

## Introduction

Welcome to issue 2 of *Cultus, the Journal of Intercultural Mediation and Communication*. As readers will notice, in comparison with the first issue, whose main focus was on “Translation at Work”, this issue is addressed to a wider group of (culturally interested) linguists and practitioners as it deals with two important aspects in the field of intercultural communication: *Training and Competence*.

In line with the purpose of the journal to explore the challenging dialogue between languages and cultures, this volume includes an interview between Delia Chiaro and Geert Hofstede who have kindly accepted to contribute to this interesting and stimulating topic.

We would also like to thank the members of our editorial board who have all acted as referees for the several papers submitted to our journal, and we would also like to express our gratitude to those colleagues not on the editorial board who also kindly accepted to referee papers submitted for this issue.

We very much look forward to your comments or suggestions regarding the journal. You will find the email addresses on our website [www.cultusjournal.com](http://www.cultusjournal.com).

### *1. Training intercultural competence*

Due to the increasing professionalization of the language-mediation sector, competence and training in the field of intercultural communication are two important sides of the same coin. But rather than ‘competence’, the plural form meets our perspective in that there are many different competences involved, from language expertise, to

the domain itself, and from cultural factors to the main process, namely the transfer itself. Thus, the term competence “acts as a superordinate, a cover term and summative concept for the overall performance ability which seems to be so difficult to define” (Shäffner *et al*, 2000: x). Given the multifaceted aspect of intercultural communication competence, its acquisition is to be considered a dynamic process of absorbing new language, encyclopedic information and communication skills as well as mindshifting itself. Against such a complex backdrop, the present volume offers a number of theoretical and practical contributions to training intercultural competence and particularly, on how to train or acquire competence for successful communication in intercultural settings. Inter-cultural communication, obviously, implies being aware of cultural differences, for this reason we open this issue with an interview with Geert Hofstede, the first to have attempted a quantitative conceptualization of culture (see the second part of this introduction).

A plethora of methodologies are approached in this issue where the reader is driven from speculative insights to more teaching oriented contributions. Hofstede’s expansion of his cultural dimensions is followed by Trickey *et al*’s theoretical overview of managers’ intercultural competencies based on the World Work International Profiler; Lysgaard’s U-curve theory (1955) has been adapted by Soriano in her study on extra-linguistic factors affecting students’ adaptation in mobility experiences. Moran’s Cultural Knowings (2001) is the theoretical framework used by Plastina to analyse students’ development of otherness’ understanding. Finally, Schwarz *et al*’s universal value types have been used by Houghton as conceptual framework of her case study.

Boylan’s and Trickey *et al*’s contributions are both framed in a theoretical perspective and both confirm the relevance of the cultural component and how differently graded competencies bring about different results.

Interestingly, Patrick Boylan describes the ability to “accommodate” or as he puts it the capacity to “decentre oneself” into the world view of an interlocutor – or of a text to translate. Five different levels of “accommodation” are listed in the paper, starting from Level 0, where zero effort is made to reach successful communication, to Level 5 where both linguistic and cultural co-creation take place. The author also describes the effectiveness of each level and we agree with him when he describes Level 3 as the most effective in cross-cultural communication. Level 3 is, in Boylan’s view, at a crossroads where translation theory,

language learning theory and intercultural accommodation theory converge. In some way, Level 3 accommodation well describes our idea of intercultural communication where successful communication is realized when culture and language are considered together.

Similarly, David Trickey, Nigel Ewington and Richard Lowe's paper analyses managers' skills and attitudes to work across cultures and, particularly, their contribution focuses on the type of competencies that international trainers, coaches and consultants should help to develop. Data were collected from different sources (see *The International Profiler*, [www.dialogin.com](http://www.dialogin.com), ...) which mainly consisted in direct or indirect evaluation of 22 dimensions representing associated skills, attitudes and area of knowledge. Findings showed what professionals value most and contribute to the creation of a profile of the primary success factors. Results from different nationalities were compared and contrasted to see how each national group in the database differed in emphasis across the competency set compared to the others. Differences in terms of gender and previous international experience are also taken into account. Possible implications of this research are in the development of intercultural programmes whose main focus should be balanced according to culturally specific competencies.

Moving from managerial to student mobility, the problems in terms of culture shock remain the same. Inmaculada Soriano Garcia used (and criticised) the U-curve theory in her study of the different stages of the cross-cultural adjustment process of Spanish students studying in Russia and Russian students studying in Spain. She clearly shows that the levels of adaptation depend on the direction of mobility.

