

# Global Leadership Teams and Cultural Diversity:

Exploring how perceptions of culture  
influence the dynamics of global teams

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ISBN: 978-87-7507-424-2  
DOI: 10.7146/aui.273.190

## Content

<b>Executive summary</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>1. Introduction</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>2. Research questions</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>3. Theoretical approach</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>4. Methodology</b> .....	<b>8</b>
4.1. Research design and setting.....	9
4.2. Data sources and collection .....	9
4.3. Data analysis .....	11
<b>5. Analysis and findings</b> .....	<b>12</b>
5.1. Global leadership teams and cultural understandings.....	13
5.1.1. Leaders of GLTs and their understandings of culture.....	16
5.1.2. The cultural concepts of local team members .....	27
5.1.3. Non-local team members and perceptions of culture .....	37
5.1.4. Cultural discourses .....	44
5.2. Working together in global leadership teams.....	48
5.2.1. Concepts of culture and preferred leadership styles .....	48
5.2.2. Local and European team members on team work and cultural diversity.....	61
<b>6. Conclusion and recommendations</b> .....	<b>73</b>
<b>7. Acknowledgements</b> .....	<b>76</b>
<b>8. Bibliography</b> .....	<b>77</b>

*Aarhus, Denmark, October 3, 2018*

## Executive summary

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, business engagements are becoming increasingly global, and global teams are now an established form of organising work in multinational organisations. As a result, managing cultural diversity within a global team has become an essential part of ensuring motivation, creativity, innovation and efficiency in today's business world.

Global teams are typically composed of a diversity of experiences, frames of references, competencies, information and, not least, cultural backgrounds. As such, they hold a unique potential for delivering high performance in terms of innovative and creative approaches to global management tasks; however, instead of focusing on the potentials of cultural diversity, practitioners and studies of global teams tend to approach cultural diversity as a barrier to team success. This study explores some of the barriers that cultural diversity poses but also discusses its potential to leverage high performance in a global context.

Our study highlights the importance of how team leaders and team members perceive 'culture' as both a concept and a social practice. We take issue with a notion of culture as a relatively fixed and homogeneous set of values, norms and attitudes shared by people of national communities; it is such a notion of culture that tends to underlie understandings that highlight the irreconcilability of cultural differences.

Applying a more dynamic and context-dependent approach to culture as a meaning system that people negotiate and use to interpret the world, this study explores how global leadership teams can best reap the benefits of cultural diversity in relation to specific challenging areas of intercultural team work, such as leadership style, decision making, relationship building, strategy process, and communication styles.

Based on a close textual interpretation of 31 semi-structured interviews with members of global leadership teams in eight Danish-owned global companies, our study identified different discourses and perceptions of culture and cultural diversity. For leaders of the global leadership teams (Danish/European) and other European team members, three understandings of cultural diversity in their global teams were prominent:

- 1) Cultural diversity was not an issue
- 2) Cultural diversity was acknowledged as mainly a liability. Diversities were expressed through a difference in national cultures and could typically be subsumed under a relatively fixed number of invariable and distinct characteristics.
- 3) Cultural diversity was an asset and expressions of culture had to be observed in the situation and could not simply be derived from prior understandings of cultural differences.

A clear result of our study was that those leaders of global teams who drew on discourses of the Asian 'Other' adhered to the first two understandings of cultural diversity and preferred leadership styles that were either patriarchal or self-defined as 'Scandinavian'. Whereas those leaders who drew on discourses of culture as dynamic and negotiated social practices adhered to the third understanding of cultural diversity and preferred a differentiated and analytical approach to leading their teams.

We also focused on the perceptions of team members with a background in the country in which the global teams were co-located. These 'local' team members expressed a nuanced and multifaceted perspective on their own cultural background, the national culture of the company, and their own position within the team, which enabled them to easily navigate between essentialist perceptions of culture while maintaining a critical stance on the existing cultural hegemonies. They recognised the value of their local knowledge and language proficiency, but, for those local members in teams with a negative or essentialist view of cultural diversity, it was difficult to obtain recognition of their cultural styles and specific, non-local competences.

Our study suggests that the way global team members perceive culture, based on dominant societal discourses of culture, significantly affects the understandings of roles and positions in global leadership teams. We found that discourses on culture were used to explain differences and similarities between team members, which profoundly affected the social practices and dynamics of the global team. We conclude that only global teams with team leaders who are highly aware of the multiple perspectives at play in different contexts within the team hold the capacity to be alert to cultural diversity and to demonstrate agility in leveraging differences and similarities into inclusive and dynamic team practices.

## 1. Introduction

Entering the 21<sup>st</sup> century, business engagements are increasingly globalising with business divisions, supply chains and production extending further and further in time and space. As a result of this development, global teams (GT) have become an established form of organising work in multinational organisations and thus managing cultural diversity has become an essential feature for successful companies to achieve motivation, creativity, innovation and efficiency in today's world. Professor of Global Leadership Paula Caligiuri expresses this relationship between managing cultural diversity and company success as follows:

I've not met a high-level leader in any industry who doesn't see cultural agility as a key factor for future success. On the contrary, I've found unanimous agreement that their organizations' global growing pains would ease, if they had access to a robust pipeline of culturally agile professionals. (Caligiuri 2012, 7)

GTs are typically constituted by members of diverse national, cultural and linguistic backgrounds and differ from ordinary teams by operating in globally dispersed working environments and being heterogeneous in multiple dimensions (Maloney and Zellmer-Bruhn 2006). At the same time, the concept of 'team' has also changed from a relatively stable unit with a particular purpose to a unit characterised by permeable boundaries of fast-changing memberships and dynamic tasks. Global teams are concurrently embedded in multiple organisational contexts and team members may be part of several other teams simultaneously, which increases the intricacies of team tasks and purposes.

Despite the importance of understanding contemporary complexities of the GTs' operations, research on this particular type of teams is still relatively limited (Connaughton 2007, Hinds 2011, Zander, Mockaitis, and Butler 2012). Some of the reasons for this research gap are that, in trying to understand the internal dynamics of GTs, we cannot simply extend traditional research approaches to conventional teams to teams operating in global settings with a higher degree of internal and external complexity. Nor can we merely focus on understanding GTs by one of their most salient feature, namely being virtual, since global teams are about so much more than spatial and temporal distribution and communication. Instead, in this report, we argue for the importance of exploring cultural perceptions and hegemonies that define the interdependencies of the GTs and hence their management and dynamics and practices as well as their overall potential for leveraging cultural diversity into a source of creativity and innovation.

In our attempt to explore and understand the dynamics of cultural diversity within GTs and how best to manage such teams, we will focus on global *leadership* teams (GLT), while being well aware that relationships between the team and its organisational context and between the team and its external environment are equally important. Our study is based on a qualitative research approach involving 31 semi-structured interviews in which we explore cultural diversity and cultural perceptions within primarily localised GLTs from the perspective of all their members. We examine the impact that this diversity and these perceptions have on the dynamics and workings of the team. In particular, we explore the effect that cultural diversity and cultural perceptions have on the workings and practices of GLTs in multinational companies of Danish origin. On this basis, we analyse and discuss how teams may best gain the benefits of cultural diversity and examine aspects that may mitigate the difficulties team members associate with cultural heterogeneity.

The purpose of our explorations is to enable the consultancy company UKON A/S to better develop new methods of working with global leadership teams aspiring to improve their performance. The research report has been financially supported by the Innovation Fund Denmark.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Innobooster grant no. 5179-00711B.

## 2. Research questions

GLTs are composed of a diversity of experiences, frames of references, competencies, information and, not least, cultural backgrounds. As such, they possess a unique potential to deliver high performance in terms of innovative and creative approaches to global management tasks as well as constructive control mechanisms from establishing premature consensus within the group (Stahl 2010b). However, like any other team, GLTs can only make use of this potential in so far as they succeed in establishing a shared understanding of their direction, coordination and commitment (Drath et al. 2008, Katzenbach 2003, Trillingsgaard 2015). This research project therefore asks the following question:

*How can global leadership teams best meet their potential for success? In other words, how do global leadership teams best reap the benefits of cultural heterogeneity?*

In order to answer this question, this project will focus on analysing the relationship between cultural perceptions and teamwork experiences of members in GLTs based on the following subordinate research questions:

### *Importance of cultural diversity and teamwork*

- How do members of the global management team interpret cultural diversity? What is defined as culturally conditioned in their global team?
- What intercultural skills are considered essential in a global management team?
- What is the importance of cultural diversity for common performance in a global leadership team?
- Which processes are perceived as valuable for bringing different cultures into play in order to optimise problem solving in a global management team?
- How does the learning of intercultural competencies occur in a global leadership team?
- What cultural factors are related to the creation of the global leadership team direction?
- What cultural factors are related to the creation of the global leadership's joint coordination (alignment), including common understanding of strategy?
- What cultural factors are related to the creation of the global leadership team's commitment?

### *Significance of interpersonal relationships and culturally diverse teamwork*

- What are the implications of interpersonal relationships in a global management team and are these relationships perceived differently depending on cultural background?
- How do members of the global leadership team experience the meeting of different management cultures in team interactions?
- How is the importance of cultural diversity interpreted in relation to the individual team member's ability to include other team members based on cultural sensitivity?
- How is the importance of cultural diversity interpreted in relation to the individual member's satisfaction with working in a culturally diverse leadership team?

### *Importance of communication for culturally diverse teamwork*

- What role does cultural diversity play in communication in a global management team (including feedback)?

### *Importance of power in culturally diverse teamwork*

- How is the importance of cultural diversity interpreted in the perception of power hierarchies in the global management team? (meaning of culturally conditioned perceptions of power/responsibility and power distribution?) (Maznevski 2012)

### 3. Theoretical approach

Despite the increasing importance of understanding the complexities of GTs and how they operate, as mentioned above, research in this area is still relatively limited (Connaughton 2007, Hinds 2011, Zander, Mockaitis, and Butler 2012). For particular aspects of the global teams, such as the salient feature of scattered localisation, remarkably good knowledge about the use and effect of virtual communication has already been established (see e.g. Gertsen 2012, Tøth 2015); however, the effects of cultural diversity has been studied to a more limited extent. Two major review articles have concluded that our knowledge of the role and importance of culture (and not just cultural diversity) for global teams still lags behind the increasing demands for more insights (Hinds 2011, Connaughton 2007).

Some reasons for this relative dearth in research on the workings of culturally diverse teams may be explained by the disciplinary approaches that have been applied to explore and perfect non-global team processes. Decades of research on 'ordinary' teams has predominantly been conducted from psychological perspectives with focus on the basic conditions for a team's performance, such as the importance of the team's task formulation, the team's composition of skills, the development of team roles (group dynamics) and the completion of processes (communication, conflict resolution and project management) and not least the creation of a shared social group identity. Experimental methods have been applied to focus particularly on the necessity of emotional conditions, such as mutual respect and trust, in producing a strong coherent identity as a precondition for a team's potential for success (Maznevski 2017, Stahl 2010a). Hence, it is achieving the right composition of personality traits, and not aspects of group diversity, that has been in the centre of much of the research undertaken by psychologists in relation to studying group dynamics. However, cross-cultural psychologists are now beginning to change this situation.

From the 1970s, explorations into global teams characterised by cultural diversity and sometimes by wide geographical spread have been taken up by business school scholars working within different social science disciplines. From these perspectives, cultural diversity of GTs has primarily been studied as an invariable condition of globalisation inhibiting teamwork, while the significant potentials of cultural diversity have to a far lesser extent been the focus of such studies (Stahl 2010a). Or, as one of the highly cited researchers on intercultural studies in this tradition, Geert Hofstede, has exclaimed: "Cultural differences are a nuisance at best and often a disaster."<sup>2</sup>

Since one of the focus areas of the team work research described above is the importance of establishing coherence of team members to achieve trust and avoid conflict, it is perhaps not surprising that cultural differences are often regarded as an inherent challenge for global teams, rather than an opportunity for high team performance. However, this assumption only holds if cultural differences are understood as irreconcilable, innate, and relatively unchangeable values that determine human behaviour and communication, which has in fact been the dominant approach in much business school research and teaching of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This cultural understanding rests on notions of culture as nationally anchored, relatively homogeneous and an essentialistic kernel of values that largely regulates norms and behaviours of the individual (see e.g. Hofstede 2010, 2003). This functionalist or 'neo-essentialistic' perspective (Holliday 2011), which suggests a causal relationship between national origin and certain behavioural traits, implies that cultural diversity poses a challenge to or even precludes team cooperation but that these negative effects might be mitigated by learning about the specific behaviour of people from different countries (Hall 1959, Hall and Hall 1989, Hofstede 2010, 2003, Trompenaars 1997).

Such a functionalist approach to culture and its oversimplifications of the complex realities of cultural diversity has been met with persistent criticism (see e.g. Askehave and Holmgren 2011, Holliday 2011, Spencer-Oatey and Franklin 2009) but continues to sustain theory building in both academia and cultural training (see e.g. Earley and Peterson 2004, HBR's 10 2016, Meyer 2014, Owen 2017), since it provides simple and recognisable models sustained by cultural stereotypes to explain cultural complexi-

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<sup>2</sup> Retrieved on August 19, 2018 from [www.geert-hofstede.com](http://www.geert-hofstede.com)

ties. For cultural trainers, predisposed cultural values, norms and behaviours of individuals become almost self explanatory and hence easily exercised and assessed with (expensive) tools and tests (see e.g. KnowledgeWorkx 2017).

In our study, we take issue with this functionalist and essentialising approach and its idea that idiosyncratic lists of cultural values make up cultural diversity. We understand ‘culture’ as an analytical concept covering social practices that are established and negotiated relationally and dynamically through human encounters, mobility and discourses (Barth 1998, Clifford 1992), rather than essentialised understandings of cultural differences related to nationality, race and ethnicity. Human beings practise, perform and interpret culture, and cultural identities are formulated and reformulated as momentarily situated and related to particular subject positions made available through discourses within a given time and space (Hall and Du Gay 2002). Culture (and identity) is thus contextually determined and a dynamic product created through actions and talks in the interaction between individuals and institutions (see e.g. Claes 2009, Franklin 2007, Hinds 2011, Street 1993). This does not mean that cultural communities are not also created and maintained through national aspects, such as beliefs in the form of traditions, rituals, institutions, and individuals; it simply means that national culture is just one of many cultural frameworks that the individual can choose to relate to, co-operate with and rely more or less explicitly on.

This dynamic conception of culture implies that the context determines how social action, such as individual behaviour, communication or norms, is expressed in intercultural situations (among other things). Individuals are regarded as acting creatively and critically in relation to incompatible norms, expectations and practices, but communication, behaviour and action are determined by the immediate contextual situation. This cultural understanding implies that cultural diversity in, for example, a global team does not in itself create challenges or ‘disease orientation’ (Ancona 2007, 227), since cultural processes are unpredictable and highly contextual and individually dependent. Similarly, GTs’ use of information technology does not necessarily create barriers but, as research has shown, may over a longer period of time lead to greater focus on task resolution and increase mutual trust building (Hinds 2005, Maznevski 2012, 194, Stahl 2010b, Tøth 2015).

Cultural diversity in co-located GTs thus potentially presents both opportunities and barriers. It presents the opportunity for teams to achieve far better performance, but it also means that these teams may be challenged on issues such as communication, relationships and alignment. These opportunities and barriers are presented in the table below:

**Table 1:**

<i>Barriers</i>	<i>Opportunities</i>
Tendency towards:	Potential for:
- Less effective communication	- Increased creativity and innovation
- Increased conflict	- More complete and comprehensive perspectives, stakeholder coverage
- Lower alignment on task	

(Maznevski 2017, 281)

In our study, we understand culture as created by team members themselves as they interact with each other in different contexts, and our focus is thus on the team members' own understanding or perception of 'culture' and 'doing' culture. We explore the discursive constructions on doing culture from all subject positions and perspectives of the team to identify dominant statements or discourses that team members rely on when explaining and making sense of the cultural dynamics of the team. We then relate these major discursive constructions to the team members' intercultural practices, such as global leadership.

