

ABOUT CULTURE AND VALUE. RESEARCH ORIENTATIONS IN CROSS-CULTURAL MANAGEMENT

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Abstract. *The paper examines the main challenges addressed to intercultural management, in relationship with knowledge management, and considering the context of economic and cultural globalization. Romania, as a recently adhered EU country is examined, from the perspective of its cultural potential and managerial problems. Various models are discussed, and solutions to further implications in the field of intercultural management research are proposed and critically debated.*

Key words: globalization, intercultural management, knowledge management

1. The crop of a wandering thought

I don't think that cross-cultural management can be yet considered a scientific major. It is an attempt which allows us to understand reality and to act against it, but the approach is still looking for its foundations. For the moment, it lends most of its operational concepts to other majors. So, the concept of culture itself is the aim of a large diversity of lectures.

In short, I would like to say from the very beginning that an enumeration of the various definitions of culture seems to be rather related to erudition and doesn't bring any answer to our questions. On the contrary, it seems more reasonable to say which is the place culture takes in its association with the notion of management. In this area, two separation lines can be drawn.

The first one refers to the way culture is perceived : like a difference or like a well-defined subject. Most of the authors start from the idea that culture must be understood as a factor which allows *differentiation between groups*. It is the case of comparative studies : others' culture is presented in comparison with the observer's, with ours. We have noticed that these studies cannot avoid neither the ethnocentrism, when the researcher's logic serves as a reference in order to decode what is being studied, nor the stereotypes, even when the results are said to be "scientifically observed". This concept animates the majority of the cross cultural management approaches which are based on national cultures (Hofstede, 1994), even if they glorify an opening and interaction attitude (Adler, 1997; Trompenaars, 1993).

The comparative study has always a lot of success. The similarities and differences analysis suggests a vision upon the things which seem to be incontestably true. The analysis tools relax by their apparent simplicity, which allows for the confidence in the possibility of mastering the complexity of a world "in plural". The success which could come from this thing creates the impression of objectivity.

By the analysis tools this study created in order to attract the other cultures, it may prove to be interesting. This does not allow, though, the thoroughgoing cultural reality and, in any case, it can only take the researcher to the studied culture's limit. Among others, culture looks like a social construction specific to every group. Here, the study looks like one of anthropology. This will be privileged by an approach to culture which interprets and gives sense to the relation the individual sets with other persons and with the environment in which he lives. The human

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species is the only ones who has a culture, and culture can be defined as the way persons humanize the world.

As Edward Hall (1976) says, three major characteristics characterize this anthropologic approach of the culture. This approach is not inborn, but gained, and so there can't exist such a thing as a "mental programming"; its different approaches are organized in a system which evolves from the apparent we perceive to the less apparent, which we must discover.

The second separation line is about the role we want culture to have. Associated with experience, customs and even values, culture has a key role, related to economic development and to company performance. Considered as a variable among others, culture is totally *instrumentalized*.

This approach can interest society (the "good" culture which creates prosperity, Fukuyama's "trust") or the company "in Search of Excellence". Then we go into *cultural design*. Cultural elements, present in a country or in a society, affect mechanically the management, in the absence of any references which can be traced in the organizational context. It would be enough to create inside a company its own culture, which may break with the national culture, carrying progress-oriented values, and which can only lead to managerial excellence. These speeches are misleading. The ones which never reached "excellence" have as a result the maintenance of the illusion that there is another place, an Eden, country or society, which is not at their disposal, but which definitely would force them to deny a part of their identity.

For us, the notion of culture must be approached in a different manner. Against these ways of thinking, we suggested to consider culture as being *the one that gives sense* (Dupriez, Simons, 2002 ; Weick, 1995). To understand a culture means to know what interpretation give the ones who live in it to situations, events, to their actions and to the others', how do they react at these (d'Iribarne, 2004). At the society's level, the decoding of a culture means the attempt to identify the values which endure a certain economic and social system. Also, it is usual in our days to wonder which are the globally traded values. Also, which are the traded values of the ones who reject globalization or whom globalization rejected. Knowing these values allows us to highlight the behaviors of the ones who believe in them.

Whatever the encountered cultural characteristics and wherever they might be found, one cannot act by opposing good cultures to the bad ones, cultures favorable to the entrepreneurial spirit to unfavorable cultures, cultures who would facilitate the transition process to the ones that would slow it down. The right challenge, to be addressed to by any researcher, would be to know the culture of the organization s/he finds himself/herself in. And so we get into the intercultural management field.

