Skewed Integration: the Negative Representation of Poles by Expatriate Managers

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Abstract

This paper provides a critique of a cross-cultural management (CCM) framework in understanding the interaction between Western expatriate managers in Poland and their Polish colleagues/subordinates based on data from 32 semi-structured interviews with British expatriate managers working in Poland. By critically analyzing the discourse of the expatriate managers, this paper argues that an interpretive approach highlights two dynamic elements crucial to such interactions which quantitative approaches fail to capture. These two dynamic factors provide a perspective from which the expatriate managers' representation of Poles as managerially and culturally inferior can be better understood. By implication, it is proposed that similar representation on the part of expatriate managers can be observed in any scenario of Western expatriation to countries they perceive as being less economically developed.

Keywords: critical management studies, cross cultural management, expatriation

Introduction

The field of Cross Cultural Management (CCM) studies has, at long last, begun to engage critically with the western-centric origins of the field with increasing regularity (Jack and Westwood). Global *West to rest* flows of power underpin both CCM theory and western managerial knowledge transfer. These flows of power influence western expatriate managers often resulting in perceptions of managerial and cultural superiority manifested in the negative representation of the local *Other*. This paper presents and analyses examples of such representation and critically confronts the predominant positivistic methodology of quantifying national culture and the related fundamental inability to address this discourse.

The analysis is based on data from 32 semi-structured interviews with British expatriate managers working in Poland. By critically analysing the expatriate manager discourse, it is argued that an interpretive approach highlights two dynamic elements crucial to such interactions which quantitative approaches (Hofstede dimensions, GLOBE survey, etc.) fail to capture. The first of these dynamic elements involves the superordinate position in organisational structures which the British expatriate managers almost exclusively hold. The second element which the orthodox CCM approach fails to take into account involves changes in behaviour when managers are expatriated to a country which they perceive as economically less developed. These two dynamic factors provide a perspective from which the expatriate managers' representation of Poles as managerially and culturally inferior can be better understood. By implication, it is proposed that similar representation on the part of expatriate managers can be observed in any scenario of Western expatriation to countries they perceive as being less economically developed.

Armstrong *et al*., (2017) rightly explore the ethical aspects of expatriation, but in so doing assume that the direction of travel (West to East, North to South or vice versa) is not a factor in interactions between the expatriated manager and the locals they may work with. This paper argues that the direction of travel is a crucial and understudied factor in such relationships to such an extent that the term expatriate is limited in its common

usage to Westerners living abroad. Those from the Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) region living in Western European countries, regardless of their profession and qualifications, are commonly represented as "economic migrants". Nelson's 2009 study of German representation of Polish immigrants is based on the hypothesis that "in spite of the remarkable progress made, there is a counterintuitive continuity in how Poland is publicly perceived and portrayed in public discourse." (p. 173). Such negative representation and associated behaviors are something that the static Hofstedian approach fails to capture and address. Without a recognition of the superordinate position the expatriate managers are almost invariably hold, and the associated representation of the local Other, the idealistic goal of cultural integration is skewed in the direction of the foreign management.

In other words, integration is assumed to be towards the norms of the Western manager rather than local cultural/managerial norms or a compromise between the two. This paper argues, based on the empirical data collected, that Western expatriate managers who are in positions of higher authority represent the subordinate Poles they interact with as inferior.

Methodology

Interviews with 32 expatriate managers were held over an eleven-year period from 2004 to 2015. There were two phases of data collection with 18 managers interviewed in the 2004 to 2006 period and the remaining 14 interviews taking place between 2012 and 2015. The criteria set for choosing interview partners were that they were Western, English native-speakers (interview partners were from the US, Canada and the UK) working as managers or directors with western firms and had a minimum of six months' experience living and working in Poland. No sampling technique was used and, due to the relatively small pool of potential interview partners, anyone who was willing, available, and matched the criteria was included in the study. The interviews typically lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were held away from the interview partners' place of work – either in a café, or at the Polish Academy of Sciences which provided logistical support with this study. Whilst this may not be the same as a first-class compartment as proposed by Easterby-Smith et. al. (2012), their examples of interviews held outside of the managers' offices producing better results was a main factor in decisions regarding setting. The interviews themselves were semi-structured and loosely organized around an interview schedule which was not shared with the partners. Above all, partners were encouraged to tell stories. When a general statement was made, they were asked to give examples and often subsequently asked to expand further on their example. The goal of this story-telling approach is not to arrive at 'facts' or 'truths' but to produce a discourse within which is provided the managers' own representation of the Other. Such a storytelling approach is increasingly being utilised by researchers as a way to investigate narratives (Driessen, 1997). Furthermore, my own position as an expatriate in Poland allowed for a close-up, partial ethnographic approach more conducive to an open, unguarded setting (Alvesson, 2003).

A critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach has been adopted as an analytical framework as CDA provides the opportunity to better understand the representation of Poles by the expatriate managers interviewed. Fairclough points out that representation is "clearly a discoursal matter, and we can distinguish different discourses, which may represent the same area of the world but from different perspectives or positions" (Fairclough, 2006, p.26). Furthermore, CDA provides a framework through which discoursal examples of self-identifying and Othering can be analyzed. Intertextuality, which "accentuates the dialogically of a text, the dialogue between the voice of the author of a text and other voices" (Fairclough, 2006, p.9), is expected to provide rich data providing an insight into the representation of Poles through the selected retelling of others' experiences and accounts.

The Static Perspective of the Hofstede Paradigm

The work of Hofstede provides a popular starting point for the management literature and introductory academic studies of cross-cultural dynamics in the workplace. Hofstede describes himself as "one of the most-

cited authors in social science" and points to the four decades of "constant attention and extension" of his work as evidence of the "unflagging interest" in the Hofstedian paradigm (Minkov and Hofstede, p.11). His five-dimensional model (sometimes four, sometimes six) of culture has become a foundation on which a multitude of studies have been based. As an analytical tool however, it is limited. The field of Cross Cultural Management studies has however, at long last, begun to engage critically with the Western-centric origins of the field on a more frequent basis. Global West to East/North to South flows of power underpin CCM theory and produce findings reflecting the presumed superiority of the 'Western' and implicitly white and male manager (Primecz, *et al*., 2016). This flow of power and presumed superiority exists not only in CCM theory but also in the cross-cultural interactions the theory attempts to describe.

It is important to remember that the Hofstede data originates from respondents living and working in their own country at the time. Furthermore, the respondents are from similar professional backgrounds. Through the Hofstede model it is possible to see, for example, that Americans generally prefer individualistic decision-making processes whereas Germans prefer collectivist. From this, one may deduce what types of problems are likely to arise when an American and a German meet in a business setting. As with all models in the social sciences however, the Hofstedian model provides us with a simplification of reality based on a number of assumptions.

While the Hofstede dimensions may prove adequate as a static measure of national cultures in isolation, they have inherent limitations in modelling power dynamics in first – second world (as well as first – third world) cross cultural interactions. Hofstede (2001) notes that according to his paradigm, the degree of inequality that members of a given culture accept or expect is a static one. Pesch and Bouncken point out however that "this optimistic view of cultural distance might be clouded by interactional obstacles driven by perceived cultural distance" (2017, p.33). The alternative approach adopted here is based on the understanding that the quantitative, static measures of culture distance which have been predominant in cross cultural management literature over the last 30 years "are not sufficient to fully understand this complex concept" (Chapman, *et al*., p. 217). In short, the approach adopted by orthodox CCM research through the Hofstede paradigm and methodologically comparable studies fails to capture two dynamic elements. The first of these elements is the adaptive behavior of the Western managers when expatriated to Poland. The second element is the superordinate position in which the Western managers almost exclusively find themselves. These failures are due to noted naïve assumptions in the model (Holden, 2002; Allen, 2016 and Mc Sweeney, 2002) regarding the nature of the reality in which real-world CCM interaction takes place.

Taras and Steele (2009) note that of ten postulates deriving from the Hofstede paradigm, the eighth states that matched samples should be used to study cultural differences, thus implying that matched sampling allows one to compare like for like, with culture alone responsible for the observed differences. The point that this paper addresses, however, is the inability of the Hofstede paradigm to be able to model the non-theoretic reality of one of two actors, or both, changing their behavior when interacting with each other. Can the stability of culture (Taras and Steele's postulate number 3) be assumed? If we accept Hofstede's numerous assumptions then the methodology can in fact operate as a reasonable comparator for two national cultures – in this example culture A and culture B in isolation. In the non-theoretic, real world however, cross cultural interaction does not take place in isolation but rather within a cultural setting which is not the national culture of one or both of the actors.