As with research on global teams, research on global leadership is also a relative nascent field of investigation. However, compared with research on global teams, research on global leadership is more prolific and is being approached from various academic disciplines both within and outside business schools, such as in the *Advances in Global Leadership Series* (see also Bird 2016, Henson 2016). Studies on global leadership have predominantly focused on the intercultural competencies and 'global mindset' required to operate successfully in global contexts, but it has done so primarily at the theoretical level at the expense of empirical studies (Mendenhall E., Li, and Osland 2016).

An exception to this theoretical trend within global leadership studies is the project Global Leadership Academy, which was set up in 2010 by the Confederation of Danish Industry (DI) and Copenhagen Business School and funded by The Danish Industry Foundation (Industriens Fond).<sup>3</sup> This project aims to explore global leadership by applying both quantitative and qualitative approaches to better prepare Danish companies for globalisation by developing leaders for working in global contexts. The project is embedded in the international research convention on global leadership, which seeks to identify specific cognitive skills such as psychological sensitivity and handling cultural complexities as important global leadership competencies. Reports of the Global Leadership Academy identify that Danish leaders in Danish MNCs often ignore, neutralise or downplay the impact of cultural diversity and essentialise a specific 'Danish leadership style' (Lauring and Klitmøller N.Y., Nielsen 2016, Storgaard and Smith 2012).

Finally, having investigated and identified discursive constructions on culture and intercultural work practices made by team members in GLTs, we relate these constructions to team practices that may leverage cultural diversity as a source of creativity and innovation. Although the scope of our investigation could not extend to observing the actual behaviour of the teams we interviewed, we believe following social constructivist theory that discourses by themselves have a profound effect on the social context of the team and its practices. We thus propose the specific GLT concepts of culture and team practices that appear to best reap the benefits of cultural diversity and develop these concepts and practices into a new intercultural competency model.

Intercultural competence is widely regarded as an organisational competence of economic importance for multinational companies (see e.g. Eubel-Kasper 1997), but research has not yet reached a consensus on how to define or best develop it. Inspired by a fairly broad agreement that intercultural competence should include cognitive, behavioural and affective aspects of human life (Bennett 2015, Dearnorff 2006, Spencer-Oatey and Franklin 2009), we propose a novel intercultural competency model on which cultural training and development may rely.

#### 4. Methodology

Given that the interplay between cultural perceptions, working practices and team dynamics in GLT has not yet been systematically investigated, this study applies an inductive, explorative approach to obtain and analyse data to address our research questions.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://di.dk/globalleadershipacademy/Pages/default.aspx>.

We selected a qualitative research design to explore how the perception of culture impacts on team dynamics; this enabled us to get as close to our informants as possible in order to contextualise the narratives and discourses of informants in their working environment. Whilst we cannot claim to know everything about our informants, our language abilities, knowledge and personal backgrounds ensured that we were able to communicate with them and understand them on a high level. Moreover, in our research design, interview guide and analysis, we were aware of and reflected on the interaction between us as Danish researchers and our informants as processes of encounters and interactions between social actors in different power positions as well as the ‘performative character’ of research participants (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992).

#### **4.1. Research design and setting**

As the focus of this study was on *global leadership teams*, informants had to be part of teams that:

- 1) consisted of at least three managers at the level of CEO, senior/vice president, director/manager with different areas of responsibilities
- 2) worked with complex management tasks of importance for the company’s position on the global market
- 3) had worked together for a considerable period of time, although exchange of single team members may have occurred and
- 4) consisted of members of different cultural backgrounds (either located together or in different regions).

It was also a requirement that all or the majority of team members were happy to be interviewed and were happy for the interviews to be audio and video recorded.

Four pilot interviews were conducted in September 2016 to inform the semi-structured interview guide and to help select informants. However, pilot interviews did not become part of the data for this study. The interview guide included general questions about the management team and its tasks as well as responsibilities, the significance of global teams, advantages and disadvantages of global teams in relation to problem solving and decision making, communication, meetings and implementation, application of local knowledge, relationship building (trust), seeking results and conflict resolution, and, finally, diversity as a concept of reflection in the teams.

Based on results from the pilot interviews, informants were approached through personal contacts with UKON. All interviews were conducted as face-to-face interviews under conditions of anonymity and confidentiality.

We chose a qualitative research design – which is particularly suited to investigating research questions relating to ‘how’ – in order to bring us close to the experience and perception of the informants and to allow us to explore previously unrecognised concepts and understandings and their inter-relatedness.

#### **4.2. Data sources and collection**

In January 2017 and May 2017, we conducted in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews (Brinkmann 2015) with 31 global team leaders and team members of eight global leadership teams in eight Danish-owned global companies. The main criteria for our case companies were that they had a long history of globalising their activities to more than one continent and depended on complex team-based processes. Furthermore, to secure cultural diversity of the case teams, the selected GLTs were all virtual teams spanning several countries in Asia or in Asia and in Europe (except for two co-located production teams, but these teams still had multicultural compositions).

We initially intended to interview all team leaders and members of the eight teams of between 4-10 members, but this proved impossible (except in one case) due to the high mobility level of the global

team members, who were often unable to keep an interview appointment or were located too far away to conduct face to face interviews within the financial scope of the project. As a result, we interviewed all the leaders of the eight GLTs (who were in company positions such as vice presidents, vice directors or general manager) and 2-3 team members of each team – in one case, GLT6, we were able to interview all the team members. For each GLT, we ensured that we interviewed at least one Danish member, one local member (Chinese, Thai, Malay or Singaporean), and one European member to ensure that cultural diversity was being represented in all teams.

All the interviews were conducted face to face at the team leader’s location (where team members were also often available for interview) except for two interviews that were conducted via Skype. All interviews were conducted in English jointly or separately by the two researchers and lasted approximately one hour. We specifically selected GLTs operating in Asia since this fitted with one of the researcher’s language proficiency in standard Chinese and cultural familiarity with Asia in general. Although all interviews were conducted in English, this language proficiency and cultural familiarity helped us to contextualise some of the informants’ narratives. All interviews were video as well as audio recorded and fully transcribed.

**Table 2: Interview overview**

Company	Team size	Team location	Team type	Team age	Informants
No. 1	9 people	Virtual	IT service	3 years	team leader (M), 3 team members
No. 2	8 people	Virtual	HR	2 years	1 team member (W)
	4 people		HR	2 years	team leader (W), 2 team members
No. 3	6 people	Virtual, partly co-located	Production	14 months	team leader (M), 2 team members
No. 4	10 people	Co-localised	Sales	15 months	team leader (M), 2 team members
No. 5	7 people	Virtual, partly co-located	Sales	2 months	team leader (M), 3 team members
No.6	6 people	Co-localised	Production	4,5 years	team leader (M), 5 team members
No. 7	6 people	Co-localised	Production	11-12 years	team leader (M), 3 team members
No. 8	7 people	Co-localised	Service and sales	1 year	team leader (M), 3 team members

An interview guide was developed based on three pilot interviews and revised accordingly. As a general rule, broad questions on working in culturally diverse global teams were followed by more specific questions related to typically challenging areas in intercultural teamwork. These more specific questions were based on theories of intercultural challenges in international collaboration and included the domains of leadership styles, working processes, decision-making processes, communication, and relationship building. Although these domains of collaboration are not exhaustive, they represent key areas of intercultural challenges as identified in the research literature.

### 4.3. Data analysis

Data in this study comprises the transcribed in-depth semi-structured interviews structured around topics identified as important for intercultural team co-operation in previous research and pilot interviews. These topics include communication styles, decision making, problem solving, establishing relationships, and authority relations.

The analysis of the transcribed interviews worked on three levels simultaneously. On the first level, we were interested phenomenologically in the ways the informants experienced and described cultural diversity in their leadership teams (Brinkmann 2015, 30). We focused on how the informants described their work experiences in the teams, how they listed challenges, and how they described any proactive action they had taken to overcome these challenges. On the second level, we concentrated on the informants' conceptual and interpretative reflections on cultural diversity based on how they presented or co-constructed the culture they claimed to be representative of or other cultures they interacted with. Finally, on the third level, we conducted an analysis of the discourses through which the informants constructed and framed their accounts. We identified the linguistic signs in their speech that made it possible to reconstruct the frames. As stated earlier, our assumption was that part of the intercultural challenges was less linked to the specific and immediate contexts the informants referred to than the way they articulated these challenges. By adding a third level based on a discourse analysis, we went a step further than most other interview-based research on intercultural communication (an exception is Askehave and Holmgreen 2011).

While we agree that it is important to depart from a phenomenological approach that identifies how the informants relate problems and formulate solutions, in accordance with social constructivist epistemology, we also think that problems and solutions are framed by the more or less conscious choices made about which discourses to draw on when articulating them. Leaving out this level entails that we risk taking the articulation of problems and solutions simply at face value.

As shown in the state of the art section, a small number of more linguistically oriented scholars have used various forms of discourse analysis to approach intercultural interactions.<sup>4</sup> In our approach to discourse analysis, we rely on the broad definition by Scollon, Scollon and Jones presented in their seminal *Intercultural Communication: A Discourse Approach*: “Here the meaning of discourse is the broad range of everything which can be said or talked about or symbolized within a particular, recognizable domain” (Scollon 2012, 8). While this definition includes both speech acts and institutionalised practices, we have chosen a methodologically more narrow scope inspired by Michel Foucault's template as developed in his famous book *Archeology of Knowledge*. We therefore only look at discourses as conceptual and positional frames expressed linguistically. Following the criteria laid out by Ian Parker, we identified the following general criteria for discourses (Parker 2014). They were:

- realised in texts
- forming objects
- containing subjects or positions
- establishing a coherent system of meaning
- referring to other discourses (interdiscursivity)

More specifically, we searched for the objects and the positions in the conceptual architecture of the texts. This entails finding central concepts around which the text clusters and examining how they are related to a set of positions. For the latter, we refer to the scenography of the discourse, borrowing an analytical term introduced into discourse analysis by Dominique Maingenau (Maingenau 1991).

Since we were interested in the main discourses through which our informants described working in global leadership teams and reflected on challenges, we first identified discourses on culture: how did

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<sup>4</sup> Since studies of intercultural interactions have been dominated by approaches that privilege theories of communication and speech acts, discourse analysis has played a more marginal role within the field.

the informants conceptualise diversity in terms of culture, and what were the consequences for how teamwork was conceived? The next step was to determine how a discourse on culture impacted on the scenography. This demanded a closer look at the ways in which teamwork was described. Following the list of topics that we had drawn from both our pilot interviews and previous research on global teams, we asked how the discourse on culture impacted on understandings such as leadership, processes such as feedback, and problem solving and decision making in the teams. We put particular emphasis on how the different relationships between the team members, and between the team and HQ, were affected by the positioning stemming from the discourse on culture that intersected and influenced not only the understanding of relationships but also such crucial aspects of teamwork practices such as leadership and communication.

To support the identification of conceptual links and positions, we coded the transcribed interviews using NVivo11. All central concepts and their links to secondary concepts were coded semantically. The scenography was coded according to the concrete actors, other actors not present and abstract actors, or entities that give legitimacy to the actors. Actors were typically identified according to their nationality, which made it possible to relate them to a (national) culture.

Finally, our initial results were presented at a seminar at the Danish-Thai Chamber of Commerce in Bangkok in January 2018. The feedback we received at this presentation aided us further in our analysis.

## 5. Analysis and findings

From the outset, the intention of this research project was to explore global leadership teams in global Danish-owned companies with a long track record of globalising their activities and organisational structures that support cultural diversity. We expected to be able to draw on the experiences of these teams to identify how global leadership teams achieve success by enabling the potentials of cultural diversity; however, contrary to our expectations, we found very few examples of teams or team leaders who consciously leveraged cultural diversity as a source of new ideas and innovation to enhance performance.

We also found limited evidence of team members having received cultural training to sharpen their cultural awareness, which was possibly related to the fact that only a few teams devoted time discussing intercultural issues at team building occasions such as outings with the team. In fact, only two team leaders were explicit in their management of the team when it came to focusing on team building across cultures. In general, team leaders and team members expressed directly or indirectly that our questions gave them a rare opportunity to reflect on cultural issues that affected their daily life but that were not usually the object of team discussion. As one team leader expressed:

... when you get questions like this, because very often it's daily work, you know, that just happens somehow and when you suddenly have to sit and describe it, it can be a little bit difficult, actually. (Interview 7.1.)

Since our informants were only partly concerned with issues related to cultural diversity and team dynamics, we focussed our analysis on the relationships between the informants' conceptualisations of culture in their teams and the impact on five partly overlapping issues known to be challenging and decisive for intercultural teamwork (Brett 2006): 1) leadership style, 2) relationship building, 3) decision and strategy making, 4) intercultural communication and 5) working together e.g. at meetings or on projects. In other words, we focused on issues relating to three interconnected components in the management of harmony-disharmony among members in global teams (and among people in general) comprising (Spencer-Oatey and Franklin 2009, 109):

- intercultural communication: ‘face’ (“Face is the negotiated public image, mutually granted each other by participants in a communicative event” (Scollon 2012))
- behavioural expectations (relationship building, leadership and management)
- interactional goals (decisions and strategy making; working together at a meeting)

## Team dynamics in global leadership teams



### 5.1. Global leadership teams and cultural understandings

In many languages, culture is a concept used to denote differences between groups. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the dominant understanding of culture in Europe has been to link it to nationality. The idea that peoples were attached to each other and were similar because they spoke the same language and lived on the same territory established itself with the rise of the nation state. Nationalist ideologies successfully produced the perception that national differences were the basic premise for cultural diversity and turned this perception into a hegemonic discourse of culture.

When we speak about and act with cultural diversity, we tend to look for general features that essentially characterise the national culture that we use as a container for differences between people. The concept and the discourse of culture have established a dominant frame with which to understand and deal with the type of diversity we categorise as cultural. With this frame, we can make national cultures the primary container of diversity. We can furthermore reduce them to a set of distinct features that we turn into the differences that really matter. These features are used to characterise ourselves and the others with whom we engage. Because these features really matter, they are connected with values. When we divide up the world into national cultures, our distinctions are both descriptive and normative. We tend to draw our cultural map, which we use to address others with whom we engage, from our own culture and include the values we provide it with. This culture therefore becomes a base culture. Base cultures occasionally become normative points of orientation in the sense that other cultures are typically seen as less valuable.

The discourse on national cultures penetrates our everyday life. It has become banal (Billig 1995). In the theoretical literature on culture, this discourse is termed essentialist because it relies on an assumption that culture can be reduced to a few dominant features that matter (for us) and that are more stable than other features. This is often illustrated with a set of concentric circles where the inner circle

represents these dominant features. Sometimes, it is also claimed that cultures are partly invisible, because they orient our being without our explicit consciousness. This is often captured with a metaphor of the iceberg, where only the tip is visible.