For us, this is a form of management which is capable to recognize the existence of different cultures; to integrate the values they are based on in the routine of different enterprise functions and to combine the taking into consideration of each culture's particular features with the global strategic requirements (Dupriez, Simons, 2002). At the conceptual level, this definition does not formulate a totally satisfying answer to all the questions we raise. Indeed, we are constantly looking for a convincing analysis of the interaction between cultural elements and the other factors playing a role in a company. We will come back to this subject.

However, the proposed definition is not completely uninteresting. When it is guided to "what it makes sense", the approach of cultural dimension allows the comprehension of certain behaviors of the participants and maybe, orients them. By relying on the workers' motivation, it acts as well on the interaction between different components of the company. No matter the way taken and the adopted practices, intercultural management is inseparable from "*recognition of*

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the other". This is a central element which will be found not only in reviewing the collective representations and the social practices, but also in the perspectives opened to the companies.

In its most simple interpretation, recognition may be considered as an identification action. In this way, a patrol will "recognize" the field; it is about scientific recognition, which only signalizes things. To take an example from Romania, we can recognize the capacity of finding their way in different situation as an important characteristic of the workers of this country.

This form of recognition does not tell much about a person; this is recognized in his individual characteristics. To recognize someone as an individual means, firstly, to accept that the values at the base of his existence have as much importance for him as ours have for us. It is also to be taken into consideration that Romanians, just like the other Europeans, have the right of being recognized, as far as their own identity is concerned. From the active voice, the verb switches then to the passive voice: being identified as an individual, the other person is recognized. *Both for an individual and for an entire people, to be recognized means to be recognized as man or as a woman in the quality of a man or of a woman.* This represents mostly the abandonment of any biases or prejudices that are generally attached to the situations in which historical contexts have placed them. This is valid for Romanians too. Then, from passive voice we switch to reflexive voice: being recognized allows you, in your turn, to recognize yourself, meaning to accept yourself in your identity, without the pressure of positive or negative evaluations, which history, always moralizing, has tied to your stereotypical identity.

This last interpretation, with no doubt fundamental to the recognition concept, is at the heart of intercultural management.

Last, in French, at least, recognition may mean as well gratitude. We quote Marcel Mauss, with his analysis of the received gift and the gift offered in return. The person who received an essential gift, as the one of being recognized in his own identity cannot offer in return but an at least equal gift: to recognize in his turn. We came back to what creates the essence of intercultural management, the place where anyone seeks for seeing the things which make sense for the other.

Here you have, in short, a small conceptual revolution. We can see how much we have advanced, but there are, still, lots of questions open, especially for Belgian and Romanian researchers, embarked upon a common voyage.

2. Exploring new paths

Our point of view regarding culture might be confusing. Because it allows raising questions on the visions of the world, it looks more authentic than the ones spread in the specialized literature. Nevertheless, this proves to be harder to be reached. How could we, concretely, observe what is proper to the cultural dimension?

Behind life's manifestations in society, exploring cultural reality means exploring the vision of the world and the shared values of the group we are referring to.

As we have already underlined, culture is present at multiple layers of life, directing itself from visible to less visible, from artifacts to art objects or to any sign from outside the behavior, from rules of conduct to expectations, to values and results of our existence, which we must try to decode and to deepen their significance.

"Culture is hiding, more than revealing things" (Hall, 1984), and the majority of the important elements in a culture remain undiscovered. However, to each situation appearing in

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the ordinary life corresponds a code which will have to be decoded by the one willing to discover the depth of cultural reality. Signs are necessary to identify cultural references.

From a certain point of view, cultural reality can be approximated starting from the relations that the individual sets with the time, context and space he is living in (Hall 1976). Habitually mastered in our daily behavior, these relations express in their way the codes of values integrated by each individual. This code of values influences considerably the perceptions anyone could have on a message, formal or informal, so that they appear both as the consequence and the revealer of cultural references. Finally, we should also pay attention to the most deep implicit expectations of each social person; impregnated with the code of values of a group, because they are as well a form of expression.

Edward Hall's relations with time, space and context are well known today. I would like to invite you to meditate on the ways of perceiving the cultural reality, which are *perceptions* and *expectations*, discussed in an ongoing research paper, initiated by our colleague, Blandine Vanderlinden.

The perception represents an access to reality, our access to reality. The perception does not mean the truth and in his way, Merleau-Ponty assures us: "the perception is not supposed to be true". He adds: "Everything I have learned about the World, I learned through own experience" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945).

This means that every sign, every received message appeals to a lot of references that have already been interiorized, which suggest a personal way of "reading" what has been transmitted. Before being read, the message passes through the filter of our vision about the World. In other words, perception is subject to the cultural references of the one receiving a message. Actually, there is nothing amazing in the fact that a message can be perceived differently in multicultural teams.

