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The Cultural Standard Method

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THE CULTURAL STANDARD METHOD

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Abstract

The proposed method enables us to identify cultural standards, i.e. the underlying norms of thinking, sensing, perceiving, judging, and acting that the vast majority of individuals in a given culture is considering as normal for themselves and others.

Norms of behaviour can be different across societies even if the underlying values are the same and can cause critical incidents to emerge.

A sequence of methodological steps allows systematically dealing with sampling, interviewer, interpretation, construct, and culture bias in cross-cultural qualitative research based on narrative interviews.

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Introduction

Understanding the dynamics of international business encounters requires a fundamental shift from comparative studies of cultural differences to the study of intercultural interactions. The decisive issue in international management is not the existence of differences, but the way behavioural differences are perceived, interpreted, and managed by members of different national cultures in the context of their business. Generating knowledge of cultural standards, i.e. prevailing norms of behaviour in different cultures, is at the core of the proposed method.

There are two major strands in cross-cultural research literature:

- a) In a general sense cultures and differences among cultures can be described and measured along culture dimensions (Hall/ Hall 1990, 2000, Hofstede 1980, 1993, 2001, House/ Hanges/ Javidan/ Dorfman/ Gupta 2004, Kluckhohn/ Strodtbeck 1961, Rokeach 1973, Schwartz 1992, Trompenaars/ Hampden-Turner 1997).
- b) In more detail and more descriptively the cultural standard method deals with differences in the kinds of perceiving, norms of sensing, thinking, judging, and acting, which can cause critical incidents in cross cultural encounters (Thomas 1996, Fink/ Meierewert 2001).

This article describes the method of cultural standards to study cross-cultural management interactions and is organized as follows: After this introduction we briefly discuss value dimension studies and cultural standard research and argue why the proposed methodology is needed to study cross-cultural interactions in contrast to the exclusive reference to cultural dimensions. Then we describe the four steps of our research methodology to collect data and to cope with various biases that might occur in our qualitative research approach: narrative interview, transcription and content analysis, feedback with culture experts from home and counterpart culture, and mirror studies/triangulation studies. A discussion and summary section conclude the paper.

Describing cultures with value dimensions and cultural standards

C. Kluckhohn assumed that the system of values, which constitutes a culture, gives guidance to problem solutions of human beings and, therefore, there are universal or near universals of

any sort that cut across cultural boundaries (Kluckhohn 1953, p. 507, Kluckhohn 1962, p. 273). A combined quantitative and qualitative approach was used. First, interviewers identified the value orientations in five local US cultures with help of a quantitative questionnaire with 22 items. Next the interviewers were asked to qualify the comments of the interviewed persons, and finally to write a report about their field work (Kluckhohn/ Strodtbeck 1961). The sample was 106 persons from five groups in the American South-West: Navaho Indians, Pueblo Indians, Spanish American village, Texan and Oklahoman farming village and a Mormon village (Kluckhohn/ Strodtbeck 1961, p. 49 and p. 104) (see Table 1).

The fundamental approach of Kluckhohn/ Strodtbeck (1961) provided the basic principles for all further research in the field of cross cultural research aiming at quantitative measures of cultural values. Since the effective research was limited by scope and scale further research based on Kluckhohn/ Strodtbeck offers variations by sample, context, and the set of values/value dimensions used to describe cultures.

Edward T. Hall and his wife Mildred Reed Hall (1990) interviewed 180 people in business and grouped their findings by four dimensions (“fast and slow messages”, “high and low context”, “space”, “time”). Their findings were considered particularly useful by American managers to better understand the behaviour of their West German and French employees.

As is widely known, the seminal work of Geert Hofstede is based on responses by IBM staff (more than 100,000) across the world (1968, 1972, and 2001). In different countries the same quantitative questionnaires were used to identify the personal values of IBM employees in their work situation which, of course, is strongly influenced by the unique IBM corporate culture as a US based global firm. Factor analysis was employed to analyze the responses to 32 questions and the famous four value dimensions were derived: power distance, individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity and uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede 2001). According to Hofstede that four dimensions explain 49 % of the variance between countries (Hofstede 2001, p. 374). Since that means that 51 % of cultural differences could not be explained further research in other contexts, probably based on more dimensions, seemingly was still appropriate.