When we understand national culture as a matrix for our behaviour, we insert a certain determinism. What we do and say can be explained with reference to our culture. It is convenient to contain others in national cultures, but it can also become problematic. Since our world is constantly changing, we are always forced to adapt our concept to the changes we experience. Since the discourse is dominant or hegemonic, we will try to bend the world. Let us take an example that our informants encounter on a daily basis. If they are facing a colleague from China who was partly educated in America or who has worked in America for a long time, they can choose to categorise him/her as typically Chinese (based on how they essentialise the Chinese) or as less typically Chinese because of his/her mixed background. In theory, it is difficult to overlook this mixed background or hybridity, but, in practice, we do it quite often.

Another practical challenge to the essentialist concept relates to the fact that our behaviour is not dictated by our culture. It is certainly framed by our cultural background but it is also intentional. Our behaviour is both rational, that is, oriented towards a specific goal, and conventional, that is, oriented towards what is expected, and culture is something that can only be observed in what we choose to do or say – occasionally and repeatedly. Sometimes we think through the different options available to us, and sometimes this is not necessary. What is important here is that we always have to orient ourselves and make decisions about what to do and say. On this understanding, culture is a concept we use to denote this capacity for orientation.<sup>5</sup> Thinkers of culture have tried to capture the fact that culture is a reservoir from which we draw to orient ourselves when we act linguistically or otherwise – and not a structural bedrock – by conceptualising culture as a verb that is, directly related to our practice (Street 1993). While the metaphor succeeds in highlighting that culture is a process and not a ‘thing’, we prefer a different metaphor. We would like to conceptualise culture as a toolbox to emphasise that we choose between a variety of ‘tools’ of symbolic resources, depending on (how we view) the context and our intentions.<sup>6</sup> Our potentials for acting are clearly framed by our culture, but what we actually do cannot be predicted by it. It is furthermore to be expected that our capacity for orientation and our choice of tools will be more complicated when dealing with people from a group that possesses different tools. We might have difficulties decoding them, or we might think that they are using the wrong tools.

When interacting with people we consider different from ourselves, we do not list all the possible differences. We focus on those differences that matter, perhaps because they are disturbing, confusing or downright offensive. Intercultural challenges are most easily observed when things go wrong. When this happens, it is more difficult to orient ourselves than normal. Even if we have already prepared ourselves by mobilising respect and openness for the unusual, situations that are less controlled cognitively can easily activate an essentialist concept of culture that helps explain why the others are apparently so strange. It would, of course, be wrong to claim that we automatically resort to an essentialist concept of culture when our orientation is challenged. But we can choose such a concept because it gives us an easy way out, because we refuse to acknowledge the situation, or – perhaps most likely – because it represents the knowledge of the others with which we are already acquainted.

However, if we accept that this knowledge is not entirely useful for coping with intercultural challenges, we open up for new interpretations based on what we actually observe. To move from prefixed knowledge to observation is to take a step towards a more analytical concept of culture. This entails reflecting on the limits of our own perspective. We then not only accept that others have different tools but also reflect on the limits of our own tools. An analytical concept of culture involves two steps: we must observe and not predict, and we must be aware that we are entering a space that contains multiple perspectives. Reflecting on these steps is often described as moving from an ethnocentric to an ethnorelative

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<sup>5</sup> The anthropologist Carol Delaney defines culture as the specific ways in which humans orient themselves (Delaney 2011).

<sup>6</sup> For the metaphor of a toolbox, see (Scollon 2012).

position.<sup>7</sup> In short, an ethnorelative position is a way of accepting that you are in situations with multiple perspectives. As we shall see in the analysis that follows, ethnorelativism does not cancel out situations of asymmetry in which some have access to more resources and have more authority but creates an initial unsettling of fixed positions.

In everyday life, we do not act as thinkers of culture when we interact with others whom we find different. We observe differences and evaluate whether they can be understood as cultural. There are obviously many other ways of understanding diversity, such as relating it to gender, age, education, profession or social status. During our interviews, our informants often viewed diversity as individualised and explained this with people having different personalities. As people, we certainly all have our own individual features or personalities. However, to address diversity as simply a question of personality is in a way to circumvent cultural diversity, which always concerns codes and norms that go beyond the individual. As such, in our interviews, we therefore insisted having our informants talking about diversity the type of diversity that can be conceptualised as cultural.

As mentioned above, however, we did not ask our informants to reflect on their concepts. In ordinary conversations, very few of us develop very general perceptions or theories of culture. Instead, we concentrated on how diversity that we can call cultural has influenced the informants' global management teams. Our aim was to focus on the articulations of such diversity when they encounter it in their work. We interviewed three different groups of team members: the general managers, the team members with a local background, and the team members with a non-local background. The three groups are positioned quite differently in the company. The managers are directly answerable to the company; the non-local team members are recruited from outside the country where the team is based and are in the same foreign environment as the managers; the local team members possess local knowledge, including the language, but are at the same time placed in a position which is foreign for the Danish company. We did not attempt to isolate what every individual member had to say about cultural diversity. What they say about culture very much depends on the issues addressed. Quite often diversity is linked to a rather robust an essentialist concept of culture that relates to the position in which the informant is locating him- or herself. Quite often, culture is used to designate identities, one's own and that of the others.

For historical reasons, we typically use 'culture' to designate group identity such as nationality. To be Danish thus indicates that a person has a sense of belonging, which is explained by his or her Danish culture. We observe when our informants make direct statements about their identity.

Even if all our informants are fully aware that they are working in an environment influenced by much more diversity than they would encounter in a more local setting, there are impressive variations in how much and how they articulate them. Will they draw a lot on prefixed knowledge about others, or will they refer to specific observations from their work when speaking about cultural diversity? In the analysis that follows, we investigate more precisely how are informants conceptualise culture; are they trying to avoid the concept, are they relying on an essentialist concept, or do they let observations influence how they understand culture? In our analysis, we address the following questions in particular:

- What is the importance awarded to culture when discussing diversity?
- Which cultural map is drawn to order the cultural differences that are identified?
- Which features are dominant when people from other cultures are described? And which are not mentioned?
- To what extent do informants draw on existing knowledge of others when they speak about cultural diversity?
- To what extent and how do informants include concrete observations in their reflections on cultural diversity?

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<sup>7</sup> Cultural relativism is fundamental to cultural analysis. Several textbooks in intercultural communication use the concepts of ethnocentrism and ethnorelativism as a point of departure and highlight the significance of the latter as an important intercultural competence (see e.g. Jackson 2014). Ethnocentrism is always couched in different discourses, e.g. as a Eurocentrism.

### *5.1.1. Leaders of GLTs and their understandings of culture*

We did not explicitly ask what our informants understood by culture. How they reflect on culture - that is, their concept of culture - depends on what they have to say about cultural diversity in the way they operate in their global teams. Like everybody else, the individual manager does not necessarily possess a consistent theory of culture. The way they use the term mostly either explicitly or implicitly depends on the situations they are referring to. Sometimes our informants rely on a relatively robust categorisation of people in specific cultures; at other times, their reference to culture is based on observations made while the team is working. How often our informants refer to culture in the first place depends on the general view of cultural diversity among the managers. Even though we did not ask our informants to provide us with general reflections on culture, in our questions, we focused on how cultural diversity might impact on the way they manage their global teams. This focus, therefore, makes it difficult to avoid speaking about culture. Below we outline the three general ways of speaking about culture that we have found in our interviews with eight managers.

- 1) Cultural diversity was not an issue
- 2) Cultural diversity was acknowledged as mainly a liability. Diversities were expressed through a difference in national cultures and could typically be subsumed under a relatively fixed number of invariable and distinct characteristics.
- 3) Cultural diversity was an asset and expressions of culture had to be observed in the situation and could not simply be derived from prior understandings of cultural differences.

#### *Cultural diversity was not an issue*

Only very few of the managers we interviewed explicitly stated that they do not encounter cultural differences in their work. However, some of them wanted to circumvent culture because they found it made work more complicated. This is what a Danish manager answers when asked what he would tell younger colleagues who come to Asia for the first time:

You know, the first time I came to China then I read a lot of books about how to manage in China, and I think I was not myself the first week because I tried to not do all the things you are not supposed to do so ... and then the first weekend hit me and I thought what am I doing, right? (Interview 3.1.)

The Danish manager differentiates between a prior knowledge that is no great use and the value of being on the ground. By dismissing prior knowledge, he puts complete trust in his own capacity to observe. In fact, during our interview, he almost refused to speak about culture. This is what he answered when we asked him directly:

So, your question was what is culture to me? What is culture? I think culture is what makes people stay in a company. (Interview 3.1.)

When he speaks of culture, it is to emphasise what people have in common. The company provides this commonality. It is not uncommon to use the term culture to point out what characterises a specific company. Company culture is typically used to designate the uniqueness of a company, be it its values, its code or the trust it has established with its employees. (Kotter and Heskett 1992). The concept is explicitly used to emphasise what everybody has in common and implicitly used to neutralise the cultural differences there might be in the company. A foreign manager in a Danish company clearly states that the function of a company culture is to bring people together and overcome differences:

... so, yes, there are differences, when you come from different countries, but I think what ultimately then brings you back to a common denominator is the company culture, right. The company culture then takes the precedent and then all of us coming from different cultural backgrounds get connected through the company culture. (Interview 2.1.)

The role of the company culture is to create a feeling of being together that neutralises difference. None of the managers that referred to company culture specified how this neutralisation would happen. It seemed to be a general assumption that all employees would accept the values and the identity of the company. Through the company culture, the company establishes a microcosm, which becomes independent of all the other cultural contexts in which the company is embedded. Furthermore, the term seems primarily to be used as a marker of identity that tends to exclude cultural diversities. Its use is more strategic and less descriptive. Creating a common identity is a goal, whereas cultural diversity is either viewed as problematic or simply as not existing within the company. However, sometimes a link is made to the larger cultural setting of which the company is part. The manager quoted above relates the company culture to its origins in a Danish culture:

NN's [company name] culture which is, I would say fairly rooted to a Scandinavian or Danish culture, I think, but I don't know all that much about Danish culture. (Interview 2.1.)

Even if there is a difference between viewing the company as a cultural microcosm or as a Danish culture island in an international environment, the most important thing to note here is that cultural diversity is not seen as important. The reference to company culture might be conventional, but its main role seems to be to flag cohesion within the company and tone down intercultural challenges.

*Cultural diversity was acknowledged as mainly a liability. Diversities were expressed through a difference in national cultures and could typically be subsumed under a relatively fixed number of invariable and distinct characteristics.*

The most frequent use of the term culture in global teams is to differentiate between national cultures. Culture is distributed among team members according to their nationality. National culture becomes a container to comprehend a set of values or typical behaviours. What team members do can then be explained by referring to these containers ("This is how Thai people are...", for example). To categorise what people say and do into national cultures and to reduce their behaviour to a few characteristics is linked to the dominant concept of culture in which nationality is a heading for what people are like. The concept works both for others and for oneself. The essentialisation that follows from reducing other cultures to a few distinct features can vary from relatively negative to more positive views of others. A Danish manager describes his Chinese team members in the following way:

Chinese they don't challenge you at all and they ... and you need to know to learn how to cope with that because everything works perfectly, you just need to do the right things in order to make it work and ... (...) I would not expect [name] to come up with the good ideas on how we could do that ... (Interview 1.1.)

This is just one of many stereotypes that managers activate to describe other team members. In this case, he sees all Chinese people as embedded in the same Chinese culture, which he furthermore views as very distant from his own culture on the cultural map that guides his reflections. The reason why we refer to stereotyping here is that his utterance about the Chinese is based, not on a specific set of observations, but on prejudice. Several of our managers are aware of the risk of moving from observations to broad generalisations:

... and that I would say is a very big difference between the working culture in Asia and in Europe. And now I'm generalizing Asia, this is very broad, because it's a very big region. (Interview 8.1.)

They sense that culturalising the differences involves making crude generalisations, even if they do not directly question the value of using the term.

The typical way of expressing cultural diversity when relying on national cultures is to compare and contrast one's own national culture with other national cultures. A Danish manager speaks of the differences as a clash between his own way of acting and the reactions he encounters from other team members:

When you get out there, I mean if you do it the Danish way, but just sit down and say, okay, what should we talk about. Anyone has good ideas, they kind of lose their respect to you because they expect you to sit at the end of a table, be the one heading the meeting, telling them what to do, be quite clear about what you expect of them. (Interview 1.1.)

This manager has a clear understanding of the challenges related to doing it 'my way', but he still persists in including the non-Danish members in a general scheme of how they always react. The result is that the only proper way for them to react would be in the relaxed code in which respect does not matter. Viewing all the non-Danish members in such a general scheme makes it difficult to interpret their reactions in other ways. As a Chinese person, respect is a prime value. Furthermore, opposing cultural differences the way our manager does entails a normative orientation: respect is an obstacle to an open exchange of views and consequently to creativity. Although the Danish manager might not view respect negatively as such, this opposition adds a strong normative dimension to the description of cultures. We have several examples of managers who are critical of how team members they view as different act. One Danish manager says that Thai people are very formal and bound by a rigid status system, while Danes respect people for what they are:

... in Denmark we're very forthright and we respect people in what they do not necessarily because they have a rank, in Thailand, people respect elders and the rank. (Interview 8.1.)

Claims like these are built on the implicit, yet likely false, assumption that status does not matter when Danes interact. Whether or not the self-description is accurate, however, is not the point. The opposition primarily works to place the other in a problematic position. The other culture is the problem. We see the same operation when, for instance, difficulties in communicating are explained by the other being completely caught in an effort not to lose face. 'Face' is a recurrent metaphor for what is experienced as strongly coded behaviour that is difficult to understand and even to accept by someone who sees him- or herself coming from a free and non-coded culture. This view is clearly demonstrated by one of our managers:

So, in European culture there's - the point is to actually be extremely transparent and put everything on the table and solve it as soon as it pops out, we don't actually have the concept of saving face which is actually very strong in Thailand. (Interview 4.1.)

The opposition this manager creates is between being transparent and non-transparent because of form. We know from research that the 'face' metaphor is used very often to characterise politeness codes of people you locate far from your own culture, and particularly in Western discourses of 'Asian' culture. Face is the form that others make use of because they are not as transparent as we are. During our interviews, we collected many examples of comparisons between cultures in which the other culture is described as being in deficit. They have less – or not all – of what we have! Describing the other becomes a zero-sum game, which is how ethnocentrism works in practice. A Danish manager tells us that his Thai team members find it difficult to make decisions and relates this difficulty to their culture:

Well for sure it's two completely different cultures, whereas Danes in general are more outgoing, want to participate, want to take responsibility, want to be involved. Where Thai's they're more, do not ... of course it's dangerous to generalize as such, but it can be difficult for them to take decisions, take their responsibility. (Interview 7.1.)

We do not contest that decision-making in global teams is demanding, but to explain this challenge with (their) culture is to eliminate other reasons for the stalemate situation. Culture risks becoming a total answer that excludes other possible answers.

Relying on a concept of culture that mainly views differences as a zero-sum game will enforce an ethnocentric perspective, which makes dealing with cultural diversity more challenging from the beginning. We all speak from certain perspectives derived from the context in which we find ourselves when we address issues of diversity, but we are also often exposed to differences that we find difficult to grasp and cope with. If we do not allow these disturbing differences to challenge our perspective, we will recur to an ethnocentrism, which can only eliminate problems through sheer hegemony. Situations in which diversity is not mastered can be felt as psychologically uncomfortable. When we stick to our own perspective, we can regain control. One of the Danish managers we interviewed made an effort to place his own perspective within a larger Scandinavian management culture<sup>8</sup>:

I think the Scandinavian management culture if I would call it that is very participative so it's inclusive, it's open, you encourage people to speak their mind and you really mean it. (Interview 5.1.)

