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Culture, an excuse? A critical analysis of essentialist assumptions in cross-cultural management research and practice

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Abstract

The essentialist cross-cultural management paradigm legitimizes a discourse that undermines the agency of people with different cultural backgrounds. The assumptions that underlie the essentialist conceptualization of culture are investigated from an attribution theory perspective. The assumptions are largely based on making culture a valid predictor of action at the expense of the actor's agency. The manifestation of the essentialist discourse in an international management context is investigated through an attribution theory framework on project professionals' accounts of intercultural encounters in large-scale construction projects. The analysis shows that culture is used as the cause of actions, but also as a means to excuse that actor for his actions. The analysis further shows how the essentialist conceptualization of culture creates a framework for using culture as both a cause of actions and an excuse. The paper provides a non-essentialist conceptualization of culture and shows how the assumptions it rests on undermine the assumption that culture is a valid predictor of action. The essentialist assumption of culture can shroud the issues that underlie the challenges currently attributed to culture. Therefore, managers are encouraged to move from an essentialist conceptualization to a non-essentialist conceptualization of culture.

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Introduction

Managers seek advice from cross-cultural management (CCM) research, for working in multicultural contexts. Much, if not most, of CCM and international business research rests on Hofstede's dimensional perspective on culture (Kirkman, Lowe, & Gibson, 2006; Primecz, Romani, & Sackmann, 2009; Taras, Kirkman, & Steel, 2010). The approach has been so popular that it has become the only legitimate approach for cross-cultural research in international business (Taras & Steel, 2009). Yet the core assumptions of CCM have not been explored to a sufficient extent (Søderberg & Holden, 2002; Stier, 2009), and there have been recent calls for bringing the field up to speed with societal changes and theoretical advances in other fields (Lowe, Magala, & Hwang, 2012; Rohlfer & Zhang, 2016; Søderberg & Holden, 2002).

One of the major concerns is that CCM research encourages managers to rely on refined stereotypes in intercultural encounters (Illman & Nynäs, 2017; McSweeney, 2002; Nathan, 2015). The refined stereotypes are based on the assumption that a national-level analysis predicts individual-level actions which Hofstede (2002) himself argues against. Further, culture is assumed to be static, determinist, homogenous, holistic, bounded (Illman & Nynäs, 2017; Nathan, 2015), and something a person "has" or "belongs to" (Søderberg & Holden, 2002) rather than something that is "done" (Dahl, 2014). Each of these elements has received considerable criticism from non-essentialists who argue for the contrary (e.g., Dahl, 2014; Geertz, 1973; Illman & Nynäs, 2017; Nathan, 2015; Søderberg & Holden, 2002). Despite the criticism, cross-cultural management largely rests on the essentialist paradigm (Primecz et al., 2009). One central criticism has been overlooked: the way essentialists legitimize a discourse among managers who use culture as an excuse by attributing causality to it. In descriptions of challenges that were collected for this research, seasoned professionals use the essentialist conceptualization of culture to reduce the responsibility of actors—to defend them, or in attribution terms, to excuse them.

Attribution theory, and specifically responsibility attribution, is rarely used in crosscultural research. However, research suggests that there are cross-cultural differences in attributions (e.g., between roles; Hamilton & Hagiwara, 1992), even though results on national differences are inconsistent (Koenig & Dean, 2010). Responsibility attribution concerns itself with how people assign and reduce responsibility for events or actions both to others and to themselves. Therefore, an important line of inquiry is how the essentialist conceptualization of culture becomes an excuse. Accounts where responsibility is reduced may consist of several different elements, such as internal and external excuses (Schönbach, 1980). We shall see that the essentialist assumptions of culture enable the use of culture as an internal excuse. The issue is both practical and moral. Firstly, if national culture continues to be used as the main explanation of managerial challenges in international settings, it may shroud underlying reasons for the challenges—for example power relations, obligations, or expectations. Secondly, the essentialist conceptualization of culture is mainly aimed at "othering" people who are not Westerners and reaffirms stereotypical assumptions that, in turn, legitimize discrimination against the subaltern.

If the cross-cultural management field wishes to remain relevant, its conceptualizations of culture should be developed to meet modern standards in other fields. It is vital that the field welcome non-essentialist conceptualizations of culture, which do not share the practical and moral issues of essentialist conceptualizations. The non-essentialist conceptualizations are not applicable as excuses because culture is conceptualized as a process or action—as "something that we do," not something we "have" (Dahl, 2014).

