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Chapter VI

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The Role of Nationality and Culture in Conflict Management

SUMMARY: Introduction. – 1. Understanding cross-cultural differences on personal and institutional level. – 2. National cultural dimensions and conflict management styles. – 3. The impact of culture on conflict management directive's implementation. – 4. Conclusions.

Introduction

“Culture is an essential part of conflict and conflict resolution. Cultures are like underground rivers that run through our lives and relationships, giving us messages that shape our perceptions, attributions, judgments, and ideas of self and other. Though cultures are powerful, they are often unconscious, influencing conflict and attempts to resolve conflict in imperceptible ways¹”. In order to capture better these in-depth meanings provided in metaphoric beginning of the current chapter it is necessary to provide the reader with a short description of some conflict-related terms before proceeding with above mentioned specific topic focusing on the role of culture in conflict management. Conflict at large is related to some kind of disagreement or a situation where the parties (of this conflict) can make opposing choices². Generally, conflicts can be classified as intrapersonal – involving just one person (usually related to one's behaviour that is inconsistent with the values of this person) and interpersonal, which involve social conflict. In such conflicts there are at least two parties where each party can be an individual or a group. Both parties perceive that they have conflicting interests with another party. Such interests can be related to goals and/or values. It is essential to mention that values and beliefs differ tremendously across cultures, although these can be different also among people employed within the same organisation or company. This chapter will address different cultural contexts and on the role of these in conflict management, focusing also on national cultural contexts.

National cultures have been studied by many researchers from the fields of sociology, psychology, cultural anthropology etc. One of the most groundbreaking conceptualizations, grounded by his studies, has been created and carried out by Geert Hofstede. Despite the fact that his approach to national cultural dimensions has been criticized by other cross-cultural researchers³,

¹ M. LEBARON, *Culture and Conflict*, in *Beyond Intractability* (Guy Burgess and Heidi Burgess eds.) – Conflict Information Consortium, University of Colorado, July 2003, <http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/culture-conflict> (accessed: November 10, 2015).

² Z. AYCAN, R.N. KANUNGO, M. MENDONÇA, *Organizations and Management in Cross-Cultural Context*, London, 2014.

³ B. MCSWEENEY, *Hofstede's Identification of National Cultural Differences – A Triumph of Faith a Failure of Analysis*, in *Human Relations*, 55(1), 2002, p. 89 ff.; B. GERHART, M. FANG, *National Culture and Human Resource Management: Assumptions*

it has been proved to be consistent and correlated with studies of different value scales as used by Shalom Schwartz and Ronald Inglehart and also the scales and results achieved within World Values Survey⁴.

Hofstede's theory of cultural dimensions identified four dimensions of cultural variability. These dimensions are individualism/collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance and masculinity/femininity. Later on long-time perspective was added. All these dimensions are useful when one wants to compare internal differences between cultures, but because of their generality, these dimensions cannot be applied on the personal level.

By comparing the above-mentioned cultural dimensions cross-nationally, Hofstede operates with 'a national culture' as a total characteristic applicable to any country. At the same time some studies show that one's (or conflict's) proximity to national borders can influence degrees of cultural identity, which can in turn, influence 'conflict styles'⁵. Thereby, a large variation in conflicts and also in conflict management techniques should be expected and applied also within the borders of a particular country. This is why the role of a common national culture should not be overestimated. Culture *per se* is likely to be just one element among all possible factors which determine the outcome of the conflict management process. Thereby, this outcome depends on the level of cultural diversity among the actors involved (i.e. the parties of the conflict and mediators). Here we should see always as a positive aspect when the third party (e.g. mediator team) is going to be composed of members with different national or ethno-cultural background. In such a cases, while working as an integrated whole, each member will make the final outcome much more valuable by contributing his/her own talents, experiences and outlooks.⁶ On the other hand, it is obvious and often the case that in cross-cultural conflict situations incorporation of the team members belonging to the culture of the "opposing party" cannot always be provided.

This is why understanding of "the silent language" – a metaphor for culture given by Edward Hall⁷ – plays a significant role. This 'silent language' is human behaviour that exists outside people's conscious awareness. It includes evolutionary concepts, practices and solutions to problems and shared experience of ordinary people. According to Hall⁸ it: "Provides insights into the underlying principles that shape our lives." These principles are not merely interesting (e.g. for a researcher or for a practitioner), but extremely valuable and practical, especially in the area of conflict management and in respect of mediation. Numerous books and articles have been published in the field of intercultural communication.