Through a chain of equivalence that connects participation, inclusion and openness with Scandinavian management, he can turn his management style into one that carries the positive values of his Scandinavian culture. The latter is viewed as stronger and more valuable than other cultures

... and I think, you know, Scandinavians I think has a certain advantage in that we are ... our trust level is so high so we trust people genuinely and when we come to an interview to the point that we are naive, particularly if you are in Russia and sometimes in China but, you know, we're genuine and people, you know, people like that. (Interview 5.1.)

It is worth noting how the main value of Scandinavian culture – in this case trust – also can be regarded as a weakness, that is, as a form of credulity or naivety, since the others are operating in a dishonest way. In this case, the others are simply cheating us. The opposition is not just between two cultures but between a value and the denial of it. As we shall see, when looking into the cultural maps that are drawn on the basis of this concept of culture, some cultures are posited in radical opposition to one's own culture. The more radical, the more challenging, the logic seems to be.

The description of the base culture – one's own culture – from where other cultures are viewed is typically reduced to features that are easily recognisable for those subscribing to it. Our informants draw on well-known discourses of how 'we' behave. Mentions of Danes (or Scandinavians) as straightforward, direct, trustworthy, inclusive and equal will be common for most speakers that place themselves within this culture. Although our informants have less developed archives of other cultures, they certainly also activate existing discourses; for example, sustained European discourses about Asia (and China in particular) view Asian people as cunning and deceitful, as constrained by rituals of politeness, as enmeshed in dense, informal networks, as spun into unshakeable hierarchies, and as captured by their facework. Several of our informants explicitly draw on knowledge of China to explain the Chinese culture they experience in their teams. To demonstrate their knowledge of the special, Chinese way of networking, they refer to the Chinese word *guanxi* (关系), and they even, as this manager does, relate the hierarchical system to Chinese philosophy:

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<sup>8</sup> The term 'Scandinavian leadership' is also used in management courses (see e.g. Grenness 2011, Lindell and Arvonen 1996)

... if you look particularly at the Chinese system that is built on the Confucian philosophy, which is a hierarchic one, where everybody fits into their system and as long as I do my part of in that system it will take care of me and certainly my leader above me will take care of me. (Interview 5.1.)

Both *guānxì* and Confucius are core elements in a European discourse on China, which, when drawn on by our informant, authorise his own knowledge of China. It is, however, doubtful whether this knowledge can be used to understand how the Chinese team members are working in the global team. There is a risk that the discourse simply upholds or enforces a stereotype of Chinese culture

Managers do not simply compare national cultures in oppositional systems. They also draw larger cultural maps that can contain several national cultures. Depending on what is needed, national cultures can be placed on this virtual map and compared with each other. Czechs can be viewed as similar to Danes; Thais differ from people from Japan; Americans are special. A Danish manager provides us with a typical example of a mapping that locates national cultures:

Oh, yeah. I recently took leadership from a Korean and I have to admit, in the beginning, I thought Koreans – it's like between Japan and China and no issue here - but Korea is really totally different in so many ways. (Interview 3.1.)

The point about these maps is that they are relative. They are typically constructed from two poles, one's own base culture and the other culture that is appointed the target culture. If an informant is speaking about Thai culture, he or she will compare it with other national cultures in East or South East Asia. Comparisons serve to highlight the degree of difference (how different?) and to pinpoint certain, distinct features of the target culture. A Danish manager uses his map to identify positive features of the target culture in which he places his local team members.

... but Indonesians taking some examples, would defer to authority and would prefer that you actually tell them exactly what to do whereas in Thailand they want to take ownership of the issue. (Interview 6.1.)

So far, we have concentrated on the dominant linkage of nation and culture. It is, however, also typical to group national cultures into larger entities that refer to continents (Asia and Europe) or to political-ideological entities like the West. Through these larger entities, comparisons as well as oppositions can be scaled up. The move is the same as that used to conceptualise culture as national. The supranational culture can also be described through a few select features, as this Danish manager demonstrates:

After a while our colleagues who are from an Asian culture they get used to it and they start participating and realize that maybe you don't have to be careful with what you're saying. (Interview 5.1.)

Anybody can do the same with his/her own national culture. While managers seem to be more cautious in their use of Asian culture, they frequently speak of their own culture as Western or European. A non-Danish manager consequently refers to his own position as European.

In Europe that's not a problem, you know, you just say, you know, "Yeah, it's my way of fixing. You know, okay, let's move on." Right. But in Thailand it's very different. (Interview 4.1.)

The fact that this manager is a foreigner in a Danish company no doubt contributes to his choice of a more inclusive category. A direct reference to Danish or Scandinavian culture is less obvious here. Another foreign manager circumvents this problem by shifting the base culture and its positive features directly to the company culture. This manager smoothly attributes what others have highlighted as typical Danish or Scandinavian values to the culture of everybody in the company:

In [company name], the culture is very respectful. Everybody takes turns to speak, you do not interrupt, you put up your hand if you want to speak and then the facilitator will say okay, your turn. (Interview 2.1.)

Even if Danish managers occasionally use the supranational categories as base culture, they mostly prefer to locate themselves within the national culture. One reason for this might be that the larger categories are too abstract or too ideological.

It is worth noting that the features attributed to the different national cultures often depend on the context in which the cultures are activated and less on a fixed catalogue. Sometimes Danes can see themselves as very direct and outspoken; at other times, they can attribute these features to national cultures from which they wish to differentiate themselves. A foreign manager provides an entire map based on directness:

We had (-) I had super direct aggressive Americans, I had super indirect and non-aggressive Chinese right.  
I guess Dutch culture is probably even more direct than Danish and very kind of, you know, black with white ... the Danish culture is extremely direct. (Interview 4.1.)

Even if he locates directness on the Western part of his cultural map, he is still able to use it rather flexibly. This semantic flexibility clearly shows that the map is dependent on the context in which the culture is activated. The main purpose of the map is to position the speaker vis-à-vis the target culture and less to describe specific behaviours. The semantic repertoire to create distinctions is therefore relatively limited (direct/indirect, formal/relaxed, rigid/authentic) and mainly formed to secure a subject position solidly grounded in positive values that are opposed to the less positive values of the other position. The subject position is then discursively armed through indirect references to how a good (Danish) manager is perceived.

However, we also find examples of managers who place themselves between what they see as their own culture and the target culture in order to criticise both positions. One Danish manager distances himself from his own culture when describing work discipline:

I think, Denmark has to be careful, the relaxed way of working is maybe too relaxed sometimes. (Interview 3.1.)

Here he depicts the Danes as less serious and dedicated than the Chinese. When we asked what he saw as the strength of the latter, he answered:

Well, they are extremely decisive. So, once ... I mean you can look at the Chinese government. The way they make decisions and when they implement, this is fantastic, strong. And when they pull together and they agree on something, they go do it together. They are extremely strong in execution. (Interview 3.1.)

It is clear that the Danes are located in a weaker position and he as manager has the role of appreciating the capacity of the Chinese to make quick decisions and implement them. Through his criticism of Danes and Danish culture and his appreciation of the Chinese, he creates a position above the cultures. Just as the managers can distance themselves from their own culture, they can also include other team members in this position. Instead of seeing team members as typically Chinese or Thai, they can be included in the position that the managers place themselves in:

So, he's [Thai member] very interesting to talk to and in many ways he can, he also serves as a bridge to perhaps more traditional Thais who may not have traveled and met Danes in Denmark or British people in the UK. (Interview 6.1.)

When managers distance themselves from the stereotypical features typically linked to the description of national cultures, they increase their capacity to let articulations of diversity in the team be influenced by what they observe in the situation. The distancing is just a first move. Even if the position of being above

cultures might provide the manager with a kind of self-made authority, it remains an illusion. Instead of viewing the distance as a position of authority, managers could make this move to reflect on the limits and the particularity of their own perspective and the potentials of including other perspectives and consequently of not dismissing other ways of communicating. If we take a more systematic approach to the distancing at play here, we can outline to separate steps. In a first step, the mapping of cultural diversity offers a possibility to question the stereotypes typically activated to bolster one's base culture. Take for instance the straightforwardness so highly praised by Danish managers as a positive value of their national culture. Several of our informants told us that team members less acquainted with this form of managing and communicating could misunderstand this straightforwardness, and the informal relationship that goes with it, as rudeness. There are different ways of responding to misunderstandings. Some managers will choose a strategy of imitation where they try to live up to what they imagine the others would expect. They could try to act in a more Chinese way when in China. This is precisely how a Danish manager reacts when faced with intercultural challenges:

When you get out there, I mean if you do it the Danish way, but just sit down and say, okay, what should we talk about. Anyone has good ideas, they kind of lose their respect to you because they expect you to sit at the end of a table, be the one heading the meeting, telling them what to do, be quite clear about what you expect of them. (Interview 1.1.)

This imitation strategy – or 'going native' as the anthropologists would say – is, however, also illusionary. Both when you place yourself above cultures, or in the culture of the other, you lower your awareness of how cultural differences are experienced and articulated. To use the distancing productively, we need to take a second step which involves a more observant attitude towards the responses made by the team members that have been located in other cultures. Reactions towards my way – the Danish way of managing – might not be caused by what is seen as a clash of values where the others are expecting a more rigid hierarchy. The reason might also be that the Danish way is difficult to decode and creates uncertainty about the decision process. Several of our managers expressed their fascination with how effective and determined the Chinese are while adhering to a very stereotypical image of Chinese culture. As long as the values and the behaviour of the other are contained within a simple concept of national culture, it becomes difficult to view their values, in casu efficiency and determination, as a contribution to the teamwork. In order to use the fascination of the others, managers should accept that the others are also constantly interpreting the teamwork. Interpretation is, however, a process that is very different from just assuming that team members mirror the culture they have been placed within. For managers to communicate and act in a more ethnorelative way, they need to be critical towards a concept of culture that enforces stereotyping and reduces the capacity to observe cultural diversity as it is expressed in all the ways that global teams work together.

*Cultural diversity was an asset and expressions of culture had to be observed in the situation and could not simply be derived from prior understandings of cultural differences.*

Although our managers emphasise national cultures when they speak about cultural diversity, they also – explicitly or implicitly – propose other ways of conceptualising the issue. As mentioned above, being critical of using a base culture as a point of departure is the first step away from the comfortable position of simply relying on categorisation in national cultures. A Danish manager explicitly highlights the failure to include other perspectives:

Sometimes we forget to look at the perspective from them because their culture is so strong and yet we are invited in and certainly not treated the way we treat foreigners in Europe. (Interview 6.1.)

The acceptance of the global team as a multi-perspectival environment is an important first move. Managers do not have difficulties acknowledging diversity within the team grounded in different personalities

or different professions. They would typically see this diversity as a benefit. Yet, as soon as diversity is located within culture, it becomes difficult to avoid the essentialism connected with the concept of national cultures and consequently the risk of reducing multi-perspectivism to a clash of cultures.

For managers to escape a concept of national cultures, they need to be more observant. Their understanding of culture must depend less on what they think they know about the others and more on what they observe in the situation. Moving away from a more fixed concept does not entail that nothing can be predicted. It is a sociological fact that our communication and our behaviour are framed by norms and values that we have incorporated through socialisation. However, these frames do not dictate what we do in every possible situation. As human beings, we select from the framework according to our interpretation of the situation and our intentions. How we interpret different situations depends on several things. A person might draw on a socialisation that involves experience from working or living abroad. Furthermore, the frames that orient our choices are not constant and stable; they change over time. Even if social life is full of repetition, we also endorse change. Large societal changes due to technology or economics as well as more individual movements through time and space affect our orientation. If we understand culture as a concept that points to the moveable frames that orient what people do and say, we see culture as dynamic and non-deterministic. With this concept, we cannot immediately verify our generalisations. We cannot immediately assume uniform behaviour from others. In our interviews, there are many examples of team members who are not viewed as typical or traditional. Simply remarking that certain team members might not fit into the existing schemes provided by the concept of national cultures is, in fact, a first, timid deconstruction of this concept. Speaking about adaptation, which the managers did fairly often, demonstrates yet another path towards a more dynamic and non-essentialist concept of culture.

In general, adaptation refers to a psychological condition whereby a person has managed to cope with unusual and strange circumstances.<sup>9</sup> It can therefore be expected that managers feel pressured to emphasise a capacity for adaptation. However, speaking about adaptation can also be seen as a willingness to change. There are essentially two ways of explaining adaptation. The first explanation is that adaptation tends to happen more or less automatically. You adapt with time. The more you are in an unusual environment, the less the differences seem to matter. The second explanation presupposes an engagement that goes beyond getting used to the unusual and involves specific experiences or even a more active learning process. Like everybody else, our managers refer to their experiences in general. They assume that they strengthen their intercultural competences through their experiences of working abroad:

So, of course you adapt with time. So, with your experience, you ... let's see. I won't call it an act, but you adapt somehow over time. (Interview 7.1.)

Assumptions of this kind are not necessarily supported by considerations of how adaptations have taken place. In fact, there is a risk that a general reference to international experiences decreases the attention on specific, intercultural challenges. If experiences primarily relate to the number of years a person has been abroad, they are disconnected from concrete contexts of work. We find several studies showing that expats tend to live together with other expats and thus isolate themselves from the surrounding society (Gertsen and Söderberg 2010).

The expat acquires a status of being a stranger who only finds commonality among other expats. While the status of being international might grant you the prestige of being mobile, the expat points towards the closed communities within a society viewed with suspicion. None of our leaders mentioned this split between being international and being an expat, but we certainly found it among the non-local members of the global teams. Praising adaptation is thus a double-edged sword. On the one hand, adaptation denotes a condition where the challenges caused by cultural diversity have been overcome. Apart

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<sup>9</sup> Adaptation appears frequently in research on intercultural challenges. Young Yun Kim, who has developed a theory of adaptation across cultures, defines adaptation as “the phenomenon in which individuals who, upon relocating to an unfamiliar cultural environment, strive to establish and maintain a relatively stable, reciprocal and functional relationship with the environment” (Kim 2012, 229). His theory is built on the rather general claim to avoid or reduce experiences of discomfort or shock over the unknown or the unusual.

from their length of stay abroad, our informants rarely mention what made them adapt. It just happened. On the other hand, adaptation can be viewed as a learning process for the entire global team. In the rare cases where the managers address learning, they primarily speak of the imprint they leave on the local team members. So, in a way, the manager facilitates the adaptation of the local team members.

There is a risk that the reference to adaptation simply works as an emergency brake. If we are all adapted, there is no need to address diversity. In conceptual terms, we can imagine adaptation as both temporal (time is the driver) and cultural (we become mixed). Few of our managers directly mentioned mixing as a driver for adaptation, but, for the local team members, it is important to underline how they are not traditionally local because of their international work experience or their education.

Adaptation is a two-way process. Since the global teams are hubs of cultural diversity, both managers and team members have to adapt. When managers emphasise that they have adapted, they indirectly point to a learning process. In some cases, they directly address situations where they have changed behaviour based on how the team reacted. However, if managers primarily use adaptation to describe the local team members, they show less willingness to include new perspectives. Adaptation is thus a problematic term. It can be used to neutralise cultural diversity (we have all become the same), to enforce a hegemonic perspective (you will have to adapt), or to reflect on how a more mutual understanding can emerge. The latter goes along with a more dynamic and non-essentialist concept of culture. A first step towards this concept is to understand adaptation as a process that involves critically reflecting on one's own initial perspective. Being directly self-critical is a similar way of articulating the limits of one's own perspective. We find several examples of managers who distance themselves from their own culture by distinguishing between 'those at home entrapped in the culture' and 'us far from home'. A Danish manager in China observes that employees at the headquarters located in Denmark simply ignore his Chinese team members during video meetings.