The objective of this paper is to illustrate how essentialist descriptions of culture manifest as excuses in practitioner accounts of challenges in international projects. The data consists of 14 interviews with project professionals who are responsible for the construction of facilities worth up to €300 million, so-called “complex projects” (Brady & Davies, 2014). By using a responsibility attribution framework (Hamilton & Hagiwara, 1992; Schönbach, 1980), the project professionals’ interviews are analyzed as “accounts” of events. As in the majority of earlier cross-cultural management research (Kirkman et al., 2006), the project professionals attributed the cause of actions to the actor’s nationality. Further, the accounts served the function of excusing the actor due to his culture.

The paper is structured as follows: first a short presentation of the construction project context; second, key concepts from attribution theory and responsibility attribution; and third, an analysis of the essentialist assumptions of culture. Next, the research design is presented, followed by an analysis of quotes that illustrate the essentialist discourses in a management setting. The results and a non-essentialist conceptualization of culture are analyzed, and finally, conclusions and managerial implications are provided.

International projects as contexts for intercultural encounters

International projects have proven to be fertile ground for investigating intercultural encounters (e.g., Illman, 2004; Mäkilouko, 2004; Nynäs, 2001). International construction projects consist of an interdependent network of actors (Hellgren & Stjernberg, 1995) where various nationalities (Ochieng, Price, Ruan, Egbu, & Moorde, 2013), institutions (Engwall, 2003; Orr & Scott, 2008), and professions (Mills, Austin, Thomson, & Devine-Wright, 2009) with a diversity of values (Långstedt, Wikström, & Hellström, 2017; Mills et al., 2009) and interests (Hellström, Ruuska, Wikström, & Jåfs, 2013) need to collaborate to finish a complex product on time, according to specifications, and within budget (Lundin & Söderholm, 1995). Hence, international construction projects involve the management of a number of technical and social challenges (Youker, 1992). International projects are interesting from a crosscultural perspective due to their complex nature, high impact on their environment, and high interdependence. The projects depend on establishing collaborative relationships between project members (Turner & Simister, 2001). Therefore, it is important that project managers are able to negotiate and manage a set of people with diverse cultural backgrounds.

Theory The legitimizing function of cross-cultural management discourses

Discourses are the ways in which things are spoken of (Kovalainen & Eriksson, 2008), and they mediate the meanings that are attributed to texts (Boje, Oswick, Ford, & Ford, 2012) through maintaining and regulating meaning-making (Fairclough, 2001). Texts may consist of verbal or written accounts, as well as material (artefacts) and events that become symbolic (Phillips, Lawrence, & Hardy, 2004). Therefore, discourses are not merely restricted to accounts but affect the meaning ascribed to actions and situations as well. Discourses in organizations can create social exclusion by creating boundaries between discourse communities, that is, the identities that are constructed in the discourse (Bragd, Christensen, Czarniawska, & Tullberg, 2008). Phillips et al. (2004) argue that discourse is a key component in the construction of realities within organizations. The legitimacy of actions is largely created through communicating and establishing a discourse that portrays those actions in the desired way (Suchman, 1995). Institutions influence discourses both within (Phillips et al., 2004) and beyond (Gelis-Filho, 2012) institutional boundaries. That is, organizations, as institutions, shape the way their members experience events (Weick, 1995) and may even exceed the national state as a medium for socialization (Triandis & Walls,

2014). Changing discourses in organizations is therefore not merely a professional practicality, but a societal issue.

The dominant essentialist discourse in management studies legitimizes essentialist discourses in multinational organizations. If organizations maintain socially harmful discourses, they will influence societal-level discourses—for example, the diffusion of the efficiency discourse from the corporate field to the educational field. This is especially important as discourses have the potential to legitimize moral transgressions (Suchman, 1995)—for example, nationalistic discourses and burning of refugee accommodations. Therefore, the discourses that are constructed within the CCM field are not arbitrary in relation to societal phenomena. On the contrary, the very way in which culture is portrayed within the CCM field is likely to affect the ways in which managers make sense of their counterparts due to the high status of the sciences. The current essentialist discourse within CCM maintains and legitimizes the belief that culture causes actions and that people necessarily behave in the ways that the national stereotypes presume. In the next section, the way people attribute causes of other people's actions is briefly described.