The methodology adopted consisted of three interviews, each one carried out before the beginning of the sojourn, in the first two weeks abroad, and at the end of the stay abroad. Results allowed the author to identify four main factors influencing the students' adaptation in the hosting country (language barrier, adjustment to a new environment, friendship networks, and climate conditions). These findings also suggest that the host culture and degree of preparation together with age and academic profile of students remain the critical factors. These quantitative results clearly support the importance of strengthening intercultural competence prior to the sojourn abroad through a more careful planning of preparatory courses.

Following the same line, Plastina describes her experience at the Technical University of Istanbul in Turkey where she ran a short Italian

language preparation course for a group of Turkish tertiary students before their mobility stay in Italy. The focus of this paper is on how to develop repertoires of cultural knowings (Moran 2001) in language learning contexts. The starting point is first of all to raise students' awareness of their own culture which may consequently lead to a better understanding of *otherness*. In order to do so, a three-phase methodology was adopted aiming at 1. diagnosing cultural knowings; 2. pinpointing competencies; 3. developing new cultural knowings. Although more data would be needed to generalize findings, the combination of language and cultural knowings in language courses represents a new and interesting approach to a more successful development of student intercultural competence.

Finally, Stephanie Houghton's paper deals with competence in terms of mediation between conflicting interpretations of phenomena, focusing, particularly, on the question of how foreign language educators should manage the evaluation of difference in foreign language education. The author describes the results achieved in a twelve-week course for Japanese learners of English. This course had as one of its main aims the development of student ability to accept both language and value difference in *the other*. Taking as a starting point Schwartz *et al's* taxonomy of ten universal value types, students were requested to reflect on their own values and to make a chart where each of the ten values occupied a position according to the relative strength assigned by each student. Learners were also asked to critically evaluate their own values with reference to the target values recommended by the teacher. Students with different value judgments were grouped together and were asked to act as mediators. The results obtained show how critical evaluation, rather than teacher transmission of values, may better support the mediation process.

We hope that the several methodological approaches described together with the interesting insights given by the different case studies may provide a valid and stimulating platform for further research in the field of cross-cultural communication.

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## 2. *On Hofstede*

As yet there is still no agreement on what inter- or cross-cultural competence involves exactly nor how to train for it. What is certainly true, though, as Geert Hofstede himself notes, under ‘Training and Consulting Services’, is that “Many people and organizations across the world make use of my research”<sup>1</sup>. Also, other key theorists in the field tend to acknowledge his influence, including, for example, Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner (1997: x), who say the following in their 'Acknowledgements':

Obviously, we could not be stimulated more than by the comments of Geert Hofstede. He introduced Fons to the subject of intercultural management some 20 years ago. We do not always agree, but he has made a major contribution to the field, and was responsible for opening management's eyes to the importance of the subject.

He is widely regarded as the modern father of “cultural dimensions”, and is indeed the first to have attempted to quantify cultural difference. His categorisation of differences into originally 4, then 5 (and now 6 or 7 – see interview) dimensions was not in itself original. Florence Kluckhohn (in Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck 1961: 341), as a result of her anthropological research provided a framework of 5 value orientations. What, then, has made his work outstanding was the quantification. The original questionnaire survey included over 100 questions to 72 IBM subsidiaries divided into 38 occupations and translated into 20 languages. The 117,000 responses allowed him to make a statistical, and hence categorical, organisation of 66 countries (as cultures) along a cline of “strong” to “weak” orientation along each of the dimensions, which, as Wikipedia[1] would have it, “affect the behaviour of societies and organizations, and that are very persistent across time”. It is the strength of this assertion that has encouraged communication training organizations around the globe to see his findings as a, or often the, solution to miscommunication across cultural divides.

We hear him speaking candidly in the interview with Delia Chiaro about himself. It is a very personal and spontaneous interview, where we glimpse at the extremely lively man behind the cultural dimensions – and

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<sup>1</sup> <http://stuwwww.uvt.nl/~csmeets/index.html>

also one who wouldn't always play ball with his interviewer. Indeed, any question of criticism of his approach was met with "these people are just stuck in the old paradigm" and "I think these authors are ... ignorant of other approaches". Although, he also does suggest that we read his 596 page closely written and reasoned book (Hofstede 2001). So, perhaps it would be as well to discuss some of the criticisms and some possible replies, taken mainly from the book.