Let's take NN [Chinese team member] again as an example. I have seen several attempts from him to coming up with a clear statement towards Denmark before he was in Denmark for these three months. On the meetings and trying to do as me, come up with some kind of very clear line, so they could not misunderstand and they didn't really listen ... and then, you know, you also stop doing it. If they don't care anyway. (Interview 1.2.)

In this example, those at the headquarters take the blame for not engaging with the other, whereas the manager places himself in the role of mediator. We learn that employees at the headquarters are not treating him as a team member on the same terms as the Danish manager, even if he is performing in a Danish way (so to speak). This critique still relies on the idea that entry into a team depends on the other acting like us. A more explicit critique of the base culture is formulated by a foreign manager, who says the following about Danish culture:

So, usually within Danish culture that's not the tradeoff. Usually - you know, whenever NN [Danish team member] thinks about something is going wrong, he regardless of - that he knows, that he is going to create some issues at the table and then someone is going to lose faith, he does it. (Interview 4.1.)

This manager obviously has an easier task criticising the base culture, since he does not see himself as part of it. In fact, he makes a point of distinguishing between his own background and what he sees as Danish culture. He plainly states that not being Danish provides him with a greater sensitivity towards the consequences of acting unreflectively in a Danish way towards local team members.

An even more explicit turn towards another concept of culture can be established by recognising that local team members contribute to the team with knowledge. All our managers seem to agree that local team members possess knowledge necessary for the team and that, as such, the company can operate in the local environment.

I can give him like the Danish view on why they would like to do whatever, but he can give me some of the ammunition needed to make sure it would also end up as a good decision seen from a Chinese perspective. (Interview 1.2.)

Recognising the importance of local knowledge and the privileged access that the local team members have to it questions the hegemonic relations that are so easily formed when cultural diversity is viewed through the concept of national cultures. Accepting that all team members possess resources makes it possible to escape the rhetoric of deficit, which characterises a robust ethnocentrism. There is, however, a risk of only identifying the resources of the local team members as local knowledge. If the local team members are left with only two choices, namely staying local or adapting to the dominant perspective, as we saw in the quotation above, their possibilities to manoeuvre in the team will be limited. There will be little room for the local team member to speak from a position which is not enclosed in the local. There is a difference between identifying local team members as knowledgeable about the local or viewing local team members as intermediaries who are able to navigate between the Danish company and the local surroundings. They only gain agency in the latter case. As we shall see below, the local team members are well aware that they should place themselves in this position as intermediary.

Several managers praise the diversity of their teams:

When a team comes from different backgrounds we can leverage on rich experiences, different points of view, opposing ideas, right, opposing ideas, and that can only enrich a conversation, not to mention, it's so fun, I love it, right. (Interview 2.1.)

When asked whether cultural diversity is a challenge, another manager promptly retorts that:

I experience a diversity around the table which is beneficial for us as a team but I don't think it's a barrier for us. (Interview 5.1.)

Evidently, such a praise of diversity should be a sign of openness. But there is a risk that this praising is simply used to overlook challenges. Based on our interviews and on extensive research in the field, it is difficult to imagine such a positive situation. One manager who was very sensitive to these challenges said to us:

But if you generalize then I would say that having more cultural diversity probably takes longer time to make decision. (Interview 8.1.)

We therefore assume that managing diverse teams demands a heightened sensitivity towards teamwork. To be efficient, the manager must turn this sensitivity into a preparedness that can be activated in concrete situations. Preparedness involves tools that make the manager observant. We propose that the manager develops a kind of cultural meta-perspective to be used in these specific situations. When the team discusses professional issues, the manager must constantly reflect on how his or her management is being interpreted. It is not enough to concentrate on the specific agenda. The attentive manager that we quoted above emphasises that a lack of awareness simply reduces the efficiency of the team:

Well, it has the impact that if you are not aware about those cultural differences then they would consider you as ignorant or arrogant because it would be easy just to make decisions and just powerful decisions because yes they may say that they agree or they may show that they agree or pretend that they agree but it doesn't mean that they agree. (Interview 8.1.)

The meta-perspective points to the necessity of reflecting much more on one's leadership style than would be the case with teams that contain no or very little cultural diversity. Most managers will sense that leading a culturally diverse team is different from working on familiar territory. Only few of the managers we interviewed explicitly considered filtering their management through the meta-perspective. Even if a manager is confident in the values of a management practice grounded in the base culture (whether Danish, Scandinavian or Western), the meta-perspective helps to relativise this position. The first thing to consider is what *not* to do, as mentioned by this manager:

So, in Denmark even though you hardly know each other, but if you know the purpose of the meeting is a business meeting then you immediately start to talk about business. If you do that in Thailand people will not feel comfortable. (Interview 8.1.)

Reflecting continuously on the problems of just doing business as usual is a first step. Another Danish manager considers the meta-perspective as a kind of sordine that you place on your management:

Now, so I have to be very careful with what I say because maybe with a Danish person will point out that I'm saying something wrong a Thai may not do it. (Interview 6.1.)

Realising that the risk of misunderstandings increases with the level of cultural diversity is an important step towards making management more sensitive towards culture. However, it is even more important to take the next step, which is to develop tools that make it possible to interpret reactions towards the management practices. Although members viewed as diverse from the perspective of the manager or the company are being included in leadership teams, it is very difficult to avoid situations of hegemony between those members that can easily accept the base culture and those for whom – typically the members with a local background – this is challenging. The local members do not possess the cultural capital to which the others have easy access. The meta-perspective must therefore include an awareness of hegemony. One of the non-Danish managers states this very clearly:

... in essence they are not underperforming, but they are oppressed within an European or a Danish kind of management system. (Interview 4.1.)

This manager tries to capture the risk of hegemony by using the metaphor of family. For him, the family signals a form of teamwork that is based on closer relationships and a more caring approach than that required in situations with less cultural diversity.

Managers who approach cultural diversity through a concept of culture that is dynamic and non-essentialist also develop tools to capture subtle and indirect responses to their management from local team members. They realise that it is difficult or even impossible to obtain responses through feedback practices they use in situations of less cultural diversity. Instead of articulating cultural diversity head on – with the risk of containing local team members in national cultures – they look for clues that indicate how the different team members respond in the teamwork. Through these clues, they become able to decode the different ways through which the team members express themselves. Moving in this direction also means departing from pre-fixed categorisations of national cultures. Some of the managers we interviewed have developed a management practice that relies on a concept of culture that we will call analytical. Based on this concept, cultural diversity is observed through the way it expresses itself situationally in verbal and non-verbal communication. A foreign manager informs us about his practice:

You have to look for cues and you have to actually learn them because as you arrive here you may initially think everything is great, everyone agrees and you know, case closed. And then they come to you separately in the meeting, one to one and say actually, I don't ... I couldn't say it in there. (Interview 4.1.)

As he states, this is something you have to pick up or learn. This action cannot be derived directly from prefixed ideas of how the others might act. Furthermore, it requires not only that you are alert (the meta-perspective) but also that you accumulate information through repetitious observation. The analytical concept of culture points towards the situation. Here culture is something that has to be observed and interpreted through the behaviour and communication that takes place when the team is working. Referring to national cultures can be used to prepare the managers for situations in which they can expect more cultural diversity than they are used to. But this kind of pre-fixed knowledge cannot be used to understand what others are saying or doing. For example, we cannot use knowledge or rather stereotypes about Thai people being smiley, quiet, reserved and formal to orient our practice in specific situations with Thai people. We may know that Thai people act in ways that are different from us, but we should be very careful

about basing our leadership style on predictions about how Thai people ‘always’ act. A manager that approaches diversity with a more analytical concept of culture must operate according to the responses he/she observes repeatedly. Adhering to an essentialist concept of culture embedded in existing discourses of the other will blind the manager in the situation and create self-referential loops in which he/she simply confirms the knowledge he/she used as a point of departure.

Basing management on an analytical concept increases the possibility of benefitting from cultural diversity. The most fundamental move is to question the hegemonic relation that sneaks in with an essentialist concept of culture. The purpose of another concept of culture is to create space for what others – also those others that are seen as very different – can bring to the team apart from local knowledge. This is a way of changing from a perspective and a rhetoric of deficiency (the others have fewer resources) to one of surplus (together we have a wide range of knowledge). Managing cultural diversity as a surplus involves being observant and inclusive. Some of our managers are certainly fascinated by what is possible in the surroundings and teams in which they are working. They are impressed by the speed and the dedication with which decisions are made in China. The Chinese are viewed as having features that Europeans desire. One manager could see the benefit of incorporating the apparently Thai capacities of being future-oriented and good at navigating in a space full of challenges, including intercultural challenges. However, there is still a long way to go for the managers we interviewed to imagine situations with local managers of global teams, which would be an example of perfect symmetry. Only one manager mentions the option of recruiting local managers at senior level, but, at the same time, he states that the failure to recruit local managers reflects an understanding of globalisation as embedded in a too ethnocentric approach.

#### *5.1.2. The cultural concepts of local team members*

The definition of global teams is that they consist of people from various parts of the world. The teams we interviewed all had members from the country in which the team was based. These local members enjoyed a special status in the team because, unlike the non-local members, they had a wealth of local knowledge. However, this privileged position should be seen in light of the fact that they work for an international company which observes codes and practices with which they are not particularly familiar. This places them in a weaker situation. None of the management teams that we interviewed had a local leader. The local team members therefore always have to deal with a leader from elsewhere. In most cases, this leader will come from the same country as the company in question.

We will now examine the cultural concepts that apply to the local team members. We do not assume by any means that local team members all think in the same way. The only thing that characterises this group of members is that their actions originate in a local position. Even though the leaders we interviewed were also relatively unused to discussing their work from a cultural perspective, there is no doubt that such discussions were even more unfamiliar and challenging for the local team members. The reason why we emphasise the importance of identifying cultural understandings from a local perspective is that this will give us access to implicit knowledge about how cultural differences in the global teams are perceived by the members who are often objectified in the national categories. The cultural understanding of the local members is invisible owing to the asymmetries and power relations present in the global teams. But we assume that this knowledge is important when it comes to exploiting the potential of the global teams.

Here are the three cultural concepts that we were able to identify in our interviews with the local team members:

- Cultural differences are not vital
- Cultures are national
- Cultural differences are flexible and can be used for the purpose of navigation

### *Cultural differences are not vital*

Most of the local members were hesitant when it came to discussing cultural differences. This is likely either because they feel uncertain when talking about culture or because they do not wish to be associated with a local culture that, in their opinion, has little prestige. The first of these two reasons surfaced when we asked our informants to assess specific differences between the way things were done in their teams and the way things were done in local companies for which they had worked; for instance, the way in which meetings were conducted. Informant 7.3 said that meetings were held in the same way. Informant 3.2 was more specific:

But for people, it's not a culture difference or nationality difference, but it's for the personality difference. Some people urge to make the decision who want to move fast. (Interview 3.2.)

As we saw with the leaders, explaining differences in terms of personality can neutralise other ways of categorising differences. The advantage of referring to personality in this way is that it suits people's experiences on a micro-level because it explains differences in terms of differences between individuals. It cannot be expected that all the issues encountered by team members should be turned into 'a cultural thing', as one respondent commented, even if cultural differences are in fact involved. Differences are easier to cope with if they can be approached as individual.

The other way to avoid talking about cultural differences is by contrasting them with the idea of being international. Even though we might assume that an international team contains a high degree of diversity, referring to the international nature of a team makes it possible to establish a third, culture-neutral space where everyone can meet. This space generally comes into existence when people have been occupying it for some time. People adapt to each other, as expressed by informant 4.3:

So, the difference in terms of nationalities or different cultures, only happens right at the beginning and once you know a little about, you know, their background, their culture, then you're starting to blend in with them and accepting that okay, he's just gonna be more direct than the others. (Interview 4.3.)

However, as revealed by this quotation, such a process of adaptation is not entirely two-way. What often happens is that one party has to accept the other party, who continues to behave as usual. We will return to this point below. Even though this informant repeatedly underlines that this adaptation takes place automatically, she also claims it is something one has to learn.

... more like, I think people just take on the hat and basically when we come into a meeting when we come into the room, we all know like what are our common goals. (Interview 4.3.)

The differences are turned into a 'hat' which can be put on (or taken off) to suit the context in question.

### *Cultures are national*

The local team members also have fixed ideas about culture, even though they make a strategic choice to relate their own sense of belonging to a culture. When talking about their own culture or the cultures of other people, they refer to national or more wide-ranging regional categories. These categories are accompanied by reductions in which a culture can be borne by individual characteristics. These characteristics may be expressed positively (the culture is characterised by ...) or negatively (the culture is not ...). It is striking that the locals (unlike the leaders) contrast their own culture with a culture that is deemed to have greater prestige. Local members from Thailand consistently choose to underline the importance of age (seniority) as an important aspect of social exchanges. According to our informants, age is regarded as an expression of how experienced you are. But this characteristic is viewed primarily as a disadvantage that is difficult to avoid or as something that is distinctly old-fashioned.

So, then if you were to be in a normal Thai environment, then it's quite hard for you to raise a point or raise your opinion out loud, because that might be perceived as disrespectful or ... but that's in a ... in a very old fashion Thai. (Interview 4.3.)

Being forced to accept the importance of seniority may occur at the expense of a preferred form of behaviour – as expressed by the following informant:

... because in Thai culture you have to be ... respect the senior as the first thing, the second thing is you cannot be that straightforward. (Interview 8.2.)

Our local informants gave us a great number of examples of characteristics not present in their own culture. It is not 'straightforward', it is not communicative, it is not inclusive, on the contrary it is hierarchical, it is brutal. Positive characteristics were sometimes attributed to people's own culture, but this was rare. In comparison with American culture, one Chinese team leader underlines that his own culture is more people-oriented:

They are being more – they are more focused on the things instead of the people, but I would say Asian are more focused on the people. (Interview 3.3.)

However, this focus is also criticised. For instance, one Thai team member felt that Thais were too sensitive and found it hard to cope with the direct manner of the Danes:

... for Thai people there are - like maybe you have to soften a little bit and even the one lower than me they are sometime quite sensitive. Yeah, I mean, I know - at least I know that in Danish culture ... you can tell him [boss] you're wrong, but in Thai culture it's very difficult. (Interview 8.2.)

The reduction of a national culture to a few characteristics generally takes place when a culture is regarded as very different. In the quotation above, it is Danish culture that is used as a contrast to Thai culture. In the cultural maps that our informants drew, they were invited to choose not only regional categories such as Asia and Europe, but also countries such as China, Thailand, Denmark and Germany. Our local team leaders often refer to both Asia and their own national culture. It is not unusual for them to refer to their own position as Asian, as demonstrated by the following local team member:

... I'm more vocal than the average Asian. (Interview 5.4.)

The term 'Asian' was used far more frequently than corresponding regional terms such as 'European'. 'The West' did not occur at all. This is probably because a clear distinction was made between the US and Europe (or Denmark) on the cultural maps that were drawn. One Chinese team member placed the US at one end of the scale, with Denmark located elsewhere on the map.

... life here [in the Danish company] compared to an American company, it's more relaxed. It's more and really depends on what you want to do. (Interview 3.3.)

American culture is described as extremely business oriented, very competitive and very direct. Danish culture is far more relaxed than American culture. As revealed below, this is not necessarily regarded as a positive thing. The specific countries mentioned on the map depend on the nationalities that are represented in the various management teams. One local member describes the difference between a previous leader and the current leader as follows:

Because [name of former leader] was very, proper like process. Step, you know, like very European, I mean NN [name of current leader] is also European but NN [name of current leader] is more closer to the Thai culture. (Interview 4.3.)

