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The Human element in Maritime Accidents and disasters
– a matter of communication
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The world merchant fleet is a global workplace and has a long tradition for sailing with crews that represent many different nationalities. Two thirds of the world merchant marine vessels have crews that are multi-national and multi-lingual (Horck, 2005). Communication and language therefore, become vital components of multinational company's ability to conduct their business adequately and play a role in global activities. The absence of communication and language skills can make the daily passing of information difficult, herby allowing miscommunication, which can jeopardize maritime operations for all involved.

Human error has increasingly become a focus area for shipping companies, insurance companies and maritime authorities. Many investigations of accidents are attributed human error and it becomes especially necessary, that research continues to contribute with knowledge and methods that can be used in the analysis of incidents in the maritime sector. The reason for investigating human error and how it is constructed in maritime workplace's, is not to point the finger at one or several persons, but to understand "why peoples' assessments and following actions made sense at the time, given the circumstances that surrounded them" (Dekker, 2002:65).

The workshop,"Conceptions of culture in international communication – limits to cultural explanation" adresses a critical approach to static, objective and context-independent concepts of culture. Conceiving of another culture as objective, persistent and evenly shared features within a nation may bring some basic order while facing an unknown culture, but it may also have unintentional outcomes, e.g. it may lead to a deterministic view of other cultures, thereby reinforcing prejudices and underestimating other forms for identity; it may tend to hide the universality and the individuality which every man also acts up to, and which makes empathy possible across cultural differences. Above all, it risks blinding the participants for the specific context of a given communicative situation.

This workshop does not seek to pull the participants towards one single perspective, but invites to reflection about diverse perspectives of cultural sense-making in international communication.

Hofstede's cultural dimensions: a critical approach

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Hofstede's cultural dimensions

Hofstede is undoubtedly the most famous and most cited researcher in the domain of cross-cultural study of organisation. He has derived four, later on five, main 'cultural dimensions'[1] from examining work related values in employees of IBM (power distance, individualism /collectivism, masculinity/femininity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term/short-term orientation)

The immense success of the framework of Hofstede may be due to the fact that it reduces the complexities of culture into quantifiable and comparable cultural dimensions, and that it can be

easily applied to various intercultural encounters. But of course, Hofstede also has his critics. A review of articles critical to his framework can be summarised as shown in the table below.

Some of the critique is radical, rejecting the framework of Hofstede; some are merely correcting or refining his framework. Yet another group warns against the extensive, nearly exclusive use of his framework. As noted by Søndergaard already in 1994, Hofstede's concepts are sometimes used "as a set of assumptions taken for granted". We do agree that the dominance of Hofstede is problematic.

[1] There are other well-known dimensions: High/low context (Hall); Universalism/particularism (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner)

We claim that an unquestioned use of his framework may lead to fallacies, and that there is a need to develop alternative views. ´Culture' and 'intercultural communication' are such complex concepts that they deserve a variation of perspectives and approaches.

Brief summary of Hofstede's critique

In-built western bias (e.g. the dimensions are chosen from a western point of view)	Baskerville 2003 Magala 2004, Osland & Bird 2000
Static, essentialistic concept of (national/organisational) culture (e.g. the unit of the analysis being a territorially unique nation-state)	Baskerville 2003 & 2005, McSweeney 2002, Magala 2004, Myers & Tan 2002, Tayeb 1994, Wildavsky 1989
National culture determinism preventing seeing other forms of identity (e.g. studies demonstrate respondents identifying more with age or gender)	Baskerville 2003, Gooderham & Nordhaug 2001, Harrisson & McKinnon 1999, McSweeney 2002, Myers & Tan 2002
A variety of methodological problems (e.g. Questionnaires measure self-representation, not practice; bipolarisation of cultural dimensions; 'unzipping' of dimension shows other results).	Harvey1997, Osland &bird 2000, McSweeney 2002
The target of the critic is not as much Hofstede as the simplified and uncritical use by others of his concepts.	Søndergaard 1994, Williamson 2002, Bhimani 1999, Osland &bird 2000

In the following, the focus will be on one assumption, namely the bipolarisation of cultural dimensions and its implications. I will primarily lean on an article by Osland and Bird (2000), whose concepts of "cultural paradoxes" and "value trumping" are constructive alternatives or supplements to the framework of cultural dimensions.