The current chapter will focus on explaining Hall's conceptions on understanding cultural differences which are considered invisible and intangible among the members of any culture. Hofstede's theory-based approach subscribes to describe national cultures all over the planet through his cultural dimensions. Influences of national culture as essential factors will be elaborated within conflict management process context. Possibilities and difficulties of application of mediation (as a way of conflict management) are addressed in the last section. In particular, it reflects on personal-cultural and institutional perspectives with regard to the application, among different cultures, of centrally elaborated conflict management directives and on some aspects of administrating these policies on national level.

and Evidence, in *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 16(6), 2005, p. 971 ff.; G. AILON, *Mirror, Mirror on the Wall: Culture's Consequences in a Value Test of Its Own Design*, in *The Academy of Management Review*, 33(4), 2008, p. 885 ff.

⁴ A. TAUSCH, *Hofstede, Inglehart and Beyond. New Directions in Empirical Global Value Research*, <http://dxdoi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2606243> (May 14, 2015).

⁵ R.A. POSTHUMA, G.O. WHITE III, J.B. DWORKIN, O. YÁNEZ, M.S. SWIFT, *Conflict Resolution Styles Between Co-Workers in US and Mexican Cultures*, in *International Journal of Conflict Management*, Vol. 17, No. 3, 2006, p. 242 ff.

⁶ C.A. LEEDS, *Managing Conflicts Across Cultures: Challenges To Practitioners*, http://www.gmu.edu/programs/icar/ijps/vol2_2/leeds.htm (accessed: November 3, 2015).

⁷ E.T. HALL, *The Silent Language*, New York, 1973.

⁸ *Ibid.*

1. Understanding cross-cultural differences on personal and institutional level

It is of necessity to underline the significance of understanding the cultural differences that have an essential role in managing possible upcoming conflicts and tensions in negotiations. Hall&Hall⁹ have elegantly worded the controversy when explaining person-society relationship in relation 'culture': "Even though culture is perceived personally, it is nonetheless a shared system." Hall points out that although culture is always experienced personally, there exist few individuals who are able to comprehend what a *program of behaviour* actually is. He explains that persons belonging to a common cultural group not only share information, but also the methods of coding, storing and retrieving of that information. Cultural codes are understood as symbols and systems of meaning that relevant for members of a particular cultural group or sometimes for several groups of that society. Revealing these cultural codes cannot be taken as any kind of simple task, as these codes are a result of the accumulation of ages including history and experiences rooted in human traditions that require time to become understood by contemporaries¹⁰.

The methods of retrieving and understating of coded and stored information vary from culture to culture. Being aware of what kind of information people from a different cultural group need is one of the keys for effective international communication. There have always existed "hidden codes" of behaviour which can be understood by the help of a "code breaker". Studies have shown – quite unexpectedly – that only less than 10% of all communication and interactions is in culture's verbal messages (i.e. expressed via language). Most well-known examples of dominating in non-verbal communication include a smile, a wave or a wink. All these of gestures and signs communicate something without the help of written or oral language. Even if one does not say a word, this silence can be a communication in a non-verbal way. In Sweden, when one becomes angry, he or she does not yell to another person, but starts to speak in extremely quiet voice instead. Without attributing any meaning to this change in voice volume, a person from a foreign culture can misinterpret the situation, and this non-verbal part of message remains uncoded. In general, while persons communicate it is important to pay attention to the fact that what has been said may not matter much, whereas the way it was said can be very important.

For Hall, another dimension of culture is opened via assessing the share of context and information balance in particular cultural environment. Context is the information that surrounds the event. These two components (context and event) which interlace with each other in order to produce a certain meaning – as a rule – exist in different proportions. This proportional balance depends on the particular culture. High context (HC) communication or message is the one where lots of the information is already "stored" on the person and very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message that will be communicated. But in low context (LC) communication the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code (e.g. two lawyers in the courtroom during a trial). Examples of HC culture are people from Japan, Arabic and Mediterranean countries. These are cultures where people have extensive information networks among family, friends, colleagues and clients. Because of (intensive) daily information exchange their messages are labeled as high-context. LC people are most of all Americans, Germans, Scandinavians and other Northern Europeans. From conflict management perspective it is necessary to know that people from high-context cultures are significantly less confrontational than persons belonging to low-context culture¹¹.

2. National cultural dimensions and conflict management styles

Conflict resolution involves a large share of duties among many professional fields. For example, a study has demonstrated that managers in average spend as much as one fifth of their valuable

⁹ E.T. HALL, M.R. HALL, *Understanding cultural differences*, Yarmouth, 1990.

¹⁰ J. HYATT, H. SIMONS, *Cultural Codes – Who Holds the Key? The Concept and Conduct of Evaluation in Central and Eastern Europe*, in *Evaluation*, Vol 5(1), 1999, p. 23 ff.

