

Introduction

This book is a collection of ten cases that deal with real life cross-cultural issues and also discusses implications for practitioners. The cases are based on field research revealing challenges and benefits from working across countries. In a succinct way, they provide both illustrations and insights on how to deal with actual cross-cultural issues. Topics cover, for example, international collaboration across organizations and within multinational companies, organizational culture in international joint ventures, as well as knowledge transfer.

WHAT ARE THE USES AND BENEFITS OF THE BOOK?

Practice-oriented studies on intercultural interactions have been repeatedly called for, because students and practitioners often consider predefined constructs or cultural dimensions too abstract, remote from practice, or lacking recommendations for dealing with and solving intercultural conflicts and misunderstandings (Blasco, 2009; Cant, 2004; Earley and Peterson, 2004; and more generally Burke and Rau, 2010). Influential models such as Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimension framework have been developed for cultural issues at the national level of analysis and for the purpose of comparing national cultures. The implications of these models for interactions in practice are not straightforward. When working together, people need to find concrete and creative solutions that help them deal with their differences; they need to go beyond the comparison of management practices across countries. Consequently, this volume provides cases that show how organizational members deal with their differences by mutually constructing their social reality, thus overcoming – or augmenting – their culturally based differences. In addition, the concluding chapter summarizes major insights from the cases and proposes nine strategies on how to successfully handle cultural differences and their related dynamics in practice.

WHAT ARE THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF THIS EDITED VOLUME?

While editing this book we worked with the authors to condense their findings

into accessible and readable texts for the benefit of students and practitioners alike, without compromising on theoretical and methodological rigour.

Ten Cases Showing Cross-cultural Management in Practice

The results are ten succinct and straight-to-the-point cases. They bridge theory and practice, they are close to the experienced reality of people and thanks to interpretive investigations they show how theoretical constructs apply in practice. The cases present success and failure stories in cross-cultural management. The qualitative in-depth studies display situated knowledge along with the participants' own explanations and are thus a rich source of inspiration. Although such studies are published in academic journals, an edited volume for students and practitioners, containing rich qualitative case studies, has been missing since Sackmann (1997).

A Contribution to the Theoretical Framework of Culture and Negotiated Meanings

By offering a study of a German-Japanese joint venture, Brannen and Salk (2000) contributed to confirm the idea that (organizational) culture emerges and develops through interactions between members of different cultural groups rather than being the juxtaposition or imposition of one culture onto the other. The emergent culture is called a 'negotiated culture'. In this volume, we consider not only partners who are present and negotiating to find an agreement, but also individuals and groups actively reinterpreting their environment, or aspects of this environment, and thus taking part in the very dynamics of cultural changes.

A Power Perspective for the Study of Cross-cultural Interactions

We argue that the power balance between interacting partners needs to be addressed because this balance (or the lack of it) affects how culture and cultural differences are talked about and how meanings are negotiated through interactions. Moreover, since power is often implicitly present, participants of intercultural interactions and researchers do not necessarily address it; instead they try to explain misunderstandings, conflicts or smooth relations with cultural reasons. Power discrepancies can exist between headquarters and subsidiaries, between different professional groups in an organization, or they can take the form of opposition between technical knowledge and client knowledge. Openness towards others and willingness to take their view into account will partly depend on people's power position in the intercultural relationship.

Nine Strategies for Effective Intercultural Interactions

The learning we can derive from these cases is condensed in the last chapter of this volume into a model presenting nine strategies for effective intercultural interactions. These strategies address expectations, understanding and actions to be considered when dealing with multiple cultures in practice. The model takes into account both the people involved in interaction and their environment. It provides a guide in intercultural situations where negotiation of meaning and power imbalance are part of the interaction.

OVERVIEW OF THE CHAPTERS

In the first chapter we introduce the reader to the philosophical and methodological background of studying culture in an interpretive way and we underscore that this approach differs from the assumptions and knowledge developed by the use of cultural dimension constructs. Using illustrations from the ten case studies, we describe the theoretical framework of this volume. First, we explicate the view that meaning is negotiated and that culture is socially constructed and reinterpreted in interaction. Second, we present the construct of ‘meaning system’ as an alternative to cultural dimensions, hitherto among the few available tools to talk about cultural differences across countries. Finally, we insist on the need to consider power imbalance in cross-cultural interactions, since it is an influential part in the negotiation of meanings.