Fons Trompenaars’ research is based on the basic assumptions of Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961) but extended to seven dimensions. Data were collected in different firms with

quantitative questionnaires (Likert scales). The results were validated with quantitative analytical instruments, e.g. cluster and correlation analysis (Trompenaars/ Hampden-Turner 1997).

To cover aspects of present and future Shalom Schwartz developed the idea to draw samples of about 200 teachers (as the present generation) and 200 students (as the future generation) in 20 different countries. Consequently the data were derived at schools and universities. The questionnaire covers 56 values that were grouped by 11 value dimensions. It was also possible to identify negative value connotations since people were asked whether a value has a meaning to them in their life. A 9 point Likert scale was used (Schwartz 1992).

The Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness Project (GLOBE) aims at identifying the impact of cultural values on organizational practices and leadership in a large number of countries. National cultures in 61 countries were investigated along nine cultural dimensions (House/ Javidan/ Hanges/ Dorfman 2002). A combination of qualitative and quantitative research is applied. Quantitative questionnaires with 7 point Likert scales are used to identify the appropriate items for the 9 value dimensions. Each of the interviewed persons is asked to fill in for the present situation “as is” and a desired situation “should be”. The idea is that the difference between the “as is” and “should be” would indicate some possible future development. For help of interpretation of the quantitative results qualitative data are also collected with semi structured interviews of the respondents, literature analysis and relevant data from published media.

Table 1: Overview of culture dimensions research

Researchers (Sources)	Dependent variable	Independent variables	Method	Sample - Context
Kluckhohn/ Strodtbeck (1961)	Human problem solutions	<i>Five Dimensions:</i> Human Nature Orientation Man Nature Orientation Time Orientation Activity Orientation Relational Orientation	Quantitative questionnaire, qualitative report	106 persons: Navaho Indians, Pueblo Indians, Spanish American village, Texan and Oklahoman farming village and a Mormon village
Hall/ Hall (1990)	Communication at work	<i>Four Dimensions:</i> Fast and Slow Messages High and Low Context Space Time	Qualitative open interviews	180 employees and managers in the field of economy
Hofstede (1980)	National cultural difference within one	<i>Four Dimensions:</i> Power Distance	Quantitative questionnaire	approximately 116,000 IBM

	organization	Individualism/Collectivism Masculinity/Femininity Uncertainty Avoidance		employees
Trompenaars (1993)	Management relevant problem solutions	<i>Seven Dimensions:</i> Time Status Achievement/Status Ascription Individualism/Collectivism Universalism/Particularism Emotional/Neutral Specific/Diffuse Man Nature Relationship	Quantitative questionnaire with scales	15,000 employees in companies
Schwartz (1992)	Present and future in society	<i>Eleven Dimensions:</i> Self-Direction Stimulation Hedonism Achievement Power Security Conformity Tradition Spirituality Benevolence Universalism	Quantitative questionnaire with 9 point Likert scales	approximately 200 teachers and 200 students per country, in 20 countries
GLOBE (2002)	Business leadership present and future	<i>Nine Dimensions:</i> Performance Orientation Future Orientation Assertiveness Humane Orientation Gender Egalitarianism Power Distance Institutional Collectivism In-group Collectivism Uncertainty Avoidance	Quantitative questionnaire with 7 point scales and analysis of qualitative data with content analysis	17,000 middle managers in 61 countries
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Researchers on cultural value dimensions imply that their system of value dimensions is explaining a large part of the observable variances across cultures (Hall/ Hall 1990, 2000, Hofstede 1980, 1993, 2001, House et al. 2004, House et al. 2002, Kluckhohn/ Strodtbeck 1961, Rokeach 1973, Schwartz 1992, Trompenaars/ Hampden-Turner 1997).

Due to significant developments in this field and the available range of value dimension studies we better understand the possible impact of similarities and differences among cultures. Dimensions, which are quantitatively measured, can be used as independent explanatory variables in follow up quantitative research, what makes them most useful if a significant coefficient can be found in appropriate regression analysis.

Nevertheless, there are limits and open questions. So far, no meta-analysis was undertaken to find out whether different dimensions from different concepts are substitutes or complements. The questions are open, whether the different concepts could be transferred to other contexts or rather not, and whether replications of the methods in other contexts and over time would deliver the same, similar or different results?