¹¹ E.G. CHUA, W.B. GUDYKUNST, *Conflict resolution styles in low- and high-context cultures*, in *Communication Research Reports*, Vol. 4, 1987, No. 1, p. 32-37.

work time for merely resolving the conflicts and disputes¹². The ongoing globalization will only increase the total time that is spent for managing these conflicts¹³. Namely, such global developments will require much more intensive and frequent interactions from all those participating individuals with variety of different national backgrounds. Thereby, it would be helpful to learn which conflict resolution styles and tactics are favoured by people representing various national cultures. A framework for learning, assessing and understanding these differences of general cultural values across countries has been proposed by Hofstede¹⁴. Among his four dimensions of cultural values, especially *individualism/collectivism*'s has been applied as a theoretical basis for explanation of conflict management when measured and evaluated via cross-cultural perspective.

Generally, individualistic nations (e.g. United Kingdom, Netherlands or Belgium) tend to prioritize personal goals and preferences, while the collectivistic nations, (e.g. Pakistan, China or Japan) on the other hand tend first of all to prefer in their conflict management activities to support their group needs¹⁵. In particular, collectivism is related to indirect and passive communication expressed through avoiding and obliging styles of conflict handling while emphasizing the value for passive compliance together with preserving relational harmony in each possible situation of conflict. Individualism is associated with direct and active modes of expression, involving competition and dominating styles of handling conflict, emphasizing the values of autonomy, competitiveness, and the need for control¹⁶. This means that there exists dependence between one's culture (individualistic or collectivistic) and the manner in which this person chooses to engage in conflict¹⁷.

Above mentioned bipolar categorization of individualistic and collectivistic cultures in conflict situations can be explained through the ways people perceive their interactions. By most of the people of individualistic cultures the interactions are seen similarly between groups and individuals (e.g. friends or family), and thereby all possible disagreements and conflicts are taken as an intrinsic or unavoidable facet of their social life. People of collectivistic cultures, on the contrary, do not like social disorganization or disagreements. Cross-cultural conflict management situations within the European Union member states should not be seen so much affected by individualist-collectivist dimension, even though the overall split between Eastern and Western cultures remains. Within the EU these situations will be daily visible in the member states of more complex multi-ethnic composition i.e. in multi-cultural states. Even countries with quite homogenous ethnic composition (in respect of individualist-collectivist dimension) have started to train their mediators (e.g. in criminal cases in Estonia, intending to incorporate cross-cultural aspects in mediators' training, considered highly useful in the cases related to handling of violence in intercultural marriages' families).

Power distance dimension of Hofstede is an useful parameter to be applied both in conflict management studies and in practice, as it claims (put shortly) that people of some cultures tolerate and accept a higher degree of "unequally distributed power" when compared to the people in other cultures. In the case of high power distance, the relationship between subordinates and their bosses is seen as 'dependence'. While low power distance cultures take this relationship as one of existing 'interdependences' in their societies¹⁸. In high power distance cultures subordinates will matter-of-

¹² K. THOMAS, W. SCHMIDT, *A survey of managerial interests with respect to conflict*, in *Academy of Management Journal*, 19, 1976, p. 315-318.

¹³ M.W. MORRIS, K.Y. WILLIAMS, K. LEUNG, R. LARRICK, M.T. MENDOZA, D. BHATNAGAR, J. LI, M. KONDO, J. LUO, J. HU, *Conflict management style: Accounting for cross-national differences*, in *Journal of International Business Studies*, 29, 1998, p. 729 ff.

¹⁴ G. HOFSTEDE, *Culture's consequences*, Beverly Hills, 1980; G. HOFSTEDE, *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions, and Organizations Across Nations*, Thousand Oaks, 2001².

¹⁵ K. OHBUCHI, O. FUKUSHIMA, J.T. TEDESCHI, *Cultural values in conflict management: goal orientation, goal attainment, and tactical decision*, in *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 30, 1999, p. 51 ff.; M.W. MORRIS, K.Y. WILLIAMS, K. LEUNG, R. LARRICK, M.T. MENDOZA, D. BHATNAGAR, J. LI, M. KONDO, J. LUO, J. HU, *Conflict management style: Accounting for cross-national differences*, cit., p. 729 ff.

¹⁶ W. WEI, E. YUEN, J.J. ZHU, *Individualism-collectivism and Conflict Resolution Styles: A cross-cultural study of managers in Singapore*, <http://www.adr.gov/events/2009/nov19-2009-materials-article.pdf> (2001).