Attribution Theory and Responsibility Attribution

Attribution theory concerns itself with how “people make causal explanations” (Kelley, 1973, p. 107) and how they use information to make causal inferences. Causal explanations are categorized according to internal or external causes (Buss, 1978; Kelley, 1973). These are dispositional or situational—the former being internal and the latter external (Pennington, 2000). According to attribution theorists, people explain other people's actions through *causal* relationships between the observed person (disposition/internal) and the event or through factors from the environment (situational/external) and the event. A major thread in attribution theory is that observers of actions make more dispositional attributions and actors make more situational attributions of their actions (Buss, 1978); this is referred to as “the fundamental attribution error” (Pennington, 2000). The error is compounded if the actor is an outgroup member (Pettigrew, 1979). Hence, the fundamental attribution error is likely emphasized in intercultural encounters.

Firstly, the observer-actor differences may result from different degrees of information: the actor has more information about the intent behind the actions than the observer has; secondly, from the observer's beliefs about how other actors would have acted in the same situation; and finally, the actor may make dispositional attributions if the consequences of the actions are positive and situational if they are negative (Kelley & Michela, 1980). This relates strongly to research on responsibility attribution, where the perceived responsibility of an actor is studied. Responsibility is the extent to which an actor is accountable for an action or event. Hence, the focus is on how people construct their own accountability or that of others, rather than whether they find the actions blameworthy or not.

Different types of accounts that explain and interpret an event or action serve to alleviate the responsibility of an actor. The accounts are divided into justifications and excuses (Hamilton & Hagiwara, 1992; Schönbach, 1980). Accounts are used to reduce the actor's blameworthiness for an event. Justifications legitimize the event and may, for example, relate to positive effects of the events, positive intentions, or shortcomings of other people. Contrary to justifications, excuses admit the illegitimacy of the event, but attempt to minimize the actor's responsibility by providing excuses for the actions—for example, external circumstances or internal factors such as illness, biological factors, and provocations. The excuses or justifications that are provided for an event may reduce the responsibility for a wrongdoing considerably, even totally (Hamilton & Hagiwara, 1992). Several different

elements are considered when responsibility is attributed; for the sake of intelligibility, the analysis below is limited to internal and external excuses (see Hamilton and Hagiwara [1992] or Schönbach [1980] for a thorough review).

The main relevance of the present study is that of different kinds of excuses. Excuses, like attributions, are causal accounts and can be internal or external (Hamilton & Hagiwara, 1992). Internal excuses comprise factors that reside within the actor and somehow caused the actions—for example, drunkenness or mental illness. The factors that constitute an internal excuse may be controllable or uncontrollable. External excuses for actions are comprised of natural or social causes, such as bad weather (the road was slippery) or coercion (*x* forced me to drive fast).

The essentialist paradigm

How do attributions relate to the essentialist and non-essentialist paradigm within cross-cultural management? The difference boils down to the question that Dahl (2014) asks: Is culture something we have or something we do? The essentialist paradigm assumes that culture is something we have. The paradigm is predominantly linked to Hofstede's (1980) studies at IBM. However, there are other competing frameworks. Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (1997) developed a framework of seven cultural dimensions, and (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, and Gupta (2004) identified nine cultural dimensions in their international leadership studies. Additionally, Hofstede's individualism-collectivism dimension, which is commonly used in organizational studies (Kirkman et al., 2006), has been further refined into vertical and horizontal individualism and collectivism by Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk, and Gelfand (1995). Although the authors have similar points of departure and approach culture similarly, heated debates within the paradigm exist. For example, the exchange between Hofstede (1996) and Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (1997) indicates that there are considerable disagreements within the essentialist paradigm. Hofstede's (1980) framework has largely dominated the field of cross-cultural management (Primecz et al., 2009; Taras et al., 2010), and therefore work based on his framework is mainly discussed. Hofstede's definition of culture (1980, p. 21) as the "programming of the mind" is widely used. The definition indicates that culture is something that controls the person, "something we have" (Dahl, 2014). The notion of culture as a disposition within the essentialist paradigm is further emphasized by Triandis's (2009, p. 191) theory of "cultural syndromes." Cultural syndromes, like Hofstede's dimensions (1980), represent "patterns of attitudes, beliefs, categorizations, self-definitions, norms . . ." Much like the "programming of the mind," cultural syndromes assume culture to be the cause of actions. Indeed, a majority of research that applies the methods developed by Hofstede treat culture as a cause of various events (Kirkman et al., 2006). In order to show how the essentialist conceptualization of culture enables the use of culture as a cause of actions and an excuse, the following section will present the assumptions that the paradigm rests on.