Bipolarisation and stereotypes

> "I attended a course recently, where a psychologist told us that they [the Filipinos] are enormously obedient to authorities. They are the second-most obedient in the whole world where the Danes are the second least obedient to authorities. Therefore, they find it very difficult to handle with the responsibility we give them."(Danish engineer) (Knudsen 2004)

This quotation stems from a Danish engineer. He volunteered to be interviewed about the cooperation between Danish and Filipino seafarers, and even before the interviewer asked any question, he had put forward this statement. Obviously, he had heard about the cultural dimension of power distance, '*the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally*´ (Hofstede 1997:28), which

is low in Denmark and high in the Philippines (ibid: 26); and he presented it as a proof that cooperation is impeded by cultural differences applying evenly for *all* Filipinos.

If cultural dimensions are used in a bipolar way, they may tend to make us see the world as either/or - black/white. They prompts us to see qualities as inherent - within the people's head, not in the relations between people, as unchangeable and as evenly distributed between people sharing the same culture. Thus, a simplified, generalising and superficial use of cultural dimensions can confirm or even reinforce a stereotyped view of other cultures, as seems to be the case with the quoted engineer. As remarked by Osland & Bird, both simplified cultural dimensions and stereotypes can be helpful as first steps – or 'best guesses'- (Osland Bird 2000: 66) when meeting people from an unknown culture. Osland & Bird compare understanding of another culture to putting together a jigsaw: Bipolar cultural dimensions and stereotypes may be a useful guide at the first trials; but if they remain unquestioned and unchallenged, *"it may lead individuals to think that the number of shapes that pieces may take is limited and that pieces fit together rather easily."* (ibid:67). At worst, it may even prevent an individual to gain new insight from growing experience. Another possible pitfall of bipolar dimensions relates to the ethnocentric (western) bias of the framework of Hofstede, as pointed by several critics (Baskerville 2003 Magala 2004).

Derrida, among other writers, has pointed out that the tendency to perceive in bipolarisation is a fundamental way of thinking in the western tradition. He also claims that, in bipolarities, structures of opposition are maintained by oppressing the elements that do not fit in the structure. Moreover, the two terms are not based on a logical relation; they constitute a hierarchical relation where the downgraded term is expounded on the premises of the upgraded one. The downgraded term becomes a mere supplement to the marked term (which is considered the original or authentic one). Beside, the illusion of a definitive opposition is only sustained at the price of overlooking all the internal oppositions (Dahlerup 1991:33-45). Thus, bipolarisation may lead to ethnocentrism at two levels: 1) by universalising a specific western way of thinking; 2) by defining the terms of the opposition and which one is positively charged (cf. in the quotation of the seaman above, how obedience leads to lack of responsibility)

Cultural paradoxes and Value trumping
For sure, people do not always behave in a way that fits what we have learnt about their culture – but if we keep thinking in bipolarity**,** we may tend to ignore the pieces that do not fit the picture, or to explain them as exceptions that prove the rules. Osland & Bird, on the opposite, invite us to take cultural paradoxes as a means of overcoming or differentiating our stereotypes. They have identified six possible explanations for cultural paradoxes

• The tendency for observers to confuse individual with group values
• Unresolved cultural issues (e.g. ambivalence, contradictions)
• Bipolar patterns (both ends of the dimension are to be found in a culture)
• Role differences (and other forms of identity, e.g. age, gender, profession)
• Real versus espoused values (what people do and what they say they do often differ)
• Value trumping (recognition that in specific contexts certain sets of values take precedence over others).

All six cases of explanation are worth being elaborated, but 'value trumping' deserves to be stressed, as any cultural paradox can hardly be understood without taking the context into consideration. Whereas routine references to cultural dimensions may lead us away from the

specific context in the given situation, paradoxes can be used as a welcome reminder of the complex, the dynamic, the relational and the contextual content of 'culture'.

This workshop argues for not ascribing culture and nation as being the fundamental determinants of international differences in a maritime company or an accident in the maritime industry, but to be open to many different kinds of answers for the many different kinds of situations that arise in the industry.

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