### *1. Ecological Fallacy*

Many have complained about the fact that reality does not fit the theory, and that individuals do not act according to the national/cultural dimension. Hofstede answers this criticism in his book (2001: 16), which he also alludes to in the interview. To answer the criticism he uses the term "ecological fallacy", which (as he notes) was made popular in 1950 by William Robinson. Robinson (1950: 35, emphasis in the original) explains the following: "In an *ecological correlation* the statistical object is a *group* of persons", while in an individual correlation the statistical object describes the individual. As Hofstede (2001: 16) puts it: "the ecological fallacy is committed when the ecological correlations ... are interpreted as if they apply to individuals. Doing so is attractive because ecological correlations are often stronger than individual correlations". He (2001: 41) continues with "The reliability of the country scores cannot be tested across individuals, only through replication on other multicountry populations". Hence the fallacy is to presume that a statistically significant aggregate means that individual members of that group will each possess the *average* characteristics of the group at large. So, we cannot determine that after tossing a coin which lands 'heads' that the next time it will land 'tails'. Similarly we cannot determine that just because "smoking causes cancer", individual smokers will contract the disease.

Similarly, Florence Kluckhohn's (1961: 10) article "Dominant and Variant Value Orientations" states the following: "There is a limited number of common human problems for which all peoples at all times must find some solution. While there is variability in solutions of all the problems it is neither fruitless nor random". She originally limited the universal problems (Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions) to 5, with an array of 3 possible solutions for each problem (compared to Hofstede's continuum from 'weak' to 'strong'). Importantly, Kluckhohn concludes with the following: "all variants of all solutions are in varying degrees

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present in all societies at all times”. Hence, there is no reason why any specific individual should necessarily ‘fit’ the dominant model. This also means that we may, as Boylan suggests (personal communication), "accept others' values", because “we never totally and only accept”. Within the other culture we are also free to reject the dominant value and choose a variant, more in tune with our own belief.

## 2. *Lies damned lies and statistics*

Though the origin of the saying is blurred in history (coming well before Mark Twain cited it) the meaning is clear. Problems relating to reliability and validity continue to reek havoc, leaving space also for selective description and interpretation of reliable and valid results. As Oppenheim (2000: 149) points out “the problem of attitudinal validity remains one of the most difficult in social research and one to which an adequate solution is not in sight”.

One particular critique subtitled “A triumph of faith – a failure of analysis” (McSweeney 2002) states that “Hofstede’s apparently sophisticated analysis of extensive data necessarily relies on a number of profoundly flawed assumptions to measure the ‘software of the mind ... there is too great a desire to ‘prove’ his *a priori* convictions rather than evaluate the adequacy of his ‘findings’”. The problems are, indeed, numerous. For example, while 6 countries, such as Great Britain and Belgium, each produced over 1,000 respondents, he has been criticized for the fact that there were fewer than 200 in 15 countries and only 107 from Pakistan (McSweeney 2002: 94). Yet, this is exactly why statistics are used, to normalise data. More worrying is that, for example, his “Uncertainty Avoidance” dimension comes from just 3 questions relating only to work:

1. How often do you feel nervous or tense at work?
2. Company rules should not be broken –even when the employee thinks it is in the company’s best interests;
3. How long do you think you will continue working for this company?

Hofstede (2001: 148), himself, is careful to point out the data was not designed with this dimension in mind, that the dimensions were not decided *a priori*, and emphasises the fact that “better survey indicators ... can be developed, but I had to use the data available...”

### 3. *Essentialism*

For a number of scholars, the organisation of categories in itself, however well constructed or complex is “naive” or “pernicious” (Baker 2006: 6), and “reductive” and “essentialist... to be fought against wherever [they are] found” (Holliday *et al*: 2004: 3). Essentialism is “the practice of regarding something (as a presumed human trait) as having innate existence or universal validity rather than as being a social, ideological, or intellectual construct“.[2] Hence, the fact of being born into a certain nationality automatically means taking on the traits of that nationality. “The individual becomes a “type” in all members of a class of objects (such as a species) share certain invariant, unchanging properties that distinguish them from other classes. Also called “typological thinking”.[3] Clearly, being typecast before opening your mouth is not constructive to communication. Again, Hofstede (2001: 300) points out that “no real-life situation entirely fits its descriptions”. However, the criticism rests. For example, typecasting a national culture, rather than the individual within it, as “feminine” rather than “masculine” is certainly reductive.