The essentialist assumptions of culture

Researchers in the essentialist paradigm assume that culture is "rooted in human nature," "static," "homogenous," "holistic," "deterministic," and "bounded" (Illman & Nynäs, 2017; Nathan, 2015; Sørderberg & Holden, 2002). Supported by these assumptions, actions are predictable based on cultural membership. Essentialist assumptions grew from the positivist traditions that permeated the fields of social psychology and anthropology in the midtwentieth century (Chapman, 1997). Largely oblivious to cross-cultural research carried out in anthropology, CCM continued to develop in a positivist direction which was set by its

foundations in social psychology (Bjerregaard, Lauring, & Klitmøller, 2009). This led to the reduction of the complexity of social life to a few variables and a failure to keep up with theoretical developments in other fields (Bjerregaard et al., 2009; Chapman, 1997; Söderberg & Holden, 2002).

The view that culture is “rooted in human nature” (Nathan, 2015) or the “programming of the mind” (Hofstede, 1980) is fundamental to the view of culture as cause of action. Culture, therefore, is something individuals “have” (Dahl, 2014), that is, a disposition. Because dispositions are subject to causal attributions (Kelley, 1973), and culture is perceived as a disposition, observers (e.g., researchers) can attribute causality to it. A majority of essentialist research does exactly that (see Kirkman et al., 2006).

National culture as a static monolith is a fundamental assumption in the essentialist paradigm (Illman & Nynäs, 2017; Nathan, 2015; Söderberg & Holden, 2002). Culture is assumed to be a stable entity that is passed on from generation to generation through socialization. This assumption dismisses the radical changes that occur in societies due to technological, social, or environmental changes and, furthermore, overlooks the different groups and meanings that exist within a nation (Illman & Nynäs, 2017; Nathan, 2015).

The assumption that national cultures are relatively homogenous ignores diversity within nations and does not represent the global, multicultural world we live in today (Illman & Nynäs, 2017; Nathan, 2015; Söderberg & Holden, 2002). A world where people move between nations for work or for a better life is necessarily more diverse than the essentialists assume (Söderberg & Holden, 2002). However, the assumption that national cultures are homogenous increases the predictability of issues between people with different nationalities, at the expense of a nuanced understanding of the social context in which people live.

The notion that national cultures are pervasive is predicated on the idea of a holistic culture that determines individual behavior (Nathan, 2015). People are viewed as passive subjects who act according to their cultural programming and are unable to adapt, learn, or modify their actions according to circumstances. Thereby, myriad elements that affect actions and meaning are disregarded, such as obligations and expectations connected to roles (Hamilton & Hagiwara, 1992).

The essentialists assume culture to be determinist (Illman & Nynäs, 2017). This assumption has been under critique from non-essentialists due to its undervaluing of human agency (Illman & Nynäs, 2017; McSweeney, 2016; Nathan, 2015; Söderberg & Holden, 2002). If culture is something that controls the individual as a program controls the functions of a computer, it diminishes the individual’s autonomy and reflexive capacities (Nathan, 2015) and renders him a passive product of his social environment, rather than an active enactor of his environment.

Lastly, culture is assumed to be neatly restricted to certain geographical areas, in particular, national boundaries. However, the extent of interconnections between various geographical locations and the increased mobility of people suggest this may not be the case (Söderberg & Holden, 2002). Whether or not it is the case, essentialist researchers tend to emphasize concepts such as “cultural distance” and aim at finding a “cultural fit” between different nationalities (Söderberg & Holden, 2002).

The essentialist assumptions of culture make culture a convenient predictor of action, which ultimately is the goal of the essentialist enterprise. That is, the essentialists attempt to create methods for mediating and predicting problems that are assumed to stem from cultural divergence (Söderberg & Holden, 2002). However, what is gained through convenience is lost in relevance. Hofstede’s framework was not originally developed for individual-level analysis (Hofstede, 2002) because individual-level values differ from country-level values in both

content and structure (Schwartz, 2008). Therefore, country-level values do not represent the individuals that managers confront. The essentialist paradigm infers that national cultures are holistic monoliths that collide; however, a more refined investigation of identity shows that national culture is merely one of many identities that guide the actions of people (Nathan, 2015; Sen, 2006). Reality is considerably more complex, dynamic, and situated than essentialists assume. People enact certain roles and interpret situations differently depending on, for example, their past experiences or the power roles in the situation (Dahl, 2014; Illman & Nynäs, 2017). Most importantly, the essentialist paradigm carries positivist baggage that has been discredited in most social sciences, such as anthropology (Bjerregaard et al., 2009), and in the humanities (Illman & Nynäs, 2017). The positivist baggage reduces the agency of the people that are researched (Illman & Nynäs, 2017; Nathan, 2015); that is, it dismisses the individuals' ability to reflect and give meaning to their actions and reduces them to passive products of their culture.