Beyond that, two particular aspects make it worthwhile to complement the value dimensions with more detailed knowledge about actual norms of behaviour: values guide individuals to select from available repertoires of behaviour those variants that likely help to achieve an appropriate problem solution. However, while values may be the same across cultures, available norms of behaviour may be different. For example traffic rules serve the goal to avoid accidents. Apparently rules of driving on the left hand side seem to solve the problem as much as a rule of driving on the right hand side. Thus, values are the same but norms of behaviour can be different.

In the cultural value literature it is often referred to norms of behaviour in order to illustrate what can be understood by values. Norms of behaviour are considered to be distinct from values:

Schwartz and Bilsky (1987, 1990) generated a conceptual definition of values that incorporates the five formal features of the values recurrently mentioned in the literature: "Values (1) are concepts or beliefs, (2) pertain to desirable end states or behaviors, (3) transcend specific situations, (4) guide selection or evaluation of behavior and events, and (5) are ordered by relative importance" (Schwartz 1992, p. 3-4).

Kluckhohn (1951, p. 395) defined a value as: "A conception, explicit or implicit, distinctive of an individual or characteristic of a group, of the desirable which influences the selection from available modes, means and ends of action," i.e. the general norms that prevail in a given society or organization specific norms that prevail in a given organization (Popitz 1980).

Value dimensions do not directly predict the actual problems emerging in business and management encounters. They do not explain how business encounters are perceived and how and why managers and staff react in a specific way. Guided by values these reactions are chosen from the available repertoire of behaviours, but ill chosen, modes of behaviour may produce undesired conflict and counterproductive results, if the valid norms of behaviour of counterpart cultures are not adequately considered.

To deal with these issues Alexander Thomas (1996) developed the Cultural Standard Method to generate more cultural specific and actionable knowledge. The cultural standard concept is based on Jean Paul Piaget's (1962 and 1976) developmental psychology and Ernst Boesch's (1980, p. 135) cultural psychology and concept of action: "An acting person is always considering possible views and judgments of their counterparts as well as own experiences and assumed experiences of others. A person reacting will always consider the desirability or

necessity to achieve a consensus with a specific partner and also the norms of judgment of his own culture" or cultural context of an organization.

Consequently research that is based on this concept needs to be different from research on value dimensions. The dependent variable are critical incidents that emerge in cross cultural encounters, which need to be explained by cultural standards, i.e. cultural norms that strongly influence action of an expatriate and reaction of a counterpart, or vice versa. In a single culture context cultural standards may even determine the way action is taken. Thomas gave the following definition: "As cultural standards we understand all kinds of perceiving, thinking, judging, and acting that in a given culture by the vast majority of individuals are considered for themselves and others as normal, self-evident, typical and obligatory. Cultural standards regulate behaviour and guide individuals to assess observed behaviour" (Thomas 1993, p. 381, translation by the authors). Cultural standards, in turn, are based on the values in a given culture, but also on traditional modes and rules of behaviour (norms of behaviour in a given context or organization) that comply with these values.

The cultural standard method delivers a much more differentiated picture of the impact of culture on observed, experienced and perceived behaviour than the culture dimension studies. In about 50 publications/dissertations/master theses we found more than 50 cultural standards which caused critical incidents to emerge in cross-cultural encounters in management and business. For sake of brevity we do not review these master theses and doctoral theses in German language that were undertaken to collect data by 30 interviewers in narrative interviews with 750 Austrian managers during 1996-2003.

For illustration we selectively provide cultural standards that relate to four deliberately chosen value dimensions: power distance, collectivism, performance orientation, and time related behaviour. Power distance can find its expression among others in: hierarchy, status orientation, respect of the achieved positions, formal distance, title emphasis, avoiding critique of supervisor, avoiding deviating opinions from that of supervisor, and authority by knowledge. As different forms of collectivism we identified: national pride, elite thinking, familiarism, paternalism, clientelism, amigo business, reciprocity expectations, and professional-private versus relationship orientation. Performance orientation finds its expression by the following cultural standards: quest of efficiency, economic thinking, rule orientation, quality orientation, goal orientation, and learning orientation. Time behaviour can lead to different norms as to timing of interactions (related to it is punctuality); time requirements (time needed to perform a task); time planning; permanent time pressure; more efficient use of time; time available should be used only for economically efficient purposes;

accelerated pace of time; scarce and more valuable time; value of our time and their time; and qualitative dimensions of working time: combinations of duration, sequence and meaning of time; and feeling of singularity of time (Fink/ Meierewert 2004, Hassard 1996).

