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# Sensemaking of managing cultural differences in a Finnish-Polish project



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## KEYWORDS

Sensemaking;  
Managing cultural differences;  
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Discourse;  
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Finnish;  
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**Summary** Recent decade has witnessed the increase of interpretive cross-cultural studies. This paper adds to these studies by examining sensemaking of managing cultural differences from a critical discourse analytic perspective. Focusing on a Finnish-Polish setting, this study specifies four discourses used in such sensemaking: 'cross-cultural learning', 'emotional dependency', 'rational managing', and 'situation-bound'. These findings add to the existing interpretive cross-cultural studies, firstly, by broadening the theoretical understanding on discursive practices used in cultural construction. Secondly, these discourses are shown to provide the managers a way to construct subjectivities and national power relations, which, under right circumstances, may lead to significant organizational outcomes. This highlights the need to understand sensemaking of managing cultural differences as an important discursive resource.

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## Introduction

Traditionally, the international cross-cultural management research has built on the positivistic, functionalist paradigm, providing multi-value models for increasing understanding on national cultures and their implications in organizational behavior (Adler & Gundersen, 2008; Hoeklin, 1995; Hofstede, 1991; House et al., 2004; Leung, Bhagat, Buchan, Erez, & Gibson, 2005; Lewis, 2006; Schneider & Barsoux, 2003; Thomas, 2008; Trompenaars, 1993). However, during the past decade, needs to extend and complement these studies with other cultural conceptualizations, methodologies, and portrayals have been increasingly voiced (Jackson & Aycan, 2001, 2006; Jacob, 2005; McSweeney, 2002; Sackmann & Phillips, 2004; Søderberg & Holden, 2002; Yeganeh & Su, 2006).

As a consequence, within the organizational studies, a growing body of interpretive cross-cultural studies has shifted attention and focused especially on the socially constructed aspects of (national) cultures in cross-national organizational interaction (Ailon-Souday & Kunda, 2003; Barinaga, 2007; Gajewska-De Mattos, Chapman, & Clegg, 2004; Heijes, 2011; Vaara, Risberg, Søderberg, & Tienari, 2003; Vaara, Tienari, & Sääntti, 2003; van Marrewijk, 2010; Ybema & Byun, 2009; Ybema, Vroemisse, & van Marrewijk, 2012). Indeed, these studies have complemented the traditional positivistic, functionalist research by highlighting that in cross-national interaction cultures are dynamic, constantly emerging and evolving social constructs. Consequently, this line of research has examined how cultures are socially constructed by sensemaking (Weick, 1995), that is, discursive (re)construction and (re)interpretation of cultural identities, characteristics, and differences (e.g. Vaara, Risberg, et al., 2003a; van Marrewijk, 2010).

Yet, it is fair to say that so far the interpretive cross-cultural studies have largely focused on the organizational actors' sensemaking of (national) cultural differences per se

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(e.g. Ailon-Souday & Kunda, 2003; Barinaga, 2007; Vaara, Risberg, et al., 2003a; van Marrewijk, 2010). However, the purpose of this paper is to add to these studies by examining *sensemaking of managing cultural differences* (cf. Adler & Gundersen, 2008; Koot, 1997; Schneider & Barsoux, 2003) from a critical discourse analytic perspective, arguing for the need to better understand also this form of social practice. Hence, this study examines not only social construction of cultural differences, but also especially discursive construction of managerial actions and interventions in relation to the socially constructed cultural differences. In this way, the paper enables to better understand sensemaking of managing cultural differences as a discursive resource for organizational actors, as well as some of its organizational implications.

Therefore, by drawing on sensemaking (Weick, 1995) and critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1993, 2005; Wodak, 2004), the paper develops a theoretical perspective for examining the following two research questions: What kinds of discourses managers use in constructing a sense of managing cultural differences (cf. Fairclough, 1993, 2005; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002)? What kinds of underlying meanings and effects this sensemaking produces (cf. Heracleous, 2004; Langley & Abdallah, 2011)?