Contrary to essentialists, non-essentialists assume that culture is complex and dynamic. The non-essentialist notions of culture are more process-like, where culture exists in the interaction between actors, not *within* actors. Culture then is more related to meaningmaking (Illman & Nynäs, 2017), which is dynamic (Nathan, 2015) and contextual (Dahl, 2014). Non-essentialists assume that agents influence culture through enacting and reenacting meaning systems (Dahl, 2014; Illman & Nynäs, 2017; Nathan, 2015). Hence, where essentialists largely view culture as a static, homogenous monolith that causes action, nonessentialists (e.g., Dahl, 2014; Illman and Nynäs, 2017; Nathan, 2015) treat culture as a contextual process between individuals and groups where the agents actively, if not purposefully, participate in its creation and maintenance. Therefore, contrary to the essentialist view, culture is not an element that enables predictive measures and causal inference in the non-essentialist paradigm.

Several essentialist assumptions reinforce the belief that culture is something to which one can attribute causality. Firstly, culture is assumed to be something one has; culture is perceived as part of "human nature" (Nathan, 2015). Therefore, it resembles what attribution theorists call a disposition. Culture consists of internal qualities, including character traits such as helpfulness (Kelley, 1973); tendencies such as drunkenness or mental illness (Schönbach, 1980); or in essentialist terms, for example, dimensions such as "masculine" (Hofstede, 1980). Second, the belief that culture is determinist legitimizes the belief that culture can cause action. Finally, the belief that culture is holistic singles it out as *the* cause of action. Hence, it is unsurprising that practitioners are found to make sense of people with other cultural backgrounds based on stereotypical representations even when they are aware of other reasons (see Barinaga, 2007).

Research outline

The Case organization was chosen because it has an international pool of employees, and it mainly delivers international construction projects. The data was collected during 2013 and 2014. The senior management of the organization chose the cases for the research project. The main criteria were that they deviated from what they typically delivered, for example, by size, stakeholders, delivery method, or utilized technology. The data collection involved five different projects, as well as meetings and workshops with senior managers. The sample was extended to include other members of the project management teams whenever the nature of a challenge concerned some specialized discipline, for example, law or a specific field of engineering.

Interviews enable a deeper analysis of respondents' statements and unpredicted factors may arise during them. Through interview data, one is able to analyze *how* things are said, not only *what* is said. This is crucial if one is to analyze discourses, where the *way* people talk is the main focus (Kovalainen & Eriksson, 2008). The interviews were transcribed and coded by the researchers. Teams of two to three researchers performed the interviews, with one or two interviewees. The reason for using teams of interviewers was that the challenges in the projects required specialist knowledge. Researchers representing law, engineering, and the humanities were present during the interviews so that researchers from each discipline could inquire further into topics relevant to their fields if needed. The interviews lasted from one to two hours. The researchers' notes were compared and summarized. Interviews were performed in English, Swedish, and Finnish and translated for the reader. As the author is bilingual in Swedish and Finnish, he translated the quotes for this paper. The interviews were mainly performed face to face, with some teleconferencing. The sample is mainly Western, comprised of 1 woman and 14 men, 40–60 years of age and of six different nationalities. The sample includes Finns, Americans, French, Moroccans, Indians, and South Koreans; many more nationalities were described by the informants.

Essentialist Attributions

In this section quotes are provided to illustrate how the essentialist discourse on culture as a cause of action manifests in accounts of challenges in international construction projects. The quotes serve as examples of the discourse that prevails in the project management context. The essentialist discourse was present in similar accounts in situations outside interviews—for example, in meetings with senior managers. The first quote describes a situation where a seasoned project manager is trying to make sense of a partner who refuses to receive advice. The project manager has tried his/her best to help the partner execute the scope of the project. However, s/he has had great difficulty in getting through. When s/he tries to make sense of the situation, s/he concludes that it has “something to do with their *culture*.” It would appear that s/he believes that the partner's culture causes the inability to receive advice. In the following quote the same manager asserts that the cause of the partner's desire for technical information is that it is characteristic for the partner's culture to replicate things— not, for example, the uncertainty that may stem from utilizing an unfamiliar technology.

Q1

R: “/.../I don't know if it has something to do with their *culture*, it's always, they have difficulties receiving advice - they just need to do it their own way.”

- Project manager

Q2

I: “So are there any signs that they are kind of softening up or?”