People who deviate from the stereotypical picture of the European can be moved closer to the local position, demonstrating clearly that the map is relative. Indications of differences depend on the purpose for which the map is to be used. As underlined with regard to the cultural mapping of the leaders, the map varies depending on how much (or how little) a culture deviates from the general characteristics.

National differences can also be indicated on the Asian part of the map; for instance, in teams consisting of members from various Asian countries. Japanese culture was presented as being extremely rigid and formal. One local team member made the following comment about a Japanese colleague:

Well, I mean if we take the example with -- okay, let's just say my Japanese colleague, because of him, you know seniority is a very, very, very big thing. (Interview 8.3.)

Seniority has been identified as a particular characteristic of Thai culture, but this informant regards it as even more characteristic of Japanese culture. The negative characteristics attributed to their own culture by locals can be transferred to other countries in a similar fashion. The same informant is the leader of a national office in Myanmar, and she says that culture makes staff reticent when it comes to saying what they really feel. A reluctance to give feedback, or a general fear that saying what you think will lead to the loss of face, is also a characteristic of local culture. The important thing for locals is to create a sense of distance when describing their own culture and other so-called Asian cultures. In other words, the maps are used to stabilise your own subject position. The list below summarises the characteristics used most frequently:

- sensitive, value security not responsibility
- formal and like to keep up appearances, value seniority
- relational
- hierarchical, value discipline
- not direct or straightforward

The Chinese members are the only members to use their own culture to position themselves vis-à-vis non-Asian culture. It is true that they underline the typical negative characteristics such as hierarchy and formality, but they also acknowledge that Chinese culture is flexible and dynamic. The negative image of Chinese culture is expressed clearly by the following Chinese team member:

So, we're not well trained to be, you know, proactive or express our opinion. So, that's our Chinese culture. So, that's against the Danish culture actually. (Interview 1.3.)

However, another member places the emphasis elsewhere when comparing non-Asian cultures:

Well, some Chinese companies have if they did good and some of the companies even did better than [name of Danish company], but most of the Chinese companies would be more discipline instead of love. European companies probably more love than the disciplines. (Interview 3.3)

According to this team member, of these two characteristics (love and discipline), it is discipline that has a positive image. Love is regarded as the equivalent of relaxation, and is therefore associated with a less combative approach to the market. On this cultural map, Chinese discipline is seen as a characteristic that enables the Chinese to match tough Americans – something which Europeans (and, in this case, Danes) find difficult. Chinese strength is linked to the changes that China has experienced. It is interesting to note that this image of China is very different from the image to which most leaders refer. They feel that, despite the developments it has experienced, China still carries a considerable cultural burden, making it the most alien of cultures. But the local Chinese team members underline the changes in China and China's expansive willpower.

For good reasons, Danish culture is central in terms of the distribution of positive and negative characteristics. It is used as the point of comparison for the positions adopted by the locals. When discussing Danish culture, various characteristics are presented which determine the way in which the locals seek to navigate between the cultures in question. Here is a summary of the terms used most frequently by our informants to characterise Danish culture.

**Table 3: Positive and negative characteristics of Danish culture**

<i>Positive characteristics</i>	<i>Negative characteristics</i>
Straightforward	Relaxed
Open	Slow
Expressive	Direct
Direct	
Flat, equal	
Personal (talking about private matters)	
Strict	

Importantly, this is not simply a list of characteristics but also a way of explaining how these characteristics are connected to each other. Equivalence chains like these are the basis for establishing a discourse about Danish culture. The term used most frequently is ‘straightforward’. One informant uses this term 32 times in the course of our interview with her, and it almost becomes a nodal point in the discourse. It is used to describe a flat organisational structure in contrast to a top-down, hierarchical and therefore vertical structure, similarities between team members, openness to everyone’s opinion, and an informal tone that is direct in the sense that people are authentic and honest. Here are some examples of the ways in which local informants describe Danish culture:

So, the value that we have is we’re all straightforward and we have clear communication direct which help a lot in terms of saving time in you know keep on discussing and we’re open about it so the value, our offices ... when things done in the meeting room, when it has been agreed. (Interview 8.2.)

This local member has already indicated that *straightforward* is a central aspect of Danish culture. A direct link is drawn to a style of communication that is clear and ‘direct’. The latter refers to the way in which things are said. But ‘direct’ can also be understood in the sense of impolite or even insulting – as this Chinese team member points out:

When I try and talk to technical person, they’re very direct. They are just saying what they want to say. So, I feel sometimes, you know, a little bit angry and why you are saying things like that way or in Chinese or now we’re saying things like that way. (Interview 1.3.)

‘Direct’ is one of those terms that can have both positive connotations (open and honest communication) and negative connotations (brutality and ruthlessness, as is the case when it is used to describe a main characteristic of American culture). The flat structure of Danish culture is connected directly with openness and feedback:

... and Danes are - because the hierarchy is very flat in the Danish culture so they’re very open to people giving comments, asking questions, saying their opinion but it’s also very much the Asian culture needs comforts and security that they will not be punished if they speak their mind. (Interview 5.4.)

The same local team member notes that the informal style is also connected to what she describes as personal relations between colleagues.

So, one of the observations I had when I joined [company name] I was like my gosh these people are real personal. (Interview 5.4.)

The term 'personal' is used to describe the fact that Danish colleagues talk about private issues – something that the informant is unaccustomed to doing. As we shall see in section 6.3, there is a difference between regarding relations between colleagues as a form of communication which is informal and a situation in which a company recognises the importance of its employees and invests in them. In the former case, relations are things that take place between team members; in the latter case, it is the company that is the subject of the relations.

It is worth noting that the local team members only use a few different terms when describing Danish culture. Even though we did not ask our informants to explain how they perceive Danish culture, the degree of standardisation in the terms they use is still striking. Consequently, we must assume that their understanding of Danish culture (and its extrapolation to European culture) draws on a discourse that is activated by the Danish companies and colleagues. In the previous section about leaders, it became clear that, when referring to the management and the company, Danish leaders and companies (and, as we shall see in the next section, also Danish team members) draw a good deal on what are presented as Danish or Scandinavian values. The image of Danish culture and therefore of the central value field in the company, used by the local members for the purpose of orientation, is largely constructed on the basis of a discourse on which the Danish companies, leaders and team members draw.<sup>10</sup>

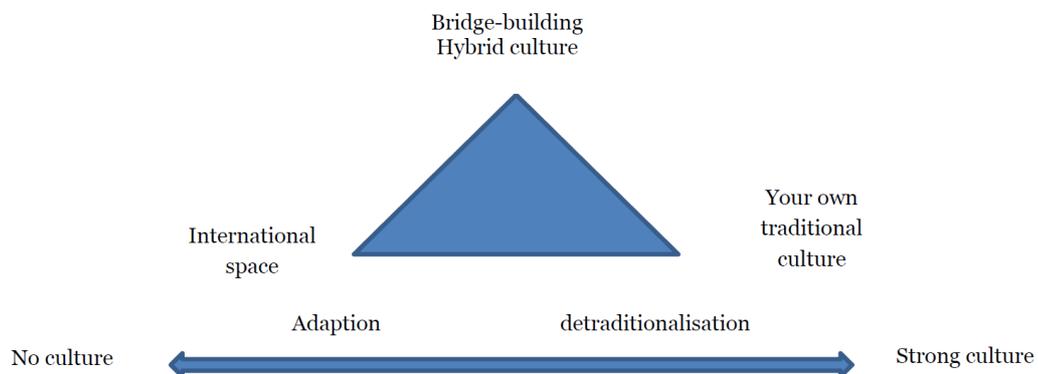
#### *The mobile concept of culture: I'm not typical of my culture*

Virtually all our local team members claim that they are not typical of the culture associated with their nationality. They actually feel that it is vital to distance themselves from their own culture. Distance can be established by criticising your own culture and the people who are still traditional representatives of this culture, while you yourself move away from it. This kind of movement is also a movement away from an essentialist concept of culture. In other words, the essence of a culture is linked to the traditional set-up, while our local team members adopt a position which is not traditional. This position can be articulated in various ways. The first and easiest of these ways is to talk about adaptation. Adaptation can take place by gaining access to an international space in which cultural differences disappear automatically. But it can also be achieved by imitating ideas of Danish culture and translating them in order to apply them to your own practice. You can make yourself more direct, more open, and more willing to give feedback than people who represent traditional culture. And finally, a bridge-building position can be established from which you can navigate between differences because you are familiar with your traditional culture but have also adapted to the way in which an international and/or Danish company works. Here is an illustration of the three steps in the movement that the local leaders stage when they talk about culture.

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<sup>10</sup> The term 'Scandinavian leadership' is used by various management training programmes, and there is also a body of literature on management research which seeks to define a Nordic or Scandinavian leadership style (see e.g. Grenness 2011, Lindell and Arvonen 1996). However, as far as we are aware, there have been no studies of how a discourse on Scandinavian or Danish culture is linked to the way management is understood in international companies.

**Figure 1: Movement of local leaders**



We will now consider the way in which this movement from detraditionalisation via adaptation to bridge-building is articulated by our local members. Adaptation can be achieved in two ways. The first of these involves considering and conceptualising the movement as a form of internationalisation. Unlike European leaders and team members, this movement cannot simply be related to the fact that people have been abroad for a long time. It requires a more active effort – a clear indication that you are abandoning the traditional culture. For Europeans, internationalisation involves adding to their own cultural point of departure. The other way of adapting involves acquiring patterns of behaviour and values that have been localised in Danish culture. When asked whether she had adapted to a straightforward style, a local team member replied:

No, I think because I have been in Danish culture for one year so I know Danish people. They are straightforward. If you are just like sitting behind and keep things within yourself things will not moving, so when I joined [company name] I always have - or normally I have Danish boss so I always be straightforward to the boss or bosses I have especially the Dane, yeah ... (Interview 8.2.)

This form of adaptation requires the ability to decode the dominant pattern of behaviour and navigate in relation to it. This equips the locals to function in various settings, so they achieve a higher degree of intercultural competence than the Danish team members. The Danish team members are not forced in the same way to consider what they need to do to function in a context with which they are already familiar. However, the locals risk taking on board a dominant culture and making it their own without further consideration. The member quoted above says that her own actions and those of her team are characterised by the fact that they are straightforward. Local team members actually balance between reflecting on how they should act in less familiar contexts and turning the dominant norms into their own.

Another way of acquiring a more mobile and dynamic concept of culture is by underlining the role of bridge-builder or mediator. The locals are definitely aware that they can contribute new knowledge to their team. One local member underlines the fact that she made herself available to answer the questions posed by the new leader during his first months in the job:

So, when he [leader] first joined the company in our affiliate, the first three months, he's been asking me a lot of, you know, the culture like, you know, what do I say when I meet people? (Interview 4.3.)

This local member was happy to provide local knowledge, but she translated it to allow for cultural differences. This becomes even more obvious when she instructs her leader (and other non-local team members) about how to behave when working professionally in the location concerned:

... when we bring out let's say our Dane colleague to a Thai doctor we have to brief him and be like, you know, don't say jokes, don't crack a joke because they will not get it for sure and they might be offended and because they're our customers right. (Interview 4.3)

In other words, what is involved here is a relatively extensive cultural translation, which is used to strengthen the work done by the team. It is therefore inaccurate to say that the locals only possess knowledge about local conditions. This is of course true, but they also operationalise this knowledge so it promotes team collaboration. The role of bridge-builder requires them to decode situations in which the lack of cultural understanding and (in many cases) ethno-relativistic self-confidence of the leaders may have a negative influence on the work done. As discussed in our conclusion, there is little doubt that the intercultural competences generated by an awareness of the bridge-builder function are not sufficiently recognised by the non-local leaders and members. One local member presented his/her virtual team in rather indignant terms:

So, yeah to be honest maybe I'm more professional than the people sitting in Denmark. (Interview 1.3)

Although we did not directly discuss the team members' collaboration with the Danish headquarters, it was clear that the distance and the somewhat sporadic contact between them had a considerable influence on the communication that took place. As demonstrated by research, it is even harder for headquarters to reflect on cultural differences than it is for the Danish leaders of the global teams. This demands even more bridge-building skills and intercultural competences among the local team members.

These intercultural competences generate the greatest value for the team in general and the leader in particular when they are converted into instructions about how to suggest changes in collaboration with a view to improving communication and performing tasks. In our interviews, we did not expect the local team members to supply detailed suggestions about how to change working practices. The interview situation is too unfamiliar for this, and their own roles in a team dominated by a Danish company culture are too asymmetrical. Yet they do mention how they change their forms of collaboration. For instance, they may play the role of cultural translators in the organisation, as explained by the following local member:

So, sometimes you have to repeat, you know, like what he expect from the meeting or, you know, like he make the list. (Interview 7.3.)

As underlined by the leaders who were interested in cultural analysis, small changes in working patterns caused by challenges which have been registered (for instance, the lack of feedback or discussion input) can improve collaboration. We have already mentioned that, according to the leaders who were interested in cultural analysis, a change in the form of feedback from round-table discussions to other forms of communication can produce good results. There is no doubt that the leaders could improve the way they use the intercultural competences of the local members not only to identify the challenges but also to propose changes in working methods. If the focus is placed too much on adaptation, there is a risk that analytical skills will not be used. Adaptation means settling into your new surroundings and even (perhaps) going native; but it also means that you can navigate in various settings. If the focus is placed on the former, the opportunities accompanying the latter will be lost. As mentioned above, this risk is largest if the discussion of cultural differences is replaced by joint admiration for the idea of being international. The truth is that we will always be international from one specific perspective or another.

The analytical approach to culture is expressed most clearly when the local members explicitly criticise the forms of collaboration in the team. Before a series of interviews, one leader told us that we should not expect the local members to express criticism of collaboration in their team. And nor was it our explicit mission to collect critical comments. We asked about the challenges, and, in this connection, a number of critical comments were made about forms of collaboration. Most of the local team members we interviewed were positively inclined towards what they called Danish culture in general and towards the way in which Danish culture was reflected in specific examples of teamwork. It is interesting to note

that there are actually certain core values in what a number of Danish leaders identify as Danish culture which are vital for their collaboration: a free exchange of views and the chance to criticise these views. One local member underlines the disadvantage of this:

So, I think maybe we spend too much time on discussion. We should – I’m the person I want to make the quick decision and implement and change along the way but that’s also maybe sometimes a waste of time because, when we go with the action then finally we decide to go that direction. (Interview 1.3.)

What he claims here (quite directly) is that all the time spent on discussion has a negative impact on the decision-making process. Naturally, this could also be seen as a criticism of inclusion in general. This is how such criticism will often be perceived by leaders who associate Danish culture, inclusion and leadership with democracy, thereby establishing a very general contrast between hierarchy and flat management, between power and inclusion.<sup>11</sup> There is, however, also the possibility that the focus on exchanging opinions is to be understood as a game of recognition, where you acquire status by stating opinions. The criticism raised here then also concerns a working relation in which everybody voices his/her opinion regardless of the quality of his/her statement. This is what a local team member reflects upon after first having argued in favour of the open working style:

But what I find, my observation is that because everybody is so willing to speak their minds and give comments we end up getting too much comments because everybody wants to speak their minds so it was at - because my role is to force people to make decisions and make choices, that’s my role within the team. So, I find it quite hard to get them to come to conclusions or to come to agreements because everybody speaks their mind and they all have different minds right and therefore it’s slower for decision making and I notice also even though everyone speaks their mind, when the big boss says something it - they will still confirm, they may disagree but ultimately they’re comfortable with the big boss taking the call essentially. (Interview 5.4.)