Consequently, the empirical focus of this paper is on managerial sensemaking, and particularly, on the managers of a complex Finnish-Polish 'large engineering project' (cf. Miller & Lessard, 2000). This focus draws, firstly, on the acknowledged criticality of managers' cultural sensemaking in the organizational outcomes of cross-national interaction (e.g. Söderberg & Vaara, 2003; Weber, Shenkar, & Raveh, 1996). This stems from their central yet paradoxical position in these processes (Vaara, 2000, 2003). Secondly, the focus on the Finnish-Polish project, carried out in Poland by a Finnish parent company and a Polish subsidiary, provides increased revelatory potential (Langley & Abdallah, 2011) and enables both learning and analytic or moderatum generalizations (Heracleous, 2004; Stake, 1995; Tsoukas, 1989).

Building on narrative interviews of the project managers, the paper then makes the following contributions to the prior interpretive cross-cultural management research: Firstly, in the managers' interdiscursive blend (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002), the paper finds evidence of four discourse types used in sensemaking of managing cultural differences: 'cross-cultural learning', 'emotional dependency', 'rational managing', and 'situation-bound'. Consequently, the paper examines and specifies their effects in terms of managerial subjectivity (cf. Knights & Morgan, 1991; Laine & Vaara, 2007). Taken together, this adds to the existing interpretive cross-cultural studies by broadening our theoretical understanding on discursive practices used in cultural construction.

Concomitantly, and secondly, this distinction highlights the need to understand sensemaking of managing cultural differences as another important discursive resource (Barinaga, 2007) alongside the previously recognized sensemaking of cultural differences.

That is, the paper highlights how from the CDA perspective the distinguished discourses not only deal with selecting or choosing optimal strategies for managing cultural differences (e.g. Adler & Gundersen, 2008; Schneider & Barsoux, 2003) – or merely represent what has been done 'in reality'.

Rather, each of the identified discourses are shown to provide the managers a way to construct power relations between nationally identified groups, which under right circumstances may lead to significant organizational outcomes (cf. Fairclough, 2005; Sayer, 1992).

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows: Firstly, the recent developments and directions of the cross-cultural management studies is briefly reviewed. This builds toward the interpretive cross-cultural studies, and eventually to the theoretical perspective of this paper. Then, the case study setting and research methods are introduced. This is followed by the analysis of the empirical data. Finally, the paper discusses the main findings and concludes on their contributions to the existing cross-cultural research.

## Toward sensemaking of managing cultural differences

As brought forth, traditionally the majority of the existing international cross-cultural management research has built on the positivistic, functionalist foundations (e.g. Hofstede, 1991; House et al., 2004; Trompenaars, 1993). This has led to the popularity of multi-value models and frameworks, where national cultures have been depicted by statistical measures positioning a given nationality along a set of value dimensions.

Consequently, the strength in this vast body of literature (see e.g. Kirkman, Lowe, & Gibson, 2006 for a review) has been on developing a universal language and an operationalization for analytic purposes; for describing and comparing national cultural differences and for elucidating their implications on organizational life. This has then enabled to examine the effects of national cultural differences on management and leadership practices as well as on organizational behavior and performance (e.g. Barkema & Vermeulen, 1997; House et al., 2004; Kogut & Singh, 1988; Newman & Nollen, 1996).

Crucially from the perspective of this study, this body of literature has developed understanding on the different strategies and approaches used by organizations and managers in managing cultural differences (e.g. Adler & Gundersen, 2008; Koot, 1997; Schneider & Barsoux, 2003). For example, these studies have shown how organizations and managers, in general terms, can either *ignore*, *minimize*, or *utilize* cultural differences in their operations (e.g. Schneider & Barsoux, 2003).

However, the traditional cultural understanding and the multi-value frameworks have also become a target of scholarly criticism. In addition to methodological deficiencies (Graen, 2006; McSweeney, 2002), these frameworks have been argued, for example, to generalize national cultures to homogeneous entities without duly considering the myriad of different cultures (e.g. ethnic, racial, religious, and regional cultures) constantly emerging and evolving within and across national boundaries (Nasif, Al-Daeaj, Ebrahimi, & Thibodeaux, 1991; Sackmann, 1997; Sackmann & Phillips, 2004; Söderberg & Holden, 2002; Tayeb, 2001). Also, needs have been expressed to view cultures as multilevel constructs, to address the simultaneous interplay of multiple cultures as well as the hybridization of cultural differences (Jacob, 2005; Sackmann & Friesl, 2007; Sackmann & Phillips, 2004; Teerikangs & Very, 2006).

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