The first case by Sara Louise Muhr and Jeanette Lemmergaard (Chapter 2) reports a study of an individual consultant travelling from his North-European home to developing countries. The frequent traveller’s challenge is how to deal with constantly changing work environments and varying cultural influences. While constantly on the road, rarely in familiar places, he has to struggle with solitude and constant change in addition to his work. Muhr and Lemmergaard argue convincingly that spaces of generic culture – so-called ‘non-places’ – provide cross-cultural workers with a sense of familiarity and identity. Airports and airplanes can be similar all over the world, they do not impose a specific culture, requiring little attention to read and understand the place once a person is familiar with the generic setting. It is these non-places that cross-cultural workers can use to cope with working across multiple cultures.

In Chapter 3, Sampo Tukiainen presents collaboration between a Finnish parent company and a Polish subsidiary in two large infrastructural projects. The case offers a report of a successful earlier collaboration and investigates how it is possible that conflicts emerged in a second project involving the same

group of people. It reveals that beyond cultural differences, individual and organizational strategic interests collided. The Finnish headquarters brought the technical know-how to the Polish partner who actually had an advantage in local market knowledge, managers had divergent agendas and both organizations wanted to lead the project. This case underscores the problematics related to the possibilities for automatically extending prior success to future collaboration. It is also an example of collaboration between members of a Western country and a post-socialist one after the economic and political transition.

The case in Chapter 4 deals with collaboration between French and Vietnamese partners in the context of a non-governmental organization (NGO). Employees from both countries work together on development projects, such as services to farmers, reducing malnutrition and micro-finance. Sylvie Chevrier describes the possibilities of smooth cooperation, although the partners had very different views, for instance, on individual autonomy, empowerment and work ethics. French workers assumed that close supervision was a sign of lack of trust; this is why they gave autonomy and expected initiative from their Vietnamese colleagues. In contrast, their colleagues found them distant, offering little support and exchange on details of the project. At the same time, the Vietnamese were seen by their French partners as incoherent when they were respectful of the social rules of their communities. The author shows that divergences in sense-making systems are at the root of the misunderstandings and she explains how to reach a position that values and builds on this cultural diversity.

The case by Christoph Barmeyer and Eric Davoine (Chapter 5) explores the transfer of codes of conduct from the American headquarters to French and German subsidiaries. The authors underscore that it is not only cultural differences and legal frameworks that influence the interpretation and thus the adoption of the code; they also show that other issues need to be considered such as the kind of relationship between headquarters and subsidiaries, or the presence and intent of active unions. They reveal that despite the successful diffusion and official adoption of the code, the code has a different ethical and legal value in France and Germany, or none at all, because adaptations to local legal frameworks were not made.

In Chapter 6, Hèla Yousfi addresses the tension between diffusion of universal management systems, or best practices, and the need for local adaptations. The case presents a successful introduction of 'American' management techniques in a Tunisian company. On closer examination the interviews show, however, that the very success of the introduction of these techniques depended on their reinterpretation in terms of a 'Tunisian' sense-making system. The author highlights that the techniques used were able to meet locally defined expectations of 'good management' and to overcome deficiencies in certain local business practices. The case illustrates the

potential implications of globalization, as well as the importance of local culture and the adaptation of global methods to a local context.

Another success story is the interaction between a Danish company and its Japanese subsidiary after fundamental changes in the company's market strategy (Chapter 7). Lisbeth Clausen analyses the collaboration through the lens of communication and shows the different levels of communication between the parties involved. She reveals the negotiations taking place between the headquarters and the subsidiary, and the various levels of culture (national, professional and so on) that influence their interaction. This case also points to societal trends in Japan and to the important role played by bicultural persons who can act as translators between people from both cultures.

The case by Jasmin Mahadevan in Chapter 8 shows that cross-cultural work is not only happening at the national level and that the cultural boundaries that one needs to bridge are also changing. The case deals with collaboration between German and Indian engineers who apparently denied and minimized their national cultural differences, and stressed in contrast their shared professional culture. The author opens our eyes to the cultural dynamics that come into play at different levels: the national (Indian versus German) and the professional level (engineers versus managers and human resources professionals). She also reveals that these boundaries are changing depending on the context. For example, she shows how in a period of uncertainties, German engineers could change their discourse and present Indian engineers as being very different and becoming a threat for the future of engineers in the German sites.