It is clear that our informant expresses a certain discontent or even exasperation regarding this form of collaboration. Since many Danish managers consider this working style the main capital of the culture guiding their management, it is simply hard to grasp and easy to dismiss the criticism. The scepticism uttered here, however, is worth listening to. People that are much less embedded in this kind of communication have fewer problems in detecting the flaws. This is also true of the informal style, which often frames the exchange of opinions. On the one hand, the local team members tell us that they are fascinated with what they see as openness and straightforwardness; on the other hand, they also express some reservations. It is well known that informal communication is more associative and presupposes a larger knowledge of codes and contexts. This is not least the case with humour, which is often used to knit together a group and provide group identity. Because it is less visible or expressive, this function risks – even if unintended – excluding others.<sup>12</sup> A local team member points out how humour confuses collaboration when used together with the exchange of opinions:

Sometimes, I think it might be a little bit too much for the normal Thai people to understand the joke or find it funny because sometimes it’s dark humor. (Interview 4.3.)

Speaking of ‘dark’ humour quite clearly indicates that the humour is either not immediately understandable or too direct and informal. Another local team member notices that the Danish team members are quite ‘relaxed’:

actually most of the work, life here compared to an American company it’s more relaxed. It’s more and really depends on what you want to do. (Interview 3.3.)

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<sup>11</sup> The reason that such oppositions are so popular concerns the influence of Hofstede’s approach to culture in management textbooks (see e.g. Zhang and Iles 2013).

<sup>12</sup> For more information about the use of humour in intercultural situations (see e.g. Michalik and Sznicer 2017).

To be relaxed is here opposed to both discipline and to efficiency.

Local team members also question whether managers are making efficient use of their competences. When asked directly whether the global team exploits all the competences that result from its cultural diversity, a local team member answers in the negative and adds:

So, yeah to be honest maybe I'm more professional than the people sitting in Denmark. (Interview 1.3.)

The criticism uttered here is quite harsh. Neither the manager nor the Danish team members can see his individual potentials because they have already framed him in a stereotypical perception of what people from his culture are able and unable to do. This failure to recognise that local team members possess professional as well as intercultural competences is certainly partly why local members have difficulties imagining themselves in a senior role within the company. Only one of the managers that we interviewed explicitly mentioned that the company had a strategy of recruiting local members as senior managers. None of the global teams we interviewed was led by people with a local background. The majority of the managers were Danes. As stated by a local team member, this could be linked to the fact that companies lack clear strategies on this subject matter:

This should be as my expect calendar but I think it's in the following coming year may be difficult for a Thai to be the managing director. (Interview 7.2.)

This local team member cannot imagine a person of his background becoming manager in the near future.

It was to be expected that we would find similarities between the managers' and the local team members' concept of culture. Just like the managers, the local members also refer to the neutralising effect of the international environment. There is, however, a major difference when speaking of being simply international. When locals refer to themselves as international, the purpose is primarily to create a distance from what they see as the traditional, local culture. While this traditionalisation of the local culture contributes to upholding an essentialist concept of culture, the distance created from it partly deconstructs the concept. The locals also refer to national cultures, but, contrary to most non-local team members, they do not see themselves as representatives. We therefore have a noticeable difference between managers (and non-local team members) on the one hand and local team members on the other. The managers place their local team members within a national culture reduced to few features, whereas the locals draw up a more nuanced space between their own culture, the national culture of the company, and their own position. The Danish managers mostly stay caught in an opposition between a perception of their own strong base culture and the weaker local culture.

The locals can more easily navigate between these essentialist perceptions, which makes it possible to moderate or even escape an ethnocentric perspective while at the same time being critical of the existing hegemony. In this light, adaptation is not a strategy of succumbing to this hegemony – quite the contrary. Adaptation is a way of creating a space of manoeuvring within the hegemonic relations formed around the perceptions of the managers and the non-local team members. The local team members are aware that they possess competences and knowledge that is necessary for the global company to act locally. We can see, however, that they struggle to have them recognised.

In general, managers do not give local team members the necessary space for them to bring their competences into the teamwork. This lack of inclusion is even more pronounced when it comes to their reactions to the management style. Even if they are relatively positive to what they conceive as a Danish or Scandinavian way of managing, they are also critical. Those features that both managers and local team members perceive as Danish or Scandinavian are valued quite differently by the two groups. If managers could bring local criticism of these values and how they influence teamwork out into the open, they would be far better able to test their management style in situations of cultural diversity. Introducing a stronger and more confident local voice would provide good opportunities to dismantle the self-confidence and

self-comfort built into an ethnocentric perspective. A strengthened visibility and articulation of the locals in the team could be a first step towards adapting teamwork to become more sensitive to cultural diversity and to make better use of the strong, intercultural competences that locals possess.

### 5.1.3. Non-local team members and perceptions of culture

As mentioned in the introduction to this section, we look at the concept of culture from three different, organizational positions within the global management teams: the managers, the locals and the non-local team members. In this section, we examine the views of the non-local team members. Apart from one, all the non-local team members are Europeans (the majority are Danish). The analysis of how the non-locals address cultural diversity can be captured within the concepts already examined. Their articulations of cultural diversity falls within the following three concepts:

- Cultural diversity is not vital
- Cultural diversity is contained within national cultures
- Cultural diversity is expressed in what team members do

The distinguishing feature within this group is that one of these concepts dominates over the other two.

#### *Cultural diversity is not vital*

If we do not include the conventional fragmentation of diversity into individuality (personality), we encounter two ways of scaling down or effacing cultural diversity. The first way subsumes all cultural diversity under a company culture, and the second way views cultural diversity as gradually disappearing with increased internationalisation. In both cases, the speakers construct a common space in which differences are neutralised. None of our informants point to mechanisms that form this space, apart from time or trust in the company's values. One of our informants views internationalisation as simply a mentality that captures you:

when you are in the office in [location] there, at least to me, it's much more multinational so (...) yeah, and actually there I would almost say that I never (...) yeah, I never think about cultural differences. (Interview 5.2)

Internationalisation almost works in a tautological way. The existence of many differences ('multi') as such dissolves the meaning of diversity. This 'logic' is no doubt embedded in a discourse on internationalisation as either a process of standardisation or as a cosmopolitan mentality.<sup>13</sup> The latter points to a more active acceptance of having created a common space, as we can see in the following utterance:

Så man kan sige, det er jo sådan en rigtig multikultur, hvor der egentlig ikke er nogen kultur. Fordi den er så forskellig. Så de går hen og danner en kultur sammen.<sup>14</sup> (Interview 1.4)

This informant assumes that diversity is too great from the start and that this is why there is a need for common culture which is separate from all the differences.

We have also seen how company culture can conceptualise a common culture. This is stated clearly in this utterance:

I believe that that is also how [company name] has promoted or assigned these particular individuals, because they have a very strong connection with the culture that [company name] has. (Interview 6.2)

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<sup>13</sup> The idea of processes that move objects and people from the local to more standardised spaces is central to discourses of internationalisation and globalisation (Ifversen 2000).

<sup>14</sup> Interview conducted in Danish: "Then you can say that this is such a multiculture, where there is in fact no culture. Because it is so different. So everybody comes together to create a common culture".

The company culture can be seen as an independent space, or it can be linked to the national culture that the company represents due to its location:

Because we're the Danish culture and [company name]'s culture is very much embedded in [company name]. (Interview 4.2)

In the latter case, the company culture loses its neutral independent character since it creates a difference between those team members that have direct access to it and those that have to adapt to it. For the informant we quoted above, the linking of national culture with company culture both serves the purpose of pointing to the difficulties that locals have in acting within the team and justifying his own action within it.

#### *Cultural diversity is contained within national cultures*

The non-local members also draw up cultural maps of national cultures to frame the diversity they encounter. A distinct set of features is attributed to these national cultures, often in pairs of opposition (direct-indirect, hierarchical-equal, formal-informal). The maps are structured around the basic dividing line between Asia and Europe/the West. Their purpose is to highlight the main differences in an axiomatic order.

But the way I see, it's mainly ... I mean in England, Netherlands, France we are quite the same, we are not so much different so between Europe ... I mean for me is a main difference between Europe and Asia. (Interview 6.5)

These maps are not universal but contextual and circumstantial. Their function is to order the specific context in which a person is currently placed. For example, if you work in an Asian country as a European, you will almost unconsciously activate the divide between Asia and Europe. If you work in Europe as a European, you will activate differences within European national cultures. The maps drawn by the non-locals differ fundamentally from the maps made by the two other groups in two ways. Firstly, they are mostly bilateral. The main opposition is between the base culture and the local culture in which they place themselves. There are very few examples of comparisons with other national cultures on the Asian part of the map. Only one informant locates China as the extremity among 'Asian cultures':

if you look to China, and now we have been in China, right, so and that's just a, you know, different animal from anywhere else. (Interview 5.3.)

Secondly, the characterisation of the local culture is more stereotypical than what we have seen in the other two groups. The locals are typically described quite negatively through a semantics of deficit:

So, that sense of urgency, I don't really see that and then this Asian, you know, kind of laziness, okay if we don't make it today then we maybe make it tomorrow. I also sometimes have a bit of a tough time coping with that. (Interview 5.3.)

To describe others as lazy and unpredictable because they have a different approach to time is a well-known topos within stereotyping. The same is true for the description of locals as less independent and creative:

but as soon as you start getting - discussing something on a strategic level or something that is, you know, something that you cannot just put into a box and maybe calculate mathematically, then things start getting difficult. (Interview 5.3.)

The Danish idiom 'to think outside the box' is used to distinguish between a 'we' that is on top and the others that are rigid, mechanistic and lacking creativity. It is then but a short step to perceive the others as less rational. The chain of equivalence between idleness, instrumentality and lack of creativity places the others in a discourse of being less free-spirited. Often the informants in this group add the lack of feedback and low efficiency to the chain and thus construct a radical difference that places the non-local

in a secure position of surplus. Depicting the locals through these chains furthermore works to legitimise the hegemonic relations in the team. At times, the deficient position of the locals can be made so pronounced that the locals do not contribute at all but are simply viewed as a nuisance. This is expressed bluntly by one of our informants:

And that's definitely a challenge for me as a leader, because often I get the thought that, okay, if I just do it myself then it's much easier and it will go much faster. (Interview 5.3.)

If teamwork is perceived from this perspective, it gets framed in a paternalistic relation, where the role of the non-local team member is primarily to help the locals reach a higher level of performance.

The non-locals also spend energy characterising their own culture. What they say about their base culture serves the purpose of valorisation. The semantics used is impressively simple and can be condensed in the chain of equivalence: direct-straightforward-honest. Asserting directness is to distribute the positive values of one's culture. We see an impressive consensus in the way the non-local members refer to themselves as direct, and how they link directness to involvement, exchange and equality.<sup>15</sup>

The following statement is fairly typical for the non-locals when describing how they work in the team:

You can say, you know, in communication I think I'm pretty direct. (Interview 5.3.)

This is not a choice they make for strategic reasons to reach a goal or to react to a specific situation; they just act in accordance with their culture:

But, I think people are in Denmark first of all they are very dynamic we are very direct to culture right and that can be taken we of course use them as being Danish right so that's fine. (Interview 4.2.)

Well the first thing is that well I'm Norwegian, I'm not so quiet. ... you would be much more direct in Norway. (Interview 7.4.)

The team members in this group observe that they have common ways of communicating and working together, which differs from what they encounter in teams with high cultural diversity. Yet it is one thing to claim this commonality yet quite another to turn it into a culture that you wish to impose on others because you know in advance that it is better, more efficient or more inclusive. In the latter case, the informants place themselves solidly in an ethnocentric position. If they furthermore rely on a concept of culture that can be reduced to a few features and valorised in an oppositional system, they subscribe to an essentialism. As a consequence, the feature and the value of directness, for example, cannot be moderated or even changed in the situation. The essentialist concept of culture and the ethnocentrism that accompanies it thus creates a framing where those perceived as very different are constantly locked in an inferior position.

We have already shown how the informants move from observing specific behaviour to explaining it as an expression of their inferior culture. Below an informant explains why the local team members do not contribute to the teamwork:

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<sup>15</sup> The reason why directness becomes such an important marker can be attributed to a Western discourse, which opposes precision in communication to what is seen as veiled, empty, ritual and even female indirectness. Despite the importance given to the dichotomy between direct and indirect in essentialist, macro-cultural topographies since Edward A. Hall used it to divide the world up in high and low-context cultures, very little has been written about the role of this pair to establish hegemonic relations. See (Lempert 2012, 195).

It's very important in Thai, you can't lose face in front of other people and hang someone out to dry in a management team or whatever setting you're in is a very bad thing for example just an exam; you can't give, you know, give feedback as such in a general sitting inside in a Thai group or example right because, that would be seen as losing face. (Interview 4.2.)

This explanation clearly eliminates other ways of understanding why the local team members act as they do in a given situation. The only reasonable explanation remaining is that the Thai members follow their culture, which dictates that it is all about face, and that this is why they do not provide feedback. Furthermore, the informant makes use of an opposition between a culture, which is unauthentic, concealed, non-transparent and reduced to appearance, and a base culture, which is free of these bonds. It is perhaps less interesting here to note that face is a concept that is used universally to understand human intersubjectivity, and it is perhaps more interesting to note that face is part of a discourse activated to create a difference between those that are free and value freedom and those that are not free (and do not value freedom).

If we leave out the obvious, cognitive reason of simply explaining what is going on, the main purpose of the opposition is to establish a position for the non-locals of both representing higher values and taking the role as mediator between the culture that counts and the locals. As this informant immediately tells us, providing feedback in a direct way is simply saying things as they are. What else should one do?

So, I give relatively immediate feedback and relatively honest feedback. So, I was quite straightforward and maybe to some extent, rude. (Interview 5.3.)

The chain of equivalence is obvious. Immediate feedback entails being honest, and honesty trumps rudeness. The informant is fully aware that his way of collaborating can be understood differently than intended. The logic is, however, that a lack of feedback would be worse than being rude. It is certainly not our intention to ridicule the informant in any way; we simply wish to show how an essentialist concept of culture risks reducing the behaviour to simple dichotomies between being either rude or honest.

The mediating role chosen by several of our non-local team members to justify their behaviour in the team differs considerably from the role performed by the local team members. The non-locals primarily see their role as teaching the locals the values of the base culture and removing them from their own culture, which limits their contribution to the team:

After a while I realized that you need to, you know, take them, sit next to them, sit together with them, go through it step by step. Because they don't ... they don't pick up everything by themselves. (Interview 5.3)

The paternalistic tone is quite obvious in this statement, which builds on the assumption that informants must be introduced to the values of the base culture (directness, straightforwardness, etc.) in a way that is not exactly free of bonds. A female informant assumes a similar, motherly role:

... and I would sit with them a little bit at the beginning and ask them to have their tasks for me for example ... I think it's more about them, letting them get to know me and also to understand that it's not dangerous to talk to me. (Interview 7.4.)

The tone is milder and more engaging, but the positioning of the locals is the same. In fact, the informant is aware of how she acts towards the locals:

... and sometimes I almost feel patronizing when I speak. (Interview 7.4.)

The teaching function can be dressed in a more or less paternalistic mode. Another informant sees himself more as a jester whose job it is to directly throw his culture on the table to demonstrate the value of it. He views himself as an instrument that the manager can play in order to convince the locals of the values of the hegemonic culture.