R: “For some reason they are not communicative at all/.../they just request a lot of technical information/.../I think it's something in their *culture* to replicate.”

- Project manager

The following quote serves as an example of how the essentialist discourse is manifested in the use of culture as an excuse for a supervisor's actions. Accounts are excuses if their purpose is to reduce the responsibility of an identified agent (Schönbach, 1980). In this account, the team member explains why his/her supervisor is not able to confront the

customer with the issues they face. In the first three sentences, the colleague draws on stereotypes to explain the supervisor's behavior. Following that, the colleague explains how his/her or her culture is better, but finally s/he alleviates the blameworthiness of his or her supervisor by stating that the supervisor's national culture is not as bad as some other national cultures. In this case, the informant uses stereotypes in a benevolent way to defend the manager. However, by doing so he effectively attributes the responsibility of the actions from the supervisor to the "[Asian nation] culture" and thereby undermines the supervisor's agency.

Q3

I: "...So have you been able to convince them [the customer] somehow about it?"

R: "The project team is mostly [Asian nation] and the [Asian nation] culture is different and everything should be very...But why not if I'm of a different opinion, I can present the issue and propose that.../___/ Openness, yes, and boldly ask, but, as I said, we have an [Asian nation] team and it's like this face value and all this, it's.../___/...we...for us [North Europeans] it's probably easier, but I can't say that I understand why they do things in another way.../___/ When you go to the *Far East* you have to be *even more* "good friends" all the time so that the counterpart doesn't lose face...this is maybe somewhere in between, it's *not as extreme as the Japanese but...*"

- Team member

The following quote illustrates how culture is used as an internal excuse. The informant does not analyze the situation or person, but s/he attributes responsibility to the social categories of culture and age to alleviate the site manager's responsibility and simultaneously undermine the site manager's agency. S/he argues that it is not the site manager's or the stakeholder's fault, but rather the different cultures are to blame. Before this quote, the project manager had briefly mentioned some challenges at the site. Later in the interview, one of the researchers asked him about it. The first line of the informant's answer shows how s/he defends the site manager by pointing to cultural differences and different ages. Both culture and age serve as social categories, and the differences in these are the source of the problems. Further, the mention of "human type" largely resembles the essentialist assumption that culture is something that is based in "human nature" (Nathan, 2015).

Q4

I: So you were having some problems on site?

R: Well, problems, maybe it's more about them coming from *different cultures*, and then *different ages*; the site manager is 50+ and the project manager, the client's site manager is 30, maybe around 30, that plus, one is from *Europe and one is from [South America]*./___/ It's also the human type that differs, I mean how, what approach one has, this, this...*latino* mentality is perhaps a bit more relaxed compared to European and then in the European approach the [European nation] are even [more]

precise. / _ _ _ / And also this specificity, you can see the European and Latino difference.

- Project manager

Drawing on attribution theory, the quotes show how the essentialist paradigm is manifested in accounts from international industrial projects. In the accounts, culture is used as a cause of actions to make sense of partners', supervisors', and colleagues' actions – something that the essentialist paradigm legitimizes through its assumptions. The quotes illustrate the form essentialist discourses can have in international collaboration. Culture is used as an excuse and a cause in the quotes and the agency of the actors overlooked.

Discussion The accountability of culture

The analysis of the interviews shows that managers in international settings use culture in order to make sense of stakeholders that have other cultural backgrounds than they themselves have. The statements have an essentialist character and involve both assumptions of culture as a cause of actions and a means through which actors are defended. The informants used culture as an internal excuse. They defended their stakeholders by attributing cause to the stakeholder's culture rather than motives or situational elements that may have affected the actions. In other words, culture is used in management settings as mental illness is used in law: as a disposition that reduces an agent's responsibility for his or her actions—an excuse (Schönbach, 1980). This is largely done through stereotypical representations that the essentialist paradigm has been criticized for creating (Illman, 2004).

While the essentialist paradigm mostly focuses on culture as something internal that controls the agent's behavior, the non-essentialist approaches assume that culture is something that the actors create through their interactions within a context (Dahl, 2014). Within the essentialist paradigm, culture is assumed to cause a response in the agent, who then acts in line with his or her cultural background. In attributional terms, the determinist assumptions make culture a disposition, something “we have” (Dahl, 2014), and it thereby becomes a potential cause of action. In contrast, the non-essentialists assume that agents construct culture through their actions and interactions. These assumptions render the actions of individuals not so much the result of culture but instead of context and their experience thereof (Illman & Nynäs, 2017). The actions are not viewed as a result of culture, but rather culture is created through the actions.