In addition, not the differences per se, but the perceptions of differences seemingly have a strong impact on actual behaviour in a given context. For example, as a result of the GLOBE project Germany (former East and former West), Austria, Switzerland and the Netherlands can be grouped into the Germanic cluster (Gupta et al. 2002). Within the Germanic cluster practices of assertiveness are largely in common for all countries. Thus, one could expect little conflict to emerge because of similar levels of assertiveness. In contrast to these expectations, cross cultural interaction analysis between Germany East and West shows that East Germans often feel offended by the assertiveness of West Germans (Kölling 2004). Austrians feel similarly offended (Brück 1999). Seen from a distance, e.g. from Spain, the attribution of these countries to a Germanic cluster seems to be perfectly appropriate. Spanish business people can hardly distinguish Austrians from Germans and usually note their assertiveness (Dunkel 2001). But relative closeness does not imply that difference would not matter when Austrians meet highly assertive West Germans.

Consequently, we assume that general culture concepts with 4 to 11 dimensions from Hofstede (2001) to Schwartz (1992) have limited predictive value for the coping capabilities of individuals with difficulties in cross cultural encounters (Ward/ Bochner/ Furnham 2001, Caligiuri 2000, 2000a) and also for critical incidents emerging in cross- cultural encounters (Fink/ Meierewert 2001, Thomas 1996, 2003). However, practitioners have to deal with specific problems in intercultural interactions. Therefore, we need a research tool to identify valid norms of behaviour and critical incidents that emerge in management interaction due to different norms of behaviour. We need a tool to validate whether incidents are culturally determined and to generate actionable knowledge about the effects of differences in norms of behaviour on management interaction.

Since we want to contribute to closing this gap in the literature we deal with the following research questions:

- How can we generate data or information about different norms of behaviour that induce culturally determined critical incidents?
- How can we distinguish differences in behaviour and action that are culturally determined from interest conflicts and other contextual factors?

We propose “cultural standard research” as a tool to generate context-dependent management relevant knowledge about conflicting cultural standards (i.e. norms of behaviour in a very broad sense) in cross-cultural interactions.

Cultural Standard Research

In the following we describe in detail our methodology of action oriented cultural standard research. The method is based on the technique of narrative interviews to collect critical incidents and related information and follow up analysis. As Aram/ Salipante (2003) emphasize the importance of an iterative hermeneutic cycle to gather and analyze data in social sciences, feedback loops are needed for developing a hermeneutic concept of sense making. The incidents are grouped and validated with reference to scientific literature about the home culture and the counterpart culture to identify underlying cultural standards and their possible impact on actual behaviour. In order to cope with numerous possible biases in data collection and interpretation, we have developed a system of feedback-loops. The method basically consists of four steps:

- Step 1) The narrative interview itself and feedback loops within the interview.
- Step 2) The stage of transcription and interpretation of interviews.
- Step 3) Feedback with culture experts from home and counterpart culture.
- Step 4) Mirror studies and triangulation studies.

Step 1: Narrative Interview

a) Description

The technique of narrative interviews allows to collect information/data without restricting data collection by presuppositions (prejudices, previous restrictive assumptions). It is a hermeneutic method to be applied whenever we have inadequately detailed information insufficient for theory building or when we have doubts about the assumptions made in already existing theories (Bewley 2002).

With narrative interviews we collect short stories about critical incidents in intercultural interaction in management and business. The goal of collecting critical incidents is to collect information when different cultural standards, which regulate action and interaction of members of a society, lead to experiences that the customary problem solution mechanism

does not work. Short stories about real incidents permit us (the experts) to analyze the reported events and to convert collected experience of managers into knowledge. Otherwise we would collect only information about the reflections, prejudices and stereotypes of the interviewed persons (Fink 2002).

b) Procedure

Mostly in convenience samples interview partners are identified with help of a range of informed people like accessible managers, trade representatives, but also by directly approaching top and middle managers of international firms. To be a worthwhile interview partner the interviewee must a) have experienced something, b) still remember the incident, c) find it to be a worthwhile story, and d) be willing to tell the interviewer (Fink 2002).

