7. International HRM and cross-cultural management
~~Interactive~~

WHEN HOFSTEDE'S 'NATIONAL CULTURE' MEETS EXCEPTIONALISM OF POLITICAL SCIENCE: TOWARDS A SOCIOLOGICAL MESO-LEVEL FOR DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCIES

ABSTRACT

The author will further develop all sections of this interactive paper prior to the EIBA conference. This paper takes a critical stance concerning the criticism which seems to have discounted the ontological and epistemological role of 'national culture' – integral to the Hofstedeian, cultural deterministic traditions in Cross-Cultural Management research and education. Through a transdisciplinary inquiry which innovatively employs Exceptionalism – a key concept in Political Science – this paper argues that although a level, and fixed nature, of 'national culture' is highly contestable, the interplay with such a macro-level phenomenon is nevertheless imperative for further developing intercultural competencies particularly relevant for international managers and expatriates. However, this paper argues that the "national" rather should perform integral to the *sociological* meso-level construct. A sociological relationism outlook on 'intercultural capital' is further advanced. The paper contributes to theory-building in terms of extending the investigatory scope beyond current ontological and epistemological boundaries of the research field. Additionally, the paper contributes to practitioners for moving beyond the focus on mere 'differences' in intercultural training within international work life, as well as advancing substantive limitations of Hofstede's research paradigm extending the McSweeney-Hofstede debate (2002, *Human Relations*), and the Hofstede-GLOBE debate (2006, *Journal of International Business Studies*).

Keywords: 'national culture'; Exceptionalism; intercultural competency; sociological meso-level; Cross-Cultural Management; Political Science; critique.

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INTRODUCTION

With the turn of the Millennium, the general field of 'cultural and business' (see Chapman 1997) has witnessed two exuberant debates and 'clash of titans' (Leung 2006) concerning the ontological and epistemological presupposition of a 'national culture' (Earley 2006; Hofstede 2006, 2002, 1991, 1980; Javidan et al. 2006; Smith 2006) – and the rejection of operating with such a level (McSweeney 2002a, 2002b; see Smith 2002; Søndergaard 1994; Williamson 2002). In *Human Relations* (volume 55, issues 1 and 11), McSweeney (2002a, 2002b) rejected the premise and plausibility of a 'national culture' in Hofstede's framework by arguing for several methodological flaws and logical inconsistencies in terms of the functionalist explanations for behaviour (Williamson 2002). These stances were vigorously rebutted by Hofstede (2002). Hofstede himself instigated a second round of the debate in *Journal of International Business Studies* (volume 37, issue 6), where he pointed out the limited innovativeness of the GLOBE-project as far as denoting national cultures (Smith 2006). In their response, Javidan et al. (2006) dismissed Hofstede's criticism of the GLOBE project as theoretical and empirical unsound.

The above cross-cultural research debates have strong implications on developing intercultural competencies. Hofstede (1994) promulgates that the 'business of international business, is culture', which reflects the paramount role of culture in terms of comprehending

social interactions and practices across cultural boundaries as well as intercultural knowledge transfer within international and multicultural work organisations. The Hofstedeian research paradigm is the most dominating, functionalist paradigmatic frameworks for cross-cultural research (Caprar 2011), and mainstream cultural research remains non-meaning-based, hypo-deductive, and essentialist (Guttormsen 2015; Linstead 1997; Primecz et al. 2011). Arguably, the ontological tools of 'difference' (Lauring 2007; Lauring & Guttormsen 2010) and 'measurable distance' (Kogut & Singh 1988), infiltrated the traditional understanding of developing intercultural competency and sensitivity. As Romani et al. (2014) elucidate, traditionally, reasoning was thought to suffice when it came to avoiding stereotyping and dealing with intercultural challenges – and only recently would the crucial impact of reflexivity be incorporated. Subsequently, intercultural development can only materialise when having reflected on the experience in accordance to Romani et al. (2014) (see Rosenblatt et al., 2013). This paper moves beyond 'reasoning' as the only necessary "thinking-tool" for enhancing intercultural competency development, by re-theorising role of a 'national culture'. Demonstrating different linkages and interrelationship with 'national culture' reflects the area of proposed theory-building due to moving beyond current ontological and epistemological boundaries of this research field (see Corley & Gioia 2011; Whetten 1989).

In interpretive frameworks, the level of a 'national culture' faces a much weakened credibility due to commendable criticism (Buckley & Chapman 1997, 1996; Chapman et al. 2008; Fang 2003; Jack 2007; Peterson 2007; Søderberg & Holden 2002). Consequently, this paper offers a two-fold argument. First, that 'national culture' has too easily been dismissed in Cross-Cultural Management (CCM) research – and it follows that the current Hofstedeian research practice in this regard is inhibiting intercultural development.

Second, the surrounding debates have been too bogged down in methodology, yet to ask the simple question of "how does this relate and matter for practitioners?" Consequently, this put forward a case to *bring back* 'national culture'. However, this enterprise is not encouraging to operate with a distinct *level* of 'national culture', but that it should rather to perform as a domain of investigation integral to the *sociological* meso-level. This argument reflects the efforts to innovatively integrating the theory of Exceptionalism from Political Science into CCM research as a transdisciplinary enterprise. This endeavour has the potential for enhancing the phenomenon of 'national culture' in relation to development of intercultural competency and 'intercultural encounters' in international work organisations as well as for international managers, cross-cultural trainers, and expatriates. This inquiry, which is not another critique of methodology, also has the potential to advance the CCM research field through new theoretical synthesis.

