance (the Malaysian is treated with high respect discourse strategies by his people whilst the Canadian is an informal egalitarian with typical Anglo cultural background). No value judgments so far.

A semiotic analysis of signs point to the subjects of the training sessions “Making positive oral presentations”, “Presenting management information clearly and effectively” as representing the low context, direct talking ideal for an Anglo organization that talks explicitly about skills and presentation skills and assumes it is a universal best practice. However, this style of package is completely unsuited to the cultural context of a Malaysian hospital as is the idea that the client should be left alone with the brochure or that the doctors should have no informal contact time with trainers. The implication is, however, that this is international best practice should be pushed on the local market, which will in time come to see the wisdom of the Western way.

The critical interpretation goes further and suggests the refusal to admit there is any merit in local ways of doing things, using time and dealing with people and contracts is essentially an imperialistic approach. Our analysis is that it is mistaken and the Canadian should modify his approach or lose his business. This suggests that a purely business view should accept that when selling overseas the onus is on the visitor to be sensitive to local conditions: good business is culturally sensitive business.

**Changmai Corporation** (Mendenhall et al, 2007 pp 89-96)

In the Changmai Corporation case the Western managers have to decide how to deal with bribery when a local government official tries to get money to pay for a trip to Europe for himself and his wife and a job for his son in the company. This is the classic “Westerner in the developing country” situation. Moral values are confronted cleverly: the locals condemn Western materialism, lack of respect for the family and toleration of towards violence and sex in the media; the Westerners deplore failure to enforce safety regulations, sub-human working conditions, indifference to fatalities and corrupt government officials. A caricature Frenchman plays the role of the corrupt manager proud of his record and pleased to accept rewards, much appreciated by his own company who gain contracts.

The etic analysis points up individualism, collectivism, universalism, particularism, inner and outer locus of control, high and low power distance and so forth, a neutral comparative analysis reinforcing “sophisticated stereotypes”.

The semiotic analysis shows indifference to outside worker fatalities, suspicion of Westerners’ moral superiority, poor officials with impunity to seek bribes and neglected machinery and infrastructure and suggests that the value contrasts overlook the underlying historical, economic and developmental differences. When the corrupt official says “the safety record does not look very harmonious” after building up a picture of how such a bad record might look to the press the choice of

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words and tone (signifier) and the tension created between official and Western manager (signified) refer to an external reality which we consider an ethical dilemma.

The critical analysis shows some complexity. The owner of the plant, which is in Changmai in northern Thailand, is himself Chinese so the stereotypes about Westerners inner agendas do not apply to the ownership structure but rather owner managers internationally. He is in fact quite brazen in his view that lives of workers hired by sub-contractors are cheap and no responsibility of his. The Westerners with their qualms about safety and environmental issues discover that the former is of no interest to local whereas the latter, subject to inspection, certainly is to the point that it can be used to blackmail a Western manager. At the end of the day the Chinese owner wants to exploit the market, the production process, the suppliers and their workers; the Westerners are portrayed as having only good intentions but being ineffectual and trying to do maintain the best “universalistic” standards. However, from a critical point of view the Western company has interests in the corporation’s functioning well as a potential future market and fails to confront the moral issues convincingly.

The case demonstrates again that a critical management approach can lend support to well intentioned management whatever its cultural origin but seeks underlying agendas. It is a complex case much as in the real world cases are always more complex, than those we find in teaching books.

**Conclusion.**

Etic dimension comparisons on their own are morally neutral and thus an insufficient approach to major features of inter-cultural management decision-making. A semiotic approach enables us to analyze emic specificities in situations by investigating the communication acts and other signs in order to draw out underlying patterns. We will take into account multiple explanatory influences on historical, economic, inter-personal, situational and business points of view, that is, the “why?” of many observed behavioural patterns. This is key to an accurate attributional explanation of events and embraces a critical approach to analysis of the power relationships involved.

Ethical issues subject to the supervision of internal and external bodies, NGO’s and government level together with shareholder pressure have long been identified as powerful mechanisms on which to build a judgmental involvement in business rather than purely pragmatic and results-driven. The power relations approach can be enlightening for students in many cases which apparently are not ethical in nature.

Students find our approach helpful in understanding how to approach cultural interpretation of behavior in business: it enables them to move beyond stereotyped simplistic approaches. In our classes we strive to reconcile the best in traditional and critical approaches by demonstrating the variety of approaches and by making it clear that cultural issues are rarely simple and rarely neutral, and that one has to decide what is negotiable and what is not. All parties are involved in decisions: the only way forward on cross-cultural issues is to demonstrate the value of negotiation.

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Negotiation means the struggle to understand the interests of all concerned, including one's own, and to seek solutions by persuasion and argument not force. Negotiation is the way to resolve conflict that lies between submission to what we do not agree with on the one hand and imposition by force and violence on the other. It requires listening skills, positive attitudes to finding solutions, the will to resolve issues in a morally correct way, the search for agreement without residual resentment and the patience and determination to settle for nothing less.

In teaching culture we are not anthropologists engaging in rich description for academic purposes: we are working in management and business school contexts and cannot absolve ourselves from the responsibility of taking positions. In the same way as corporate social responsibility, diversity inclusion initiatives, environmental sustainability programmes are increasingly disseminated world wide so in the cross-cultural field must we take lessons from the semiotic and critical management school, without necessarily thereby becoming neo-Marxists.

The fact that our approach does not fit students' expectations and previous experience may make our task more difficult. Also many teachers may take the view that our job as cross-cultural communication facilitators and teachers should be neutral and not concerned with anything that looks like political involvement - that we should be studiously neutral - but I do not believe that we can take this view as social science professionals. The teaching approach and literature references are different and must be learned about from the teachers', the institutional and the students' points of view. WE may even feel that the specialized approach of semiotics is not the most digestible for our students: if so then that line of discourse should be abandoned!

By the same token the teacher must be prepared to listen to a critical approach and prepared to spend time and effort inculcating it. Resistance may occur also in corporate settings, in which we do not want to offend our clients. This is one of the oldest dilemmas in the business world: do I tell the client what they want to hear or what I sincerely believe? On a multitude of issues, ranging from the patenting of pharmaceutical products to concealment of the effects of the additives in food to possible dangers to children of small parts in toys, confidentiality about salaries, asset stripping to make workers redundant (as featured in the film Wall St) and a thousand others issues we cannot be neutral; if we do not take a position we acquiesce in behaviour which may be unacceptable. The same applies in our analyses of cross-cultural management cases in our course.

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**Author**

Prof. Dr. Roger Bell,  
ESADE, Universitat Ramon Llull, Barcelona  
e-mail: [roger.bell@esade.edu](mailto:roger.bell@esade.edu)