To illustrate this point, think of Hofstede's dimensions of a given national culture (culture A) as a set within which is contained culture A's, or set A's, cultural characteristics. Then according to the Hofstedian model, we could compare set A to one for culture B (set B) and in so doing ascertain the similarities and differences between the two cultures. The ubiquitous Venn diagram (Fig. 1) can be used to illustrate this relationship. This simplification of the Hofstede model helps to illustrate the erroneous assumption. The Hofstede paradigm compares national cultures based on data collected in respondents' own countries, but the model is used as a predictor of interactions between two or more individuals from different national cultures (e.g. sets A and B).

Thus far, the Hofstedian Venn diagram works reasonably well. Using set theory notation, this can be formulated as:

{x: (x ∈ A) and (x B)}

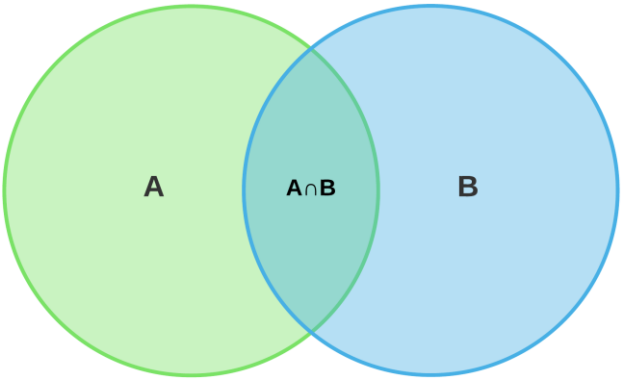

Fig. 1. Venn diagram

A∩B represents the intersection of objects that belong to set A and set B. In our example, A∩B is the intersection of cultural traits common to both cultures A and B.

A\B = {x: (x ∈ A) and (x B)} on the other hand represents the objects that belong to set A, but not set B. In other words, the cultural traits unique to culture A which are not found in culture B. The problem with our Hofstede-Venn diagram, and the Hofstede paradigm in general, is that cross cultural interaction does not take place in culturally neutral isolation. For such interaction, at least one of the two individuals ('a' from culture A and 'b' from culture B) must interact in a setting where the national culture is not his or her own. In the example of the study this paper is based on, it is the Western (let us say British for example) manager 'a' from British culture A interacting with Polish manager 'b' from culture B. Crucially, this interaction takes place within the geographical constraints of culture B or, in our example, Poland.

Adaptive Behavior of Expatriate Managers

The previous section established the static perspective of the Hofstede model and its limitations in modelling inter-cultural contact in which one actor is likely to be in their own country and the other abroad. Can we expect the actor who is abroad however, let us say the British expatriate, to behave in the same way as if she or he were in the UK? Furthermore, can we expect the Pole to behave in the same way to the British manager as to another Pole? Research from this study indicates that neither of these are realistic assumptions. Shankar's 2001 study supports these findings and points out that the Hofstede model conceals the different roles of "home" and "host" environments. (from Bjerregaard *et al*., 2009). Analysis of the western manager interviews shows that the very fact that they are not in their own country influences their behavior and influences their chosen management style. Furthermore, the specific country they are expatriated to also has an impact. Analysis of the data indicates that the expatriate managers adapt their behavior to a given environment based on a number of factors including:

- their own preconceptions of the country;
- the depth of their immersion in the local culture;
- ability (or inability) to communicate in the local language;
- the degree of their contact with the expatriate community;
- their day to day on-job experiences;
- the strength of the organizational or corporate culture in their workplace.

It is important to note that interview partners were encouraged to tell stories of their experiences rather than asked specific questions. As such, they were not led towards pre-established conclusions. One interview partner, a senior British manager from an international chemical company, shared a story typical of those told in many other interviews:

> "I knew before I came to Poland, based on the experiences of my predecessor and other colleagues, that Poles are not good at planning and following through with plans. You know, deadlines and things like that. So, I knew. Before I came I mean. I knew that I would have to be more hands on. It's not my job but I knew I had to."