The interviewed person is willing to tell little stories, if she/he finds the interviewer sympathetic or if she/he can help the interviewer to solve a difficult task. Interviewed persons mostly find interviewers who belong to their own culture more sympathetic and trustworthy. Interviewed persons do not want to look bad or lose their face during the interview (Bewley 2002). Van de Vijver/ Tanzer (1997, p. 268) yet raise the issue: "Construct bias can occur if there is only partial overlap in the definitions of the construct across cultures." If interviews are led by interviewers who are not from the same culture as the interviewed person, there is higher risk that interviewer and interviewed person consider different factors as important, because of different cultural standards. They both would attribute different meanings and interpretations to the events/behaviour described by the interviewed person. When Alexander Thomas tried to undertake narrative interviews in China with Chinese managers he encountered numerous problems due to the differences between direct and indirect communication styles and between fact and harmony orientation (Thomas 1996). These forms of construct bias mostly can be avoided when interviewers and interviewed persons belong to the same culture.

The interviewer bias is quite often linked with interviews in foreign languages and can have a strong impact on trust building, the current flow of the interview and on the content of the interview (e.g. number of critical incidents told, stereotypes, generalisations).

Age, gender, personality, appearance, and expectations of interviewers and interviewed persons can easily lead to unnoticed problems during the interview. Not only the interviewer himself, his behaviour and his relationship with the interviewee, but also the context of the interview could influence research results. Some people become embarrassed when openly

asked about critical incidents, e.g. when male interviewers interview females, or females interview males, when interviews do not take place in a purely bilateral setting, but a secretary or the wife/husband of the interviewed manager is listening, etc.

To deal with interviewer bias and construct bias it is strongly recommended that interviews are undertaken by members from the same culture as the interviewed persons. We recently tested this effect. An Austrian student who interviewed American managers could not collect critical incidents. He was only told generalizations and various repetitions of auto- and hetero-stereotypes.

Originally Alexander Thomas followed the recommendations by Witzel (1982) and Lamnek (1995) to confront the interview partners only at the beginning of the interview with the aim of the interviews (Thomas 1993, 1996). After jointly discussing our experiences we decided to modify the original approach. Since interviewees should tell short stories about incidents they need time to mobilize their memory (Hermanowicz 2002). Therefore, information about the research topic should be given in advance. When establishing the first contact we inform the persons to be interviewed that we want to collect critical incidents, i.e. short stories about encounters with people from other cultures who reacted differently than what could be expected.

During the interview, after an opening remark the interviewed persons are asked to tell significant or remarkable task related critical incidents. We again explain what critical incidents are. After the interviewed person has told a little story, he/she is asked in a first feedback-loop: "How do you explain that?", next: "How did you cope with that problem?", and finally: "What was your reaction? Did you adjust your behaviour later on?" (Fink/Meierewert 2001). We pose these questions in order to collect information about value perceptions, stereotypes and learning behaviour of the interviewed person (Latein 1996, p. 13, Ward/ Bochner/ Furnham 2001). The collected information about the personal assessment of critical incidents, of stereotypes, value judgments, and coping strategies should help at this and later stages to deal with possible bias in data collection and interpretation of the data.

After each interview the interviewer has to reflect on her/his experience: What went well, what wrong, and how to improve the interview technique? The interviewers are also asked to participate in interview trainings and group discussions at regular intervals.

Step 2: Transcription and Content Analysis

a) Description

To move towards identifying cultural standards it is necessary to undertake a qualitative content analysis of the interviews and the reported critical incidents, culture related remarks, and stereotypes. All narrative interviews must be taped. A transcript of all narrative interviews has to be produced. Computer assisted qualitative data analysis software packages like Atlas.ti© turned out to be useful in the qualitative data analysis process (of interview transcripts). These software packages aid users in handling non-numerical and unstructured qualitative data.

b) Procedures

The transcripts are analyzed with qualitative content analysis developed by Mayring (1999, 2000a, 2000b) to identify social reality by concluding from characteristics of a transcript (an existing text) to characteristics of a non coded context (Merten 1983, p. 16). Content analysis according to Mayring is based on 3 steps: summarizing, explication, structuring (Lamnek 1995, p. 208). By selection, bundling, omission, integration and generalization the text will be reduced to the important content (summarizing). We use additional material (e.g. relevant literature) to get an understanding for those parts of the text which are not easily interpreted because of the chosen wording, terminology or incomplete formulation of sentences (explication). In a last step it has to be defined what characteristics a piece of text or a phrase has to meet in order to be of use for a specific category. Categories are characteristics of the text, which were developed by the researcher during reading and rereading the interview protocols and the transcripts (structuring) (Lamnek 1995, p. 208).