Clarified, perceptions reveal more of the values carried by persons or groups. But they sometimes highlight things that are subject to privacy and cannot be found out but through the reactions they generate. The other way around, the knowledge of the values carried by a person or by a group sometimes allows the anticipation of perceptions that they will have about transmitted messages and further, the anticipation of possible reactions.

On the other side, that of observing behavior norms, the adhesion to one group awakes in the individual certain expectations regarding that group. It is the reward he expects for his contribution: for always respecting the older ones, he expects in his turn to be respected by the youngest ones; for always serving the society, he expects the safety of his work or freedom at work, or even a promotion. These expectations can differ from one culture to another. Often, they are implicit and interiorized. If they do not come into life, they generate bitter deceptions. In a team, the deception of unaccomplished expectations can become the cause of a lack of motivation. Nevertheless, for decoding the perceptions and expectations, we need other instruments, too.

Through different studies on companies, we tried to identify the cultural references which are expressed through *collective representations* and their translation into the social practices of the studied groups. These studies on collective representations and their association with social practices we conduct, presently, with Camelia Fratila have especially proven to be productive in finding more questions raised by research conducted in intercultural management.

This point of view actually allows the decoding of social practices in the middle of collective representations, identifying the dialectical relationship that is established among people and by this, identifying the actors of change; but in the same time, it proposes an analysis

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framework which integrates the cultural and economical dimension without reducing culture to an instrumental variable.

Whatever the considered level, what does make sense for a group is expressed in the collective representations that belong to it. The term is not new: the expression has already been used by Emile Durkheim in 1898 and 1961, Serge Moscovici (1976) has brought it into present by highlighting the process of changing and evolution of the knowledge systems. In the sociological field, the concept has been captured by a movement that enlarged it and applied in different departments of psycho-sociology. In its initial formulation, this notion is situated at the interface between social and psychological. As any interface notion, it presents an important heuristic value for social sciences. In this way, without unconditional borrowing of the path designated from this point of view, we could extract from it the conceptual or methodological points that, adapted or enriched, help us in better approaching the relations between culture and economic change.

To refer to our preoccupations in a more general manner, we may note that collective representations are the representations that people have on their own individuality and on their place in society. They appear, quoting Paul Ricoeur's formulation as "symbolic mediations contributing to the installation of social binding; what they represent are identities that offer a determined configuration to these social bindings in the elaboration process" (Ricoeur, 2004).

This function of symbolic mediation puts first the problem of the social entities' identity, by highlighting their openness to new impulses and the modality in which they are transposed into social practices.

The identity of social entities, openness to new impulses and the actors' behavior in the companies are sending us directly to the questions that are asked at organizational level, which make the object of intercultural management. Actually, here are raised all the questions put by transition and openness to a global society.

This work of recognition, considering all the meanings of the term, is far from being easy and it is not amazing that many researchers give it up, preferring to launch themselves into more accessible criteria, but which reveal less of a complex and continually changing cultural reality.

The path that leads to this is hard to follow. And the ones that choose to confront it are not at the end of their problems. To be afraid of cultural reality is not the endpoint, but only the first step of intercultural management. Of course, we cannot forget the reality of management.

A path that proved to be productive is the one that does not seek to rearrange cultural reality in its organizational context. In a certain amount, is about beginning the contextual analysis of the studied organization. This approach seems to have been pushed into two directions that can very well complete one another.

For Nigel Holden (2002), knowledge management constitutes a major resource of the organizations. He considers intercultural management ("cross-cultural management"), as well, as a form of "knowledge management", of organizational apprenticeship which is to become an interaction network at global scale. But still, we can't reduce the whole problem of strategy and administration at its unique dimension of knowledge management.

Blandine Vanderlinden has proposed a larger view, which is based on a contextual approach of the organizational culture. She presents some analysis tools which place the observed cultural elements in the global cultural context of the company, and which allow tying each type of culture to its organizational context. In order to use the obtained knowledge, she presents a model of interpretation based on a systematic approach of the company. Considering the strategy, technology, organization and culture as sub-systems, this model of interpretation

should be able to provide information on each of them's coherence with the general system, that is, with the company considered as a system. The model of interpretation proposes references on which to base recommendations which can serve as a guide of action. These models of analysis and interpretation are far from being *passé-partout* instruments to which we resort in each situation. On the contrary, they have to be rebuilt each time, depending on the context of the company being studied. There is an interest in conducting such type of research in different countries, presenting, each time, specific characteristics. For this, several MIME collaborators work, otherwise partners of their Romanian colleagues (Blandine Vanderlinden, Camélia Fratila, Salomé Dandenne).