Even though the managers' motives appear to be benevolent, the assumption that people's cultural backgrounds inhibits them from behaving in a certain way undermines their reflexive capabilities and so serves to undermine their agency. The essentialist assumption that culture is the cause of action goes further and can include discrimination of different kinds (Nathan, 2015). Someone, for example, may not be assigned to a task because the “cultural distance” between the stakeholders is too big.

The current essentialist discourse that prevails in cross-cultural management legitimizes the discriminatory use of culture by portraying cultural differences as objective facts where culture is used as an excuse. This inhibits the evaluator from discovering the situational causes for the assumed dispositions that may or may not be manageable. When culture is assumed to be action, it ceases to be a disposition, and actions become more difficult to dismiss as “culture.” The essentialist paradigm assumes culture to shape the agents, who further act as they are culturally “programmed.” Non-essentialists, on the contrary, assume actors to create and shape culture through their actions.

This does not mean that there are no differences in culture; on the contrary, there are customs, institutional factors, and many other things that differ between, for example, national and ethnic cultures. However, in the non-essentialist paradigms, these are situational factors that affect actions; they are not dispositional causes that control agents. In the determinist tradition, culture shapes and controls agents' actions, while the dynamic paradigm assumes a reciprocal relationship where culture is the result of interactions between agents.

Towards a non-essentialist CCM

Recent alternatives to the essentialist paradigm have developed within the social sciences, particularly anthropology (Bjerregaard et al., 2009). A main theme in these developments is the contextualization of culture and a movement beyond cultural determinism. Contrary to the essentialist perception of culture, the non-essentialist perception of culture is "rooted in the human condition...dynamic...internally riven, heterogeneous, changeable and with blurred boundaries" (Nathan, 2015). Thus non-essentialists avoid the reinforcement and legitimation of stereotypes characteristic of the essentialist paradigm. Nonessentialists focus on culture as the meanings and purposes actors ascribe to their environment. This involves a shift from the actors' cultural background to the way they experience their context. That is, actions are determined based on how actors experience their environment and the meanings associated with it (Dahl, 2014). Hence, the problems that essentialists relate to a bad "cultural fit" (Søderberg & Holden, 2002) relate more to the meaning that the parties ascribe to the situations in which the differences are salient than to the differences per se (Nynäs, 2001). Causality cannot be attributed to culture because the central aspect of intercultural encounters is interpersonal skills and the context of the encounter, not whether or not the parties' cultural backgrounds are compatible. When the focus shifts from the cultural backgrounds to the persons who actually meet, the attribution of responsibility to culture is undermined.

According to non-essentialists, culture is a dynamic system that is negotiated by actors as they engage with a complex network of social systems in their lives (Nathan, 2015). Culture is seen as something constantly in flux, changing according to various circumstances (Illman & Nynäs, 2017). Culture provides an actor with several frameworks for interpreting situations, including professional, religious, and personal frameworks (Nathan, 2015). The dynamism of culture is related to the individual's ability to negotiate rules and roles in context (Dahl, 2014; Nathan, 2015). The choice of framework depends on personal experiences of a situation as much as socially produced structures. Taking into account the complexity of the social context enables a more nuanced study of "culture." This is especially important in CCM, since the variance within nations is significant and the instruments in current use are insufficient to capture the complexity of the social context and its varying meanings (Nathan, 2015; Søderberg & Holden, 2002). The dynamic nature of culture makes culture *less* reliable as a predictor of action because as circumstances change, so do actions associated with them. Further, as the experiences of contexts are assumed to be guided by how the actor experiences them, a myriad of possible outcomes exist. Therefore, the predictive powers and the causal nature of culture are undermined by the non-essentialist assumption of dynamism.

In line with the dynamic and contextual nature of culture, culture is assumed to be internally contradictory or “riven” (Nathan, 2015). There are several cultural systems within a national culture, and these systems involve conflicts despite appearing similar (Nathan, 2015). For example, such a seemingly homogenous group as the Finnish Lutheran church is in the midst of internal conflict about whether or not to allow same-sex marriages; not allowing the unions contradicts state law, under which same-sex marriages are legal. The question of same-sex marriage shows how two complex systems are interdependent and how a single subject can relate to several systems through which people can make sense of an event. This supports the non-essentialist argument that national cultures are heterogeneous (Nathan, 2015). Nations consist of many different groups; there are different ethnicities, strata, and occupations that form their unique complexes of meaning. These assumptions, too, decrease the predictive power of culture through asserting that cultures involve conflicting systems and that cultures are heterogeneous.