¹⁷ D. CAI, E. FINK, *Conflict style differences between individualists and collectivists*, in *Communication Monographs*, Vol. 69, 2002, No. 1, p. 67 ff.

¹⁸ G. HOFSTEDE, *Culture's consequences*, cit.

factly agree and follow their boss, avoiding to challenge this person or present their own proposals or solutions in a conflict situation. On the contrary, in low power distance cultures, negotiations with subordinates are anticipated and overall readiness to oppose or challenge bosses is a way for finding a solution for a conflict. Both parties want to co-operate towards finding a solution for any dispute via expressing their own view-points. If their consultations cannot meet an acceptable result, they may turn for a help to a mediator. Overall, leaders in low power distance countries in fact even encourage independent thinking and any contribution to problem solving is expected. In short, any person who has his/her background in low power distance culture and has to deal with another person of higher power distance culture has to be sure that he/she contacts and talks to the right person in the hierarchy in order to deliver his/message. In a way, only this approach will ensure that his/her contribution will have some influence or impact to the correct problem or conflict resolution.

In current globalizing world the progress and development of ICT and ODR technologies can be seen as a tool for shortening the mentioned power distances. On the other hand – unequal possibilities in accessing this kind of tools (once technically available for masses) can even increase the inequalities among different groups and countries. Although some scientists have claimed that “the world is flat”¹⁹, the sharp differences caused by societal stratification and variation in financial possibilities will continuously hinder the improvement in this kind of access and frequently we have to conclude that the “world is spiky”²⁰. Still a hope remains that some European efforts will facilitate the access to ADR and ODR processes for more citizens. Examples of e-banking and experiences of e-governance, once applied as a standard in all EU member states will, through their effectiveness, lower the power distances and enable faster resolutions of conflicts through the use of ADR/ODR technologies.

Masculinity/femininity dimension is extremely important to understand when handling cross-cultural conflicts. While in masculine societies people value competitiveness, aggressiveness and direct expressions of one’s aims and motivations, then in feminine countries people focus much more on how to establish and maintain stability and solve their problems via co-operation. For example, managers try to achieve consensus, all people try to follow principles of equality, including solidarity and quality in their personal and work related activities. Conflict situations are expected to be resolved mostly via compromises and negotiating. Personal free time, family related obligations and overall flexibility is supported on all levels of society. Focus is on individual well-being; openly exposing or discussing one’s achievements and professional status in societal or family surroundings is not considered as a proper way of behaviour. In conflict situations, whether there is required participation of a mediator or not, any decision has to be made with involvement of all parties. By contrast, in masculine countries, authoritative personalities (e.g. leaders, managers) are likely to act in decisive or assertive ways, and their focus is predominantly on equity, top competitiveness and high performance. Thereby, conflicts in these countries can be resolved merely by fighting them out.

Morten Deutsch²¹ demonstrates via his studies a certain degree of similarity to masculine-feminine dimension of Hofstede when he explains conflict resolution techniques by dividing these in specific ways. According to his conceptualization, a conflict can be resolved via “cooperative” or “competitive” processes. Both process types are associated with different conflict resolution strategies. By understanding the conditions that support either cooperative or competitive conflict resolution processes, together with their country-specific details, it is possible to foresee which circumstances will lead to constructive or destructive processes in each observed case of conflict resolution.

Uncertainty avoidance as the fourth dimension of national culture corresponds to the level up to which the members of a given society accept uncertainty and when they start to feel uncomfortably. Societies or countries which are characterised by a high degree of uncertainty avoidance have rigid codes in their beliefs and values and try to control their future by rules and regulations (written and

¹⁹ T.L. FRIEDMAN, *The world is flat: A brief history of the twenty-first century*, New York, 2005.

²⁰ R. FLORIDA, *The world is Spiky*, October 2005, <http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/images/issues/200510/world-is-spiky.pdf> (accessed: November 13, 2015).

²¹ M. DEUTSCH, *Constructive Conflict Resolution: Principles, Training and Research*, in E. WEINER (ed.), *The Handbook of Interethnic Coexistence*, New York, 1998, p. 199.

unwritten). Countries with low uncertainty avoidance level have much more relaxed attitudes, for them practical activities count much more than laws and regulations.

3. The impact of culture on conflict management directives' implementation

In each cultural context (e.g. country) some alternative dispute resolution methods (ADR) are more accepted and utilized than others (if there are any ADR methods actively use at all). These methods have to be acceptable and compatible with behaviour and expectations of the majority of people of that country. For example, a study about Estonia²² shows that its population has little in common with the ADR philosophy overall. However, in numerous countries the rules on mediation have been formally passed despite the lack of 'cultural readiness' of their inhabitants. Another comparative study²³ of 28 European Union member states carried out for assessment of the impact of Mediation Directive (2008/52/EC) finds that mediation in civil and commercial matters is still used in less than 1% of the cases in the EU. A dilemma arises related to the application of the directive, as making mediation obligatory may increase its use, but it also might provoke resistance from lawyers and from society in general as it may be perceived as not suitable for a particular legal and/or common culture.