So, we got to study the climate of the companies. A first step was made in this direction when, with the complicity of Camelia Fratila and Blandina Vanderlinden, we were able to prepare what we call today "the Furachov case", which will soon be published. Starting from the cultural and organizational context of a company, questions about the capacity of handling desired changes of strategy were raised. Obviously, besides organizational culture, we must take into account also other professional cultures, as cultures of craft. A study on which Blandine Vanderlinden and Katleen Hubert have worked together is now in progress in a vast industrial project in Quebec.

3. To be open to new horizons

So far, we have questioned the issues related to sense in organizational world. It is indeed the specific ground for intercultural management. But the problem of sense raises at different levels, at the level of the individuals, as well as at the one of nations.

For 17 years, Romania has been involved in a process of transition to the market economy. Out of necessity, it adheres to the world movement of economy globalization. At the same time, it adheres to the European Union, on January 1st, 2007.

Romania, Europe and the globalized world are values carriers. They are far from being identical and we have to ask ourselves which values will prevail in the blocks that will be formed.

In Romania, the transition to a market economy points toward a cultural model which is based on the occidental modernity. But this model is far from being the main source of Romanian culture. The roots of this culture can be traced just in the same amount, if not in a larger one, in central Europe, Russia and in the Balkans, and to this we must add almost half a century of communist regime. It is not our business to trace the cultural portrait of today's Romania. Others, more entitled, will do it in a more pertinent way.

But maybe it is useful to disclose the "bridges" that bind the Romanian cultural world to the West, besides which it has gone, whom it had flattered, wanted and finally found again. The Western reference was a powerful engine for Romania's aspirations to modernity and to sovereignty, ferments of the construction of a national identity. But the modernity itself has evolved very well under the effect of globalization. As a starting point, we have found an inheritance which can be traced back to the Enlightenment. For a while, this modernist philosophy made sense for the individual, as well as for the society, and constituted the source of the Western glamour.

But for many decades, the representative values of modernity are experiencing a crisis. To make itself operational, modernity has absorbed other trends that altered very much its content. It tends today to exacerbate the individualism that it claims from its origins, it sees only *today*, ignoring *tomorrow*, and it hides under the most trivial materialism. So, globalization relies

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on a more individualistic modernity, more materialistic and atemporal, in a context of fight and competition.

And the Europe there, inside? Its position appears to be a paradox. On one side, carrying its own values of humanism and democracy, it cultivates them and defends them strongly. On the other side, under the pretext of respecting the market logics, it appears to subscribe to the dependency between the domain and the borne fief of globalization. This global system does not exist without questioning today's world and especially countries like yours.

For those who have adhered to the globalization field or were adjacent to the globalization, a question raises, whether the system is able to give sense to human action. Of course, it can motivate people to whom it proposes to get into the battle to succeed in life, that is to climb the stairs, to gain more money, and to obtain more power. Life is presented as being a battlefield, and competition, which used to be a means, becomes an end, a value to cultivate. The modern man, some will say "hypermodern", finds himself snatched up and down between the two systems of values: a materialized universe dominated by rationality and competition, and a symbolic universe that allows escaping from the heavy economic system and from living in a society "sick in its management" (de Gaulejac, 2005).

4. Conclusions

This global culture, born in an occidental tradition loaded with various trends carried by a globalization preoccupied in the first place of financial profitability, can it offer sense to the whole humanity? Is it capable to listen to the other, the one for whom "I" has sense only in reference with an ensemble that exceeds him, the one for whom the signification is traced from a symbolic universe and not from a materialistic universe, the one that knows that he assists to a history written in time and duration?

Fortunately, culture resists (Dupriez, Simons, 2002). It is not easily locked in the homogenizing cultures brought in by globalization. At different levels of the social life, any individual that is in connection with this values preserves also a part of his cultural roots: the ones that he finds in himself, in family, in groups to which he belongs or which he chooses, just like in a company or in professional life. Each of us can extract significance from more cultural sources, so that, today, cultural diversity stays alive. It offers existential marks to millions of people who participate to each of the cultures, and who have a complex identity composed from many belongings. Our Romanian cultural universe is participating to this diversity.

We will have to cover such a cultural diversity whose roots plunge in the history of countries in order to melt in a remodeled modernity wanted to be planetary? Concretely, we will have to give up being Romanians in order to be Europeans or Globals? Or on the contrary, will we try to recognize us in a global world? Let us be carried away by this fascinating adventure of continuing to write the history of humanity in a world economy which became global. Do you want to put a stone to this history that is written and to contribute to giving it a sense? It will not be possible, unless you are truly Europeans, in being profoundly Romanians.

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