The most prominent difference between the essentialists and non-essentialists is that the latter do not assume culture to be a determinant of action. Rather than falling victim to their culture, actors negotiate and construct it in an iterative process. There are, of course, social constraints on individuals that vary and affect their actions. The actors are not, however, regarded as subject to their culture, rather the culture is (re-)enacted in the interaction with and across its boundaries. Therefore, the actors’ being able to reflect on their own and others’ actions has a key role in shaping the culture (Illman & Nynäs, 2005). Nonessentialists do not assume that culture causes actions. They assert that personal actions and meanings are affected by, for example, power, status, and structure (Dahl, 2014). In contrast to the essentialist paradigm, the assumptions of culture in the non-essentialist paradigm empower the individual as an actor. Actors are assumed to be active interpreters of the situations they experience. They are not assumed to automatically react according to a “programmed” mental schema.

From an attributional perspective, culture has a different function whether it is something that we have or something we do. If culture is something we *have*, it can be treated as a disposition similar to, for example, a bad temper or personality. However, if culture is something we *do*, that is, if culture *is* action, then it does not have a similar causal characteristic as an essentialist definition of culture. The essentialist paradigm is identifiable in accounts of other people’s actions through the excuses and causal links that informants provide when describing intercultural encounters. In CCM research, culture is assumed to be the cause of challenges and the like (Stier, 2009; Taras et al., 2010; Taras & Steel, 2009); similarly, the essentialist paradigm is present when causality is attributed to categories, such as national culture or age, and the context is overlooked.

There are considerable alternatives to the essentialist paradigm in CCM. It only requires CCM researchers to widen their horizon. The essentialist and non-essentialist paradigms within cross-cultural management rest on different assumptions (Dahl, 2014; Illman & Nynäs, 2017; Nathan, 2015). It is especially important in the management sciences to understand what assumptions cross-cultural research is founded on, since it will affect the solutions provided for the issues at hand. Exclusion based on cultural background is likely to continue if a discourse that views culture as the principal, not to say the sole, cause of action persists to dominate the cross-cultural management field. If the CCM field continues on the current trajectory, there is a risk that scapegoating culture will continue, and CCM will remain stuck in legitimizing stereotypical depictions of people from different cultural backgrounds. Cross-cultural researchers have an obligation to further the enterprise of encouraging research beyond the essentialist paradigm so that the legitimation of stereotype production ceases.

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Conclusions

To conclude, the dominant essentialist discourse in cross-cultural management legitimizes the use of culture as the principal cause of actions in international contexts. The assumptions that the essentialist paradigm rests on create the conditions for predicting actions on the basis of national culture. The analysis of the assumptions underlying the essentialist and non-essentialist paradigms shows that they have different implications for responsibility and agency. The analysis of the interviews illustrates how causality is attributed to culture and how culture is used as an excuse in accounts of challenges in international projects. This undermines the actor's agency by assuming that the actor cannot reflect on his or her own actions but acts as s/he is predisposed by cultural background. The non-essentialist assumptions of culture are based on the belief that actors behave according to the experiences of situations. Therefore, non-essentialist assumptions of culture undermine the causal relationship between culture and action. The cross-cultural management field must move beyond the essentialist assumptions of culture if it aims to increase understanding of management practices in different national settings. Otherwise, there is a threat that it legitimizes exclusion on the basis of different cultural backgrounds.

Practical implications

The practical implications of the study are mainly aimed at managers. Firstly, if diversity within organizations is taken as a serious concern, managers need to take a look at the discourses on culture in their organizations. If the discourse is predominantly essentialist, the managers must be aware of the assumptions that underlie the discourse and the inequalities it can justify. If managers and the management profession distance themselves from essentialist conceptualizations of culture, other factors that pertain to the social environment, or personal experience thereof, may be revealed. National culture as a guideline for management practices is simply not sufficient to take into consideration the complex web of social systems in which people act. In international businesses where people work in different institutional environments and are subject to different systemic pressures, and where relationships are often short-lived and the work tempo is high, it is *understandable*, not *acceptable*, to simply attribute challenges to cultures. When one does, one overlooks the context of the actions as well as the actor's experience of the situation, which may be manageable. Blaming culture for the challenges that managers face denies an individual the ability to meet the challenge by attributing it to a phenomenon so large as to be unbeatable by a single manager. Hence, corrective actions are not done. Adopting a non-essentialist perspective on culture has a practical benefit, as managers cannot disregard an issue as cultural but are forced to look deeper into it to find the source of challenges.

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