With help of content analysis the told stories about interactions (critical incidents), assessments, coping strategies, and stereotypes are ordered and grouped to develop cultural standards at the next step. In the context of cultural standard research complete short stories with a clear beginning and an end should be identified in the transcript, but also stereotypes and culture related remarks. Remarks or incidents which were made/told at earlier stages of the interview have to be compared with remarks/incidents made/reported at later stages of the interview (Boeije 2002). Together with the relevant incidents those variables of each interview that may have had an impact on the interview like context, age, gender, experience of the interviewed person, etc. should be coded.

After checking individual interviews for consistency we start with the interpretation of results to finally achieve a summary presentation of typical cases ordered by categories (Lamnek 1995, p. 208). Further comparative steps are recommended. 1) Pair-wise comparisons: compare the first interview with the second, the second with the third interview etc. Compare the critical incidents with diverse culture related remarks and stereotypes in interview one and in interview two. 2) Compare short series of interviews: Do the results of the first 6 interviews differ from the results of the second 6 interviews, etc.? Why do these results differ? What conclusion can be drawn from the sub series in comparison with the whole interview series?

We found that a summary analysis of the first 4-6 interviews is helpful to improve interview techniques. After that interviews usually become more effective. One may consider the first few interviews as biased by the capability of the interviewer. Usually after 12 interviews an experienced interviewer will have a record that covers all important types of incidents. However, only after 25 interviews, one will be able to identify the most important types of incidents. It is helpful to establish a rank order by how many respondents did mention a similar type of incident (Fink 2002). The result of the content analysis is grouped material by different preliminary categories that should be sufficiently homogenous and distinct from other categories.

The main problem at this stage of the analysis is the so called cultural interpretation bias. Own culture, experiences, prejudices and stereotypes of the analyzing researcher can have an impact on content analysis.

Step 3: Feedback with Culture Experts from Home and Counterpart Culture

a) Description

We deal with the possible interpretation bias with a feedback-loop with cultural experts. The aims of the feedback rounds with cultural experts are to eliminate the cultural bias of the interviewers and to make the results interpersonally comparable. Those critical incidents from the sample should be eliminated, which are not arising because of cultural differences, but because of other important factors, like personality traits or specific personal interests of the interacting persons, or due to organizational context. However, these incidents are not completely useless. They are an important tool to be employed in cross cultural trainings because one can confront trainees with incidents that are culturally determined, or interest driven, or caused by adverse circumstances (Thomas/ Lulay 1999).

b) Procedure

The various critical incidents which have been told by the interviewed persons are presented to experts from home culture and counterpart culture. Experts are people who have lived and worked in the home and the counterpart culture. Experts are also culture theorists, linguists, psychologists, from the home and the counterpart culture who can assess the behaviour of people in their own culture and describe the typical or normal behaviour, i.e. the ways people are perceiving, sensing, thinking, judging, and acting in typical situations. These experts identify and describe relevant cultural standards.

Usually the experts are presented one critical incident by the other and asked: Is this a typical behaviour in your home culture? Do such situations also arise in your home culture? Why has the person from your home culture developed that behaviour? How would a person from your home culture have adequately reacted in such a situation?

It is also useful to have incidents discussed by groups of experts, e.g. in the analysis of Austria and Hungary we invited Austrian and Hungarian experts to jointly discuss the interpretation of the critical incidents. The discussions were taped and transcribed. After validation of incidents in the group discussion we had another feedback separately with individual cultural specialists from both cultures to check the jointly provided explanatory patterns. In some cultural contexts it cannot be excluded that experts from a more harmony oriented culture tend to agree with interpretations of experts from a more conflict oriented culture, just to keep harmony. In any case a final feedback with individual cultural specialists is required.

When critical incidents are interpreted by members of the home culture and the counterpart culture, it is possible to reduce the probability of interpretation biases. We can distinguish between value and norm dependent incidents and incidents that are due to other, non-cultural factors.