In the current globalised world understanding of the importance of the above-described dimensions of culture is very important, however we have to remember that even if small fragments of culture are brought to awareness, these fragments cannot be changed because they are very personally experienced and because people cannot act or interact at all in any meaningful way except through the medium of culture. Any culture relates to its environment, but these local cultural dimensions are mostly hidden from view.

Another two aspects that are essential to remember about cultures: they are continuously undergoing a change, and they are connected with the symbolic dimension of life, where we are constantly creating meaning and enacting our identities. Cultural messages from the groups we belong to give us information about what is meaningful or important, and who we are in the world and in relation to others -- our identities²⁴.

Differences in these identities and cultures continuously play significant role also in adoption of mediation-related laws and directives. Not unlike federal state, European Union is an amalgamation of many different states, cultures and ethnicities. Thereby, 'one-size-fits-all' approach cannot be prescribed in order to implement general mediation programs to be used in each member state²⁵. It has been suggested that EU member states with minimal or no mediation tradition would benefit much more when becoming much deeper committed to the values behind the institutions that the EU tries to harmonize. Simply formally following the centrally passed regulations and directives does not make their national legislation more credible²⁶. Hopefully this approach will ease the directives' implementation on the institutional level. It is also expected that follow-up interdisciplinary research in the area will be necessary in the future.

4. Conclusions

It is necessary to take into account dynamics within the time periods that the conflict resolution can take, thereby I would propose that the requirements for Hofstede's cultural dimensions of individualism-collectivism, power distance, masculinity-femininity and uncertainty avoidance can

²² M.C. SOLARTE-VASQUEZ, *The institutionalization process of Alternative Dispute Resolution mechanisms in the European Union. The Estonian legal developments experience*, in *L'Europe Unie*, No. 7-8, 2014, p. 104.

²³ DG-IP-PD (2014). *'Rebooting' the Mediation Directive: Assessing the Limited Impact of its Implementation and Proposing Measures to Increase the Number of Mediations in the EU. Study*.

²⁴ M. LEBARON, *Culture and Conflict*, in *Beyond Intractability*, cit.

²⁵ DG-IP-PD (2014). *'Rebooting' the Mediation Directive: Assessing the Limited Impact of its Implementation and Proposing Measures to Increase the Number of Mediations in the EU. Study*, p. 210.

²⁶ M.C. SOLARTE-VASQUEZ, *The institutionalization process of Alternative Dispute Resolution mechanisms in the European Union*, p. 109; see also Chapter III in this *Volume*.

vary throughout the life cycle of a conflict, and therefore these cultural values, beliefs and behaviours have different influence during the its stages. Cultural patterns in the process of conflict resolution reflect cultural patterns in society at large²⁷.

Broader acceptance of mediation (as a primary tool of conflict management in civil and commercial cases) by lay persons among East European countries and cultures – with history of low personal trust and limited sharing of knowledge – remains somewhere in the future. High prosperities towards using litigation in each emerging case or for conflict management or resolving a dispute determine this kind of behaviour in these particular countries while strict enforcement and mandatory adoption can cause even reverse effects among population. Efforts have to be made to understand ‘closed histories’ of these countries, the knowledge about their past will be the key to facilitate the process. Even ‘mediation’ being conveyed as ‘conciliation’ into Estonian legislative language demonstrates that ‘cross-cultural’ translation, when involved, can expose the exact meaning of the term to a risk. But these meanings rather often contain deep cultural assumptions that require time and a lot of interaction to be fully understood, especially by the people whom these new terms concern. In the contemporary world technology can be a key to assist overall awareness and help to overcome the difficulties that emerge from cultural differences. Effective use of ICT and online dispute resolution technologies will hopefully contribute to the cases of cross-cultural dispute resolution. At the same time, changing or harmonizing deeply rooted conflict management structures, existing for decades or centuries in histories of any cultural group, is seen as a continuously challenging task for the whole EU in the future, but also for individual Member States of the Union which in many cases have already or are going to have much more cultural diversity that any prognosis has foreseen it.

²⁷ U.K. MOHAMMED, G.R.T. WHITE, G.P. PRABHAKAR, *Culture and Conflict Management Style of International Project Managers*, in *International Journal of Business and Management*, Vol. 3, No.5, 2008, p. 3 ff.