When asked if his actual experience after seven months in the country reinforced his expectations, he embellished his story with an interesting metaphor:

> "Yes. Definitely. You see, they are grasshoppers. You cannot catch them. You cannot (inaudible) them, if you want to catch them they jump. And if they, if you try to catch them from another side, they jump in another direction. The only thing to do is to (pause) watch them. You must monitor things much more carefully here. But this takes time away from the work I should be doing."

Finally, when asked if he managed people in Poland in the same way he had in the UK, the answer was simply, "No. I don't. You can't".

Analysis of the interviews suggests that pre-existing assumptions or stereotypes about one another have a strong influence on cross cultural interaction. According to the data the managers, for the most part, displayed more negative attitudes to being in Poland, where they feel detached from local culture, than if they were in another Western country.

Super ordinary In Ccm Relationships

Within the Hofstede paradigm, and methodologically related studies, one of the key components which is missing is extra-cultural (outside of a given culture) power in cross cultural interactions. Data from interviews with the 32 western expatriate managers living in Poland, none were subordinate to Polish managers yet all 32 had Poles working under them as subordinates in their corporate structures. Such a distinction, which the Hofstede paradigm fails to capture, is a significant one. This power is not the Hofstedian dimension of power distance which refers to the internal workings within a culturally homogeneous organization, but rather the power dynamic present in real-life cross-cultural interaction. It is such power discrepancies through which expatriate managers perceive and represent themselves as both managerially and culturally superior. This can be framed in terms of Hurvitz's 1965 superordinate-subordinate role relationships in which individuals see themselves in relationship to the other as dominant, equalitarian or submissive.

Expatriate managers interviewed as part of this study were asked to compare their own culture (national, corporate, institutional, etc.) with their experiences of the Polish equivalents in a non-leading fashion. The responses included value judgements and invariably interviewees described their own management culture (national and corporate) as superior and many implied that they felt their own national culture was, as a whole, superior to Polish. Those who compared their Polish experiences most negatively vis-à-vis that in their home country also tended to be the ones who had come to Poland with the most negative preconceptions of the country prior to their placement. Interview partners were also asked, in a neutral, non-leading manner, about workplace integration between expatriate management and local employees. Their responses were framed invariably in terms of stories of Polish staff integrating with what the managers perceived as Western norms. Integration itself was seen by the expatriate managers as a higher to lower interaction chain in which Poles are expected to

integrate to 'western norms' without the need for a similar or reciprocal west to east integration. One interview partner, an American director of an IT firm which had recently expanded into Poland, discussed "the effective transfer of knowledge" in such a manner that there was no doubt as to who should be, in his opinion, both disseminating and receiving this knowledge. The following comment was framed within a story about how he viewed his role in Poland:

> "They've been through a lot – the Poles – and it's been difficult. They say, they think, that they're very entrepreneurial – and they are – but it's not very sophisticated. Not very developed. What we need to do is show them – teach them. It's about the effective transfer of knowledge so that they can develop their systems and their ways of working. And it's nice to be able to do that. You know, to play a part in their development."

When asked about the integration of his team, the interview partner also echoed the sentiments of many others that the Western managers' perception of an integrated team is, in fact, one which conforms to the manager's own cultural norms:

> "It's getting better. When they learn these things it's easier for us to operate in an efficient way and some of them have been to the states to see what we're doing there – how we do things. I wish we could take them all over 'cos it would be great for them to be part of it, and to learn, and to see how much better it is when everyone understands. We're getting there though. There's a lot of learning left to do but we're getting there."

The preconceptions of other Western cultures compared more favorably to those of Poland amongst interview partners. Their opinions differed when asked about their attitude towards a subordinate Pole in Poland compared to a subordinate from another Western country (France, Germany and Canada were used as examples). Extra-cultural power distance seems to vary based on the preconceptions of the national culture of the person one is interacting with. The behavior of the Western managers may be affected by the dominant position they almost exclusively hold in such a context. Arrogance and feelings of superiority among individuals (Western managers) have consequences in organizations and produce systems of defense or resistance in those who are subject to such behavior in such a context (Allen, 2003). Furthermore, the CCM notion of cross cultural integration is undermined by Stahl and Voigt's findings that cultural distance is less detrimental under conditions of higher autonomy and lower interdependency within interorganizational collaborations (2008).