Step 4: Mirror Studies and Triangulation Studies

Mirror Studies and Triangulation Studies are undertaken by the same or preferably independent researchers in two or three counterpart cultures. These studies may help to overcome problems which are related to possible cultural bias and the sampling bias, since most of the samples which are drawn are convenience samples. If two independent researchers from two counterpart cultures undertake independent culture studies with

independently sampled managers and achieve symmetric results then there is a good chance that the cultural bias and the sampling bias has been overcome and the aggregate result of both studies can be considered as a reflection of reality as results are interculturably comparable. Incidents which do not find an appropriate reflection in a counterpart study need further inspection.

Another way of implementing control group studies is to have studies undertaken at several points of time, e.g. a comparative static analysis could be realized in the years 1992, 1996 and 1998 (Dunkel/ Meierewert 2002). These comparative static analyses help to validate earlier results achieved by other researchers. Differences that are observed could be interpreted as some reflection of the dynamic character of culture. This might be important in rapidly changing societies as in transition economies in East-Central Europe or in Asia.

Mirror studies constitute our final step to eliminate the cultural bias with help of "decentring, i.e. simultaneously developing the same instrument in several cultures" (Van de Vijver/ Tanzer 1997, p. 272).

Although during these 4 steps we deal with sampling, construct, interviewer, interpretation, and cultural bias, there still remains some room of liberty for researchers or small groups of researchers to deliberately develop their own constructs. The still remaining degree of freedom could be further reduced if a number of interview series covering a larger number of interviews is independently analyzed by a team of researchers in a joint qualitative meta-analysis. This is a task yet to be undertaken.

Discussion and Summary

In this article, we have explained the advanced methodology of cultural standard research to collect and analyze qualitative data in the field of intercultural management encounters. The cultural standard method, which originally was developed by Alexander Thomas (1996, 2003), looks at intercultural issues from a different perspective than the cultural dimensions approach predominant in the literature. The goal is to identify cultural standards, i.e. norms of perceiving, thinking, judging, and acting that the vast majority of individuals in a given culture are considering as normal for themselves and others. In narrative interviews critical incidents are identified, grouped by similarity, validated in feedback interviews with culture experts from the counterpart culture, who help to define the underlying cultural standards.

One might consider the qualitative validation of cultural standards and the liberty of researchers to generate new constructs as weak points of this method (Dunkel/ Mayrhofer 2001). One of the most frequent criticisms of the employed qualitative research method is the argument that the data available for analysis typically will be construct biased, interviewer biased, and interpretation biased. Additionally, as the interviews mostly are based on convenience sampling they do not present a representative image of the whole population of a culture.

While the latter is often not intended, as we want to study encounters in management and business, or in the context of student exchange, the four steps proposed, narrative interview, transcription and content analysis, feedback with culture experts from home and counterpart cultures, and mirror studies or triangulation studies, help to cope with most of the biases identified in the methodological literature dealing with qualitative research.

This method delivers a much more differentiated picture of cultural encounters in a given context (business, management, universities, etc.) than the cultural dimension studies. Knowledge created with help of this method can be successfully applied in culture specific trainings, like culture assimilators or cultural sensitizers. The critical incidents collected and validated help the trainees to distinguish between conflicts which are caused by cultural differences or can be explained by interest clashes or are due to adverse circumstances.

It seems to be promising to enlarge the basis of data collection by cooperating with a larger number of international scholars who could undertake narrative interviews in their own cultural context. So far we could export this method to a few countries. In Germany and Austria more than 100 studies were completed. Counterpart studies were undertaken in Argentina, China, Czech Republic, France, Hungary, Indonesia, Japan, United Kingdom, United States, Russia, South Korea, Switzerland and Spain.

While we can generate context specific actionable knowledge in bilateral or trilateral cross cultural interaction in business, management and universities, new problems emerge as detailed knowledge abounds. The more we enter into bilateral research the more difficult it is to maintain oversight. At the same time bilateral cross cultural encounters seemingly are becoming the exception to the rule in international management and at universities. Considering European Union enlargement to 25 states by May 2004 what implies 300 possible bilateral relations it becomes obvious that with more internationalisation of firms and higher student mobility new tools have to be generated to investigate issues emerging in

multicultural work teams in business, at the European Union Organizations, and at universities.

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