Moving beyond stereotypes in managing cultural difference: Communication in Danish—Japanese corporate relationships

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Summary   This study addresses challenges in intercultural management between corporate headquarters in Denmark and subsidiaries/alliance partners in Japan. It takes its point of departure in the prevalent cross-cultural stereotypes of 'national cultures', shows the limitations of using such stereotypes and offers a social constructivist framework that captures the complex processes of understanding others in intercultural collaboration. Based on interviews with 50 managers in five companies, this study presents lessons learned and describes how management practices in the intercultural workplace can result in several approaches from "ongoing culture clash" to situations where cultural differences are considered a strategic asset. It illustrates how some managers perpetuate stereotypes, how some managers move beyond stereotypes, and how others are actually able to "trump" them.
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Introduction

International collaboration inevitably involves consideration of cultural differences, which in turn involves the construction of stereotypes. Stereotypes are simplified categorizations and preconceptions of others. They may at best hold some truth about groups of people and nations. However, stereotypes may also be fixed, resulting in ridged perceptions that hamper fruitful communication (Beamer & Varner, 2005). This study investigates how managers employ stereotypes to cope in bicultural encounters. It illustrates how some managers merely use commonly held stereotypes or generalized images, and how others gain a more elaborate under-

standing of their partners that enable them to even "trump" values in intercultural encounters (Osland & Bird, 2000). Theories of cross-cultural management are still influenced by essentialist and positivist scholars (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1993; Hall, 1959; Hofstede, 1980), who view national culture as an inherent and relatively stable variable. The present study, on the contrary, is rooted within the social constructivist paradigm, in which culture concerns the construction of meaning and its "negotiation" in social encounters (Brannen & Salk, 2000; Clausen, 2007). Stereotypes, in other words, are viewed as relational and ongoing constructions (Tienari, Søderberg, Holgerson, & Vaara, 2005). Rather than merely looking at national characteristics, which are admittedly important within limits (Zander, 2004) and efficient as first best guesses (Adler, 2002), this project emphasizes contextual influences, cultural dynamics, and change (Blasco & Gustafsson, 2003; Lauring, 2008; Sackmann & Phillips, 2004).

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It is generally asserted in intercultural studies that people from Western and Asian cultures are at great risk of misunderstanding each other (Samovar & Porter, 1997). Many of these studies have focused on the US and Japan, and thus highlight the differences between two very different countries and cultures (Ito, 2000). The present study presents a Danish view on Japan. It deals with difference, but it is also important to emphasize that there are a great number of similarities in the values and cultures of the two countries (Clausen, 2006).

The Japanese market is known to pose a number of challenges to foreign companies, including complex systems of business networking, demanding and highly quality-conscious consumers, and hierarchical and family-oriented management practices (Brannen & Salk, 2000; Matsumoto, 2007; Nakane, 1970). Danish companies face considerable challenges in dealing with Japanese managers. In turn, Japanese managers equally struggle to connect with their Danish counterparts (Clausen, 2006). While ''interface'' questions are still relatively under-prioritized in comparative studies concerning Asia (White, 2002), this study focuses on the practices of five Danish companies and involves feedback from *both* Danish and Japanese managers. The research questions are: How do managers perceive and address cultural problems between Danish headquarters and Japanese subsidiaries/alliance partners—and how do they cope? Each company in this study has its own strategic goals, corporate values, and business aims that influence management practices and challenge individuals in intercultural encounters.

This report is structured as follows: it begins by defining the concept of cultural stereotypes. The discussion is followed by a list of theoretical generalizations from the existing literature on cross-cultural management between Denmark and Japan. Subsequently, the notion of value-trumping is introduced. Then the methodology of the study is discussed and the cultural coping practices of the five companies are presented. Finally, the conclusion presents a discussion of the study's findings and their practical and theoretical implications.

What are cultural stereotypes?

A cultural stereotype is a widely held, generalized and simplified conception or image of a specific group of people (Varner, 2000). Stereotypes may be divided into stereotypes of self (auto-stereotypes) or stereotypes of others (hetero-stereotypes) (Hofstede, 1980). The construction of stereotypes often serves as a way to create a group identity by establishing a positive image of self (in-groups) against less positive images of others (out-groups) (Tajfel, 1982). Stereotypes of national cultures and people, such as the Japanese, are group-oriented may be created and perpetuated through historical accounts and media representations. Creating stereotypes of the national culture of groups of people within multinational corporations may also serve to build organizational identity (Vaara, Risberg, Søderberg, & Tienary, 2003). The acceptance of taken-for-granted images or generic stereotypes of a given country or people (such as Danes are blond or Japanese are polite), is referred to as a ''low-level'' form of stereotyping. It is often based on lack of personal contact (Osland & Bird, 2000, p. 66). Whether harmful or helpful to the image of those being categorized, stereotypes may be fundamental to the way we process information and make sense of experiences. ''Without any generalizations, meaningful intercultural business communication would become even more difficult than it is already. To concentrate only on the individual and approach every intercultural communication situation from ground zero would be exhausting and not very productive'' (Varner, 2000, p. 46). Mental categories, scripts, and schemata from cognitive psychology explain how we think and process information (Beamer & Varner, 2005). We perceive other cultures through schemata or projections based on our own culture. Importantly, ''for the most part, we do not first see, and then define; we define first and then see'' (Lippmann, 1922, p. 81). People rely on their own personal perceptions to understand encounters. In other words, ''Individuals hold preconceived conceptions about the culture and project mental schemata of other cultures based upon their preconceptions'' (Beamer, 1995, p. 158). For example, rather than perceiving Culture B on its own terms, we experience it through our own cultural filters to arrive at a projected understanding (Culture B1). People from the other culture, in turn, perceive us (Culture A) through their projected image (Culture A1). Thus, we act based on our projections of the other culture, rather than on the culture itself. Beamer and Varner (2005) argue that the more knowledge we acquire about another culture the closer our projection approaches the other culture, and the better and more successful we become as managers. While this is encouraging, it poses some questions: What kind of information should we seek, and how much information is necessary to manage and behave appropriately in a foreign culture? How can we gain an understanding of other people's projections of our own culture in order to better understand their communication? And, What sort of mutual learning processes and mindsets will encourage the projections to converge over time?

There are no simple answers to these three questions. However, in this report, knowledge, motivation, and the ability to manage in culturally different settings (Thomas & Inkson, 2004) are used as analytical categories to assess how managers perceive others and maneuver in cross-cultural settings.

Cultural stereotypes in management research

Cross-cultural management studies are dominated by efforts to identify patterns and variables that describe differences across cultures (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1993; Hall, 1959; Hofstede, 1980). I refer to these studies as ''generalization studies''. Culture in this research tradition is understood as the ''mental programming of the mind'' (Hofstede, 1980), implying that cultural behavior is predetermined and the outcome of cultural encounters is predictable.

Hundreds of cross-cultural studies have employed the dimensions of masculine—feminine, uncertainty avoidance, individualist—collectivist, and egalitarian—hierarchical to measure and characterize national cultural values and their influence on cross-cultural management (Hofstede, 1980). In the original study by Hofstede (1980), the index scores for Denmark and Japan place the countries at opposite ends of the bipolar continuums. Thus, Danes have feminine values, while the Japanese have masculine values. Danes do not