This paper, in juxtapositioning with the Hofstedeian research practices, will first position the application of Exceptionalism and the development of intercultural skills within the debate of 'national culture'. Second, how the theoretical lens of Exceptionalism can contribute to cross cultural business studies is discussed, followed by evaluating how the sociological meso-level can contribute to further enhance cross-cultural research. Fourth, implications on developing intercultural competency is offered, which leads to concluding remarks regarding theoretical and practitioner contributions, and future research directions.

POSITIONING EXCEPTIONALISM AND DEVELOPMENT OF INTERCUTURAL SKILLS WITHIN THE DEBATE ON 'NATIONAL CULTURE'

The level of 'national culture' has dominated the ontological and epistemological perspective on 'culture' in the broader Business and Management Studies (Chapman 1997). Exceptionalism, which also has a strand of 'national level' embedded into it is yet to have made a mark within the mainstream business-school academe. Thus, exploring the contagious issue of 'national culture' from this new theoretical lens is a novel contribution in its own right. The Hofstedeian research paradigm has also permeated the field of intercultural competency: the over-emphasis on 'difference' rather than the construction of boundaries between "us" and "them" and what is between such categories and conceptual boundaries (Barth 1971). Furthermore, in quantitative CCM research, as expected, the 'national' is assumed to comprise a 'national *level*'. When mainstream, multi-level focused research operates with a meso-level, its performativity relates predominantly to a separate, typologised form of level and is often taken to mean the level between the macro and micro levels. A grouping of people such as a collective community could serve as one example. Interpretivist and constructionist researchers have largely dismissed the notion of a 'national *level*' and rightly so due to "ecological fallacy". Moreover, such researchers are theoretically and philosophically almost destined to do so contemplating on the underpinnings of their own research approach. However, discounting the 'national' altogether is one step to far and misses out on important grounds of analysis and sources for explanation in CCM research and in particular development of intercultural competencies. The *sociological* meso-level, however, has yet to be explored in mainstream CCM research approaches.

EXCEPTIONALISM OF POLITICAL SCIENCE: ADVANCING CROSS-CULTURAL BUSINESS STUDIES

McCrisken (2002) explains Exceptionalism, in a US Foreign Policy context, as the "belief that the United States is an extraordinary nation with a special role to play in human history; a nation that is not only unique but also superior". Although Exceptionalism can be used about any nations, as a means to reflect the epitome about a nation, it is principally and historically a core American political idea: "understanding the meaning of American exceptionalism is indispensable for anyone who wants to understand what it has meant to be an American" (Lipset 1996:25). Huntington (1997:29) continues "American identity has been a set of universal ideas and principles articulated in the founding documents by American leaders: liberty, equality, democracy, constitutionalism, liberalism, limited government (...) the American Creed." This paper does not promulgate that there is a separate level of 'nationality' or that an identity of a country is uniquely distinguishable from all other countries (which Hofstede's etic framework is prefaced on, and consequentially the assumption of measuring 'cultural distances'). However, to claim that the "American Creed" has not been at the forefront of most of American foreign policy deliberation and practices, as well as international business conduct and commercial activities, would be a hard sell.

As this paper argues, albeit not a 'national level', discounting streaks of 'national culture' would remove important explanatory sources for understanding intercultural encounters and how to develop intercultural competencies (Guttormsen 2015). The transdisciplinary engagement with Political Science is also helpful in "bringing the nation back in" (Jones & Khanna 2006). This showcases how some of the limitations of Hofstede's research can be

advanced into – but without succumbing to the Hofstedeian approach – a more purposeful engagement in CCM research. This brings us to what the sociological meso-level is.

BRINGING THE NATION BACK IN: TOWARDS A SOCIOLOGICAL MESO-LEVEL

The sociological meso-level is different from the dominant multi-level approach. It differs in that the former incorporates agency (microindividual) and structure (macrostructural) which always operate dialectically in an inseparable fashion (Bruhn & Rebach 2007). As context and macrostructural elements have an impinging nature, and that structures are (re)structuring, but also structured by agency (see Berger & Luckman 1966; Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1984), streaks of the 'national' is one of those macrostructural components in play.

IMPLICATIONS FOR DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCY

In terms of developing intercultural competencies, focusing only at the individual and cognitive processes would very much deny agency of further theoretical exploration such as identity-formation (see Guttormsen 2015; Moore 2011). Removing the 'national' (from the equation), the analysis is effectively also removing important structures produced by agency but also the constraining agency – and a fuller, more holistic understanding of intercultural encounters would be significantly decreased. Moving away from 'difference' would have the potential of developing 'intercultural capital' which can be accumulated through experiencing the context-specific surroundings (materiality and physical locations, and conceptual space) and beyond cultural self-awareness (Hall 1966; Low & Lawrence-Zuniga 2003). This can result in the very beneficial – and potentially as a competitive advantage – ability to apply

intercultural knowledge across different situational aspects. This can be achieved through the grasp of the whys and the meaning behind actions, behaviour, thinking, strategising and beliefs of cultural Others (and not only being able to identify differences based on broad-strokes cultural dimensions) (Guttormsen 2015). This should permeate training, preparations and repatriation of expatriates and for managers and workers in corporate and non-corporate sectors who operate in multicultural contexts.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: CONTRIBUTIONS

In addition to providing limitations on developing intercultural competency, this paper will also develop theoretical contributions: moving beyond the typical inward-looking ontological paradigmatic critiques and methodological debates only – and simply asks practitioners 'what is relevant for your intercultural engagement?!' The debate concerning intercultural competencies critiques the national cultural debate further (i.e. sociological meso-level) which also begs for moving beyond behaviour, difference, and values in mainstream CCM research.

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