But, of course, 'reduction' is also the key to making sense of reality. Modelling through reduction is a fundamental cognitive process, which functions through deletion, distortion and generalisation (Bandler and Grinder 1975: 14). Without reducing reality to something comprehensible we would have no learning, no schema or frames to access, no prototypes, and hence precious few sense-making tools (O'Sullivan *et al* 1994: 299-230; Katan 2004: 131). The function of statistics is to make sense of, and, to generalise about, larger populations. Statistics are also used, as above, to link a specific indicator to a general pattern. Hence questionnaire answers such as “working for a company for life” have been taken by Hofstede to indicate a more general high “uncertainty avoidance” in *all* contexts.

The downside of reduction and generalisation is stereotyping, which Hofstede (2001: 14), himself, defines as “fixed notion about persons in a certain category, with no distinctions made among individuals”. The notions are (usually negative) value judgements, such as the (in)famous British government guide for exporters, gleefully reported by *The Daily Telegraph*,<sup>2</sup> which stated that Italians “are loud, late and don't tell the truth”. Hofstede is generally careful to not attribute absolute qualities,

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<sup>2</sup> (08/12/1993)



but tendencies; and the dimensions are in theory value free. He also reformulates value judgements about practices into fairly objective statements, such as the following: “Expressive cultures ... are the places where it is socially acceptable to raise one’s voice” (2005: 171), and “Time is a framework to orient oneself in but not something one is constantly watching” (2005: 183). Unfortunately, though, the second statement he actually relates to weak uncertainty cultures.

Osland and Bird (2000: 83) call Hofstede’s approach “sophisticated stereotyping”, in that “it is based on theoretical constructs and lacks the negative stereotyping”. However, as they note “cultural paradoxes” abound. Osland and Bird’s solution is not to discard the stereotype, but to add other categorizations and schemas, such as ‘cultural history’, and importantly ‘indexing context’ to their “sensemaking model”, which “provides a more complex way of understanding culture” (2002: 74). Hofstede, himself says exactly the same in the interview, and consistently adds historical background throughout his book (e.g. 2001: 11-13).

#### 4. *Static Culture(s)*

However, the thorniest problem is the question as to what *actually* has been tested. To what extent does a political national border coincide with “a culture”? Also, it is clearly not the case that the white English speaking IBM employees in South Africa could represent the country’s culture, nor is it very useful to talk of culture in the singular. Hofstede is very aware of this shortcoming (see interview). Indeed he states (2001: 10) that a culture may be “any human collectivity or category”, and discusses (2001: 63) how some multilingual countries, such as Switzerland, showed greater intracultural differences.

But there is a further aspect which makes these ‘central tendencies’, less convincing. For example, Hofstede notes that Israel’s population has nearly doubled since his original survey through immigration from Russia, and that this increase would significantly change the low power distance results (2001: 121). His own take on migration in general is that acculturation through assimilation or integration is the norm (2001: 428-451). There is, though, in reality, a strong element of transculturation, a term coined by Fernando Ortiz (1947/1995) where no culture is ‘pure’, nor ever was. Produced out of history, but never a product, cultures are dynamic.

Hofstede certainly accepts the idea of cultures changing, but focusses on the *practices* (e.g. 392-4), demonstrating how national, occupational

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and organizational practices will differ, while the values remain unchanged. Yet, Hofstede's second survey (just 4 years later) was unable to fully replicate the 1<sup>st</sup> survey results due to a number of significant “response shifts” (2001: 60) as he calls them. Clearly, one wonders, what shifts would be visible today, 35 years after his second survey.

### *5. Modelling and Reality*

To conclude, Bandler and Grinder (1975: 14), who popularised Korzybski's (1994: 58) “a map is not the territory”, point to the fundamental problem, which is not in Hofstede's work but in how his models of culture have been used: “So, the [modelling] process which allows us to accomplish the most extraordinary and unique human activities are the same processes which block our further growth if we commit the error of mistaking the model for the reality”. This, Hofstede does not do. Instead, as can be inferred from the interview, at 80 years of age he is still seeking to refine the model so that it may better fit reality - rather than the other way round.

*David Katan*

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[1] [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geert\\_Hofstede](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geert_Hofstede), accessed 05/10/09

[2] <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/essentialism>

[3] <http://evolution.unibe.ch/teaching/GlossarE.htm>, accessed 05/05/09