Chapter 9 relates to a project directed to Eastern Europe in the early 1990s, just after the political and economic transitions. Bulgaria was supported by Western European states as the beneficiary of a programme providing management education. Snežina Michaliova and Graham Hollinshead show that the very first part of the project was a sort of blind drive: the educator had neither information of the knowledge that was needed or the knowledge that participants already had, nor did they have any local knowledge. The case addresses fundamental issues linked to knowledge transfer and reveals how the project gradually changed the form of knowledge that was transmitted to become more successful.

In Chapter 10, Guilherme Azevedo reports of two joint ventures between Chinese and Brazilian organizations. He shows that intercultural cooperation is feasible despite large cultural differences (China and Brazil can be seen as cultural antipodes). Based on ethnographic observation, the author suggests that effective cooperation can be built upon the construction of a sense of proximity and through micro-dynamics of integration. Although the informants acknowledge that interactions between people with such different cultural backgrounds may not always be easy, they indicate that good inten-

tions and the dynamics of their concrete actions can eventually lead to fruitful cooperation and a successful joint venture.

Chapter 11 offers an analysis of 'globalization' in corporate language use, denoting ways of thinking and perceiving the transforming relations between home and foreign markets. Iris Rittenhofer explores shared cultural patterns of perceptions and meaning production through two cases: the visualization of a global company and the discourse of an expert advising how to prepare for global markets. Unravelling these perceptions of globalization, she shows implications for strategy development processes: the way organizations see (or imagine) foreign markets will impact their globalization process.

In the closing Chapter 12 we summarize the managerial and practical implications of the ten cases and propose nine strategies for dealing with inter- and cross-cultural differences at work. These include expecting differences rather than similarities when different cultures are involved and we stress that cultural frames that are in a given context need to be identified and understood from the perspective of the native participants. Acting as an interpreter and translator of meaning may foster mutual understanding and such practice may be aided by identifying and building on common grounds. Respect for others is important while refraining from judgment, appreciating existing differences and learning from them add value to cross-cultural work. At the same time a common vision, purpose or goal will help overcome cultural differences while working towards that shared goal. Next to these strategies it is also important to be aware of the larger context in which interactions take place.

HOW DID THIS BOOK COME TO BE?

The three editors are themselves boundary spanners between different academic domains and divergent cultures. Familiar with both the fields of organization studies and international management, we could see similarities and points of contact between these two academic fields. One important link is the study of the interconnection of culture and management. This topic has been well researched both in the positivist paradigm with cultural dimension frameworks, and in the interpretive paradigm with intercultural interaction studies. Yet, few cross-references exist and consequently very limited cross-fertilization between these two streams of research. Our object became to raise the awareness of the importance and value of different paradigms among researchers working with culture and management, by revealing how many different streams and research traditions currently exist (see Primecz et al., 2009). Together with Katalin Topçu, we organized a track at the European Group for Organizational Studies annual conference in Vienna (EGOS 2007) that led later to a call for papers for the special issue of the

International Journal of Cross-Cultural Management (issue 3, volume 9, 2009). In both instances, we received a large number of submissions, most of them submitted by interpretive researchers. This is when our idea of an edited volume started. We wanted to promote the visibility of interpretive research in cross-cultural management and provide hands-on, applied cases and illustrations of cross-cultural management that could be used for teaching purposes. We actively worked on completing the range of studies represented in this volume to include cases related to various geographical locations (North and South America, Europe, Africa and Asia) and treated by researchers of various origin (Europe, South America and Africa) and interpretive research traditions.

Our professional training, teaching, research and consulting experiences have influenced this volume in many ways, starting from the various networks in which we diffused the call for papers, to the goal we had of including cases linked to rarely covered geographical areas (such as Eastern Europe or North Africa). We hope that our edited volume will not only provide exciting reading but also become a useful resource for practitioners, students of cross-cultural management, and colleagues alike.

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