Ethnocentrism, the idea that one's own race, nation, group, etc. is better than any other, was evident in the stories told by interview partners about the Poles they interacted with in their workplace. This representation of the Other as inferior in a management context has an Orientalist element (Allen, 2015) in which Westerners in hierarchically superordinate positions represent the non-Western world "as something ontologically inferior to the west, and hence needing firm western supervision, guidance and assistance for becoming fully civilized, and developed/modern. (Banerjee and Prasad, p. 92). Another example illustrating this ethnocentric representation comes from a qualitative study of human resource management practices in foreign corporations operating in China. Chen and Cheung (2008) found evidence of "asymmetrical understanding" between Chinese and non-Chinese managers. Their analysis showed that Chinese managers are expected to be knowledgeable about western business and cultural norms but western managers were not expected have similar levels of knowledge and understanding about the local equivalent.

More geographically relevant, although not a study of expatriate management, is Nelson's 2009 study of contemporary German-Polish relations which is "based on the hypothesis that, in spite of the remarkable progress made, there is a counterintuitive continuity in how Poland is publicly perceived and portrayed in public discourse." (p. 173). In support of this hypothesis, Nelson provides examples of a popular discourse in which

Poland is represented as "the inferior and threatening Other" (p. 175). Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations?* (1993) famously referred to this cultural divide in Europe as the Velvet Curtain of cultural difference. (p. 177).

Conclusions

This paper is based on data from 32 semi-structured interviews with Western expatriate managers in Poland which has been analyzed with a view to examining manifestations of power in the representation of Poles by Western expatriate managers. The findings suggest that the managers' perception of an integrated team is actually synonymous with a team that conforms to the managers' own cultural norms and that the Poles with whom the Western managers work are often represented as managerially and culturally inferior. Hofstede's methodology provides an insight into national business cultures, but the model is unable to accurately describe the dynamic relationships present in the cases studied. As an example, according to Hosftede's model of comparing national scores over cultural dimensions, managers coming from various Western countries should face different challenges in dealing with Poles in a business context. According to the data however, this is not the case. Most managers, viewing Poland as a non-western country, feel a bond with other Westerners of a similar status and had surprisingly similar accounts of working with Polish subordinates. Chapman *et al*., (2008) came to a similar conclusion in their comparison of German and British interaction with Polish managers. By comparing the respondents' attitudes towards their foreign colleagues, the authors showed that respondents from countries with high scores for culture distance in Hofstedian terms often perceived the cultural distance as not being so great. Their study found that German and British managers perceived themselves as more culturally similar to each other than to Polish managers despite the Hofstedian paradigm measuring significantly closer similarity for Poles and Germans.

Whilst the approach adopted by this paper attempts to engage, in its own way, with the theory of "positive scholarship" in cross cultural management scholarship (Stahl and Tung, 2015), it raises legitimate and observed obstacles to the approach. The question of integration in a cross-cultural context raises the question of which cultural systems integration should be directed towards. In other words, whose integration? In an expatriate management context, managers are often sent from economically more developed, Western countries to those which are less developed or understood to be so. In such a scenario there may be resistance on the part of the expatriate manager regarding integration towards local culture yet, at the same time, an expectation of integration towards the work/management culture of the parent company. Polish employees were frequently represented by the interview partners as managerially and culturally inferior and showing a lack of integration to what the expatriate managers regard as Western cultural norms.

The continued proliferation of the Hofstede paradigm, as well as other methodologically similar models, have led to an assumption that "national cultural identity remains separate and distinct throughout the process of integration" (Boyacigiller *et al*., 2004). Rather than lessening difference, the predominant CCM paradigm can be seen as reinforcing it. As Said's Orientalism posited, the cataloguing of difference and subsequent representation on the part of those controlling the discourse (Western CCM scholars in this case), reinforces difference and division. The findings of this paper suggest that such quantification of difference fails to address the underlying representation of the Other in real cross-cultural interaction and that changes in managerial behaviours when Western managers are expatriated to Poland, combined with their superordinate positions vis-à-vis the Poles they interact with, renders the orthodox CCM approach significantly limited.

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