So, we kind of ... I think he [manager's name] used me actually to show that it was okay to kind of have a different opinion and that actually helped I think ... As I told you about before that I was not afraid to raise my opinion and then that they could see that it well received and then they also started doing that more and more. (Interview 4.2)

In this case, the teaching function is less caring or seductive and more activist. The performance of directness will simply convince the locals about the value of working in this way. The teaching role is thus almost eliminated since it works through an assumption that the locals will imitate it. The strategy of simply performing your superior culture, which the locals will then imitate, strengthens the superior position of the informant. The more he performs, the more locals will follow. Within an essentialist concept of culture, the role of mediator gets caught up in a logic of differentiating between a hegemonic position and a position of inferiority. The non-locals are unable to distance themselves from their base culture in the way the locals are. By distancing themselves from the culture they were supposed to belong to, the latter gained a conceptual manoeuvring space that the non-locals do not create. The non-locals do not separate themselves from a traditional base culture. They are not more or less traditional. Like the managers, they use the distinction about local team members. One of our informants makes use of a brain metaphor to point out how the locals are able to navigate between the traditional and the culture of the non-locals:

... let's say the way I see they have kind of two brains. I mean they have one western and one Thai so they still of course understand the Thai way of thinking. They are not totally Western. (Interview 6.5.)

Equipping the locals with two 'brains' resembles the way the locals distance themselves from traditional culture. If they are viewed as not simply representatives of their culture, they acquire a position, which entails more agency. They can do more than just being Thai or Chinese. The non-local informants, on the other hand, do not establish the same distance. None of them said that they were more or less Danish, Norwegian, Scandinavian, French, British or European. It seems that distance would lead to a dismantling of the safe hegemonic position established by the essentialist concept of culture.

Both managers and non-local team members relied on this concept of culture but, for the latter, it was far more dominant in understanding cultural diversity that it was the case for the managers, and also more stereotypical. They seem to have a stronger need to secure a position through this concept that will justify their role. There might be several reasons why the non-locals feel this need. They are typically younger than the managers are and have been stationed abroad for a shorter period, and they do not have leadership responsibilities. Our sample of interviewees, however, is too small to determine whether these reasons hold.

#### *Cultural diversity is expressed in what team members do*

We also found examples of non-locals who did not act ethnocentrically and who were less prone to perceiving diversity through an essentialist concept of culture. These non-local members felt uneasy simply relying on their base culture. A first indication of this unease could, for example, be a feeling that the locals feel uncomfortable or misunderstood:

... så tror jeg ikke hans nej talte på samme måde. Det er bare en følelse, jeg har. Altså ... så du får hele den der ... nervøsitet ind over, kulturforskellen, så hvem kan mest her, hvem har ret til mest her.<sup>16</sup> (Interview 1.4.)

Informants can also address the problem of acting ethnocentrically more directly:

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<sup>16</sup> Interview conducted in Danish: "I don't think his no counted as much. It is just a feeling I have. So ... you get all that ... nervousness manifested with cultural diversity, who can get the most out of it, who is most entitled here".

And day one, we talk about opportunities and what we have done and day two you talk about big bets and what should happen in the future or going forward and we discuss the acts and it's very Danish in some ways, where you spend the whole team a lot of time, three days in a room to make a plan together. And the Chinese absolutely don't understand it. (Interview 5.2.)

This informant knows quite well that the problem relates to the 'very Danish' approach and not to the Chinese team members acting in a 'Chinese' way.

Being critical of acting 'very Danishly', that is, of not questioning the perspective and base culture on which 'being Danish' relies, is a first step in the direction of not seeing cultural diversity as expressions of national cultures. From this often follows an observation of the negative effects for the teamwork of self-confidently relying on one's base culture. Even an informant who praised his own effort in making the locals imitate him might occasionally notice the negative effects of being in his own culture

Right in Denmark it's because everyone wants to be heard and everyone has an ego and blah, blah, blah. (Interview 4.2.)

This time, Danish culture is not about honesty or a democratic exchange of options but about publicly asserting oneself at the expense of others, or what we could call face.

We just saw how the role of mediator can be appropriated to secure a superior position as teacher of the valorised culture. If, however, mediation is linked to a distancing from the base culture, it takes quite a different direction. The mediator can create distance by placing him- or herself in an in-between position, that is, a position between two positions that are more fixed, the local culture and the national culture to which the company belongs:

We all agreed that it's not about the Danish should work in a Chinese way, but it's also not the Chinese that should work in a Danish way so it's about meeting somewhere in the middle. (Interview 5.2.)

This in-between or 'middle' position can be conceptualised as a culture-free zone, but there is also the possibility of perceiving it as a meeting place where both sides consider what to bring and how to act.

It is even more important to observe how cultural diversity shows itself in the actual teamwork and to consider how ways of working together can be changed in order to avoid problems that have already been experienced. In our interviews, we found very general ways of acknowledging the need to be observant. One team member speaks of his manager as being 'open':

So, yes, I think the way [name of GM] manages is – it's a very open way, he's very open with all of us and we have open discussion altogether. (Interview 6.5.)

Openness might indicate an awareness of shifting from the containment strategy of an essentialist concept of culture towards being observant. It might be more efficient, however, to address specific problems and propose changes in the teamwork; for instance, in how the members communicate:

There's a few things that we do, do differently; it's usually when we sit together and we discuss, we make sure to be maybe slightly more disciplined than we would have been in a Danish only team. We also try to ... the Danish people try to shut up until the Chinese people have spoken, we try to ask the Chinese so what do you think? At least air your opinion. (Interview 5.2.)

Using the expression 'shut up' manifestly indicates that our informant is aware of the negative consequences of communicating in the usual, 'Danish' way. It can also be that you are aware of all the communication that takes place outside the formal setting:

Otherwise I try to pick up on the gossip, because I can see when they're gossiping so I'll ask you know if I should be part of the group. (Interview 7.4.)

Yet another informant proposes to include pre-meeting small talk as a form of preparation for the meetings:

... så har jeg lige haft sådan en lille small-talk med ham. Og det synes jeg er vigtigt inden vi træder ind i det her fora, et møde globalt kræver forberedelse.<sup>17</sup> (Interview 1.4.)

Some informants remark that they are more careful when choosing formulations, or that they actually ‘filter’ their communication:

I need to adapt to these people, I need to put a filter the way I manage, the way I talk. (Interview 6.5.)

The metaphor might contain a certain patronising tone, but it is also used to emphasise the need to change the style of communication.

When we asked the non-local team members whether they considered cultural diversity an advantage or a disadvantage, the majority said they considered it an advantage. Despite the criticism uttered about the locals being traditional, rigid and instrumental, there seems to be a consensus that cultural diversity adds value to the teamwork:

We don't understand why it doesn't really work and they provide some valuable cultural input and also how to - if, when you want to approach somebody. (Interview 5.2.)

The same can be said in a more programmatic way:

Yeah, I think it adds value to the global scene to have different culture because we don't always have the same preferences, we don't see always things in the same way of course depending on where we are coming from. (Interview 6.5.)

It is perhaps unsurprising that our informants, who are working in global teams, would not dismiss the value of cultural diversity. However, manifestly praising cultural diversity can go hand in hand with a less reflective ethnocentrism. The informants that lean towards a more analytical concept of culture based on observations of how diversity is expressed nonetheless speak more openly about synergy. The non-local informants who are more likely to diminish the role of culture in the team are also more likely to talk about adaptation to an international environment as the main driver. Since internationalisation as such provides synergy, there will be fewer incentives to look for cues in the concrete teamwork. If diversity is being contained on the map of national cultures (or even larger civilisational entities), synergy is always already framed by a hegemonic structure through which is at the same time deconstructed. Often you are left with the solution that the teamwork is a poor imitation of a working style that would be far better if we were alike. One informant directly states this as a loss of not being in an environment of sameness:

I miss having our work environment, a social work environment to speak to people that are not just sound patronizing but speak with people that are same as me, not because these guys are not on the same level as me it's just because we are different. (Interview 7.4.)

In conclusion, we can say that, if cultural diversity is either neutralised in the name of internationalisation or contained in pre-fixed stereotypes, it becomes very difficult to actually specify how diversity brings synergy to the team. It is only when an awareness of how perspectives can limit what we see and do is followed by a capacity to concretely observe how diversity is expressed in the teamwork through many different explicit and implicit signals that new ways of working together can be enacted, that is, when

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<sup>17</sup> Interview conducted in Danish: “Then I just have a small-talk session with him. And I think this is important, before we enter this space; a meeting at a global level demands preparation”.

observation leads to changes in the teamwork. The link between awareness, observation or alertness, and reaction or agility depends on a concept of culture which is analytical.

#### 5.1.4. Cultural discourses

As mentioned above, a discourse analysis adds a larger transtextual view to a textual analysis. The latter investigates how explicit and implicit statements on cultural diversity can be condensed into more basic understandings of culture – or what we call the concept of culture. With a discourse analysis, we look at the connection between these concepts and larger discourses on culture to which the informants have access. When we analysed the informants' concepts of culture above, we examined similarities that transgressed the individual interview. We did not attempt to establish whether every individual informant possessed his or her own concept, since it would be unfair to assume such consistency within a conversation about cultural diversity. How our informants look at global teams and their role within them is framed by how they understand cultural diversity, but it makes no sense to look for a 'theory'. We did not ask them to provide us with a theory of culture. What our informants tell us about cultural diversity in global teams is influenced by the different contexts in which culture is addressed. Therefore, instead of looking for individual consistency, we tried to identify common patterns across the interviews.

In a sense, this transtextual approach is in itself a form of discourse analysis. Yet discourse analysis as a methodological approach goes a step further in looking at possible connections between what our informants say about culture and a larger discursive reservoir or 'archive'. When our informants – and indeed all of us – articulate diversity as being cultural and point to challenges related to culture, they draw on existing discourses about culture. Regardless of whether they relate to culture more generally or in specific situations, they activate discourses in which culture is framed.

In the research literature on the concept of culture, it has become conventional to distinguish between two basic theories or concepts: an essentialist and a dynamic or analytical.<sup>18</sup> With the essentialist concept, you already have access to a knowledge that makes you able to predict and explain the behaviour of others. For example, you might know that seniority is an important principle and code for Thai people, which can then explain any specific Thai behaviour. This knowledge can take the form of experience-based generalisations or be more stereotypical (we just know it!).<sup>19</sup> A non-essentialist concept of culture relies on a more inductive approach to how culture manifests itself in what others are currently doing and saying. It is analytical in the sense that it must be based on observations of behaviour; and it is dynamic because it works with the premise that what others are currently doing or saying may challenge previous knowledge of the culture. The difference between the two concepts is often described as a difference between culture as being and culture as doing.

In our analysis of how the informants articulate cultural diversity, we have drawn inspiration from the theoretical distinction between the two concepts. We have looked at specific formulations of cultural diversity as essentialist and non-essentialist. The essentialist concept of culture has traditionally been embedded in discourse of national culture. This discourse can take both ideological forms (this is how people should live together) and existential forms (this is how people live together), which are recognisable in many genres, from travel guides to news coverage and global business.<sup>20</sup> Our informants draw on both the hegemonic discourse of culture as being fundamentally national (which we all tend to use when we speak of cultural diversity) and a more specific discourse on culture and business. The non-essentialist

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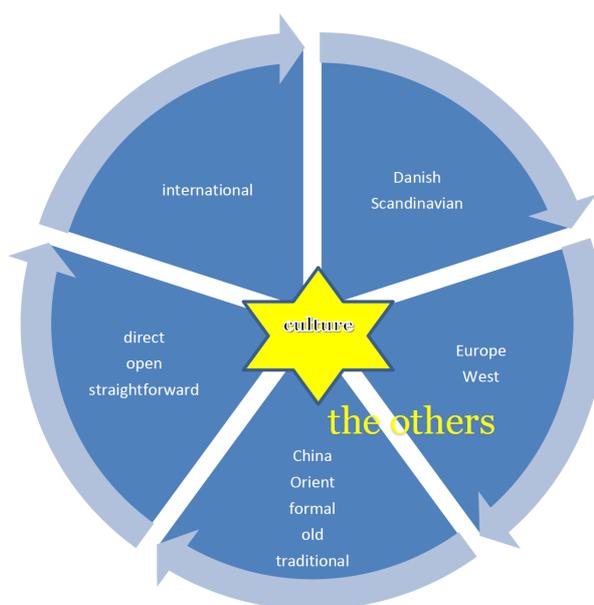
<sup>18</sup> Everybody who studies intercultural communication, whether as intercultural communication or something else, begins by reflecting on the concept of culture. For an interesting discussion of an essentialist and a non-essentialist concept, see (Holliday 2011). There is less consensus about a positive term for the non-essentialist concept. Holliday prefers to place it within a larger theory of critical cosmopolitanism.

<sup>19</sup> Whether generalisations are based on individual experience or accumulated through widespread surveys – as with the 117,000 questionnaires in Hofstede's famous analysis of national cultures – they are still included in a concept where behavior can be captured in a set of features.

<sup>20</sup> There are scores of studies on the effect of national culture on global business. The Paris-based scholar and consultant Erin Meyer has been highly influential circulating a discourse of national culture within the business world. Her bestselling book *The Culture Map* (Meyer 2014) gives detailed information on how people from different national cultures vary in behavior within a select number of parameters. Meyer's parameters are more numerous than the six parameters Geert Hofstede detected in his famous *Culture's Consequences* (Hofstede 2003), although they are based on a much smaller sample of data.

and analytical concept emerges from the challenges that observations pose to existing knowledge about people are supposed to act as well as from discourses of culture as being mixed and unstable. When informants speak of themselves or others as more or less traditional, they begin to relativise the knowledge of national culture, even if being non-traditional is still conceptualised as a derivation from the standard culture. The same is true with adaptation, which implies that a person has moved from his or her base culture. Discourses of hybridity, which are closely related to larger discourses of globalisation, work on the assumption that people are formed by several cultures. To better understand how our informants articulate culture when speaking of cultural diversity, we must take a closer look at the discursive environment that forms their concept of culture. Below we outline the most prominent discourses.

Figure 2: Surrounding discourses



### *Internationalization*

A discourse on the international and internationalisation can include many aspects. When our informants refer to internationalisation, they tend to oppose it to being bound in a national culture. Internationalisation – and, even more so, globalisation – is perceived as a process and a force of standardisation. When our informants refer to being or becoming international, they mirror this idea of moving from the local and bound to the unbounded and global/international. Internationalisation can thus lead to an international culture in which everybody follows the same codes and endorses the same values. In fact, a discourse on internationalisation designates a space that is either separate from national cultures or separate from culture as such.<sup>21</sup>

### *The Others*

The knowledge of national cultures, or the cultural maps, that our informants make use of to describe the others draws on a large archive. The cultural maps are both contextual (the content is formed by specific experience) and discursive (the content draws on the archive). Since experiences are framed by discourses, it is impossible to decide whether the knowledge derives from concrete situations or from the archive of general knowledge of others. Our informants do not refer to more formal studies of others. Very few of them have acquired any formal knowledge of the locations ('the cultures') before their posting abroad.

<sup>21</sup> Within studies of intercultural communication, scholars have tried to conceptualise 'a third space' as a dynamic scene for communication that actively reflects on the lowering of barriers between culturally diverse actors (see e.g. Kelly 2017).

The entry ticket to a job – aside from professional competences – seems to be prior international experience. When people speak of others, they draw cultural maps that can be filled with different types of knowledge from the more stereotypical (Thais always smile, Germans are always punctual) to the more formal. Stereotypes produce condensed and reduced images of others with the purpose of adding value judgements to the cultural map (Americans are superficial, the French are arrogant). These images can be found in specific discourses of others. As mentioned above, the Chinese appear to fulfil the role of the most radical others for our European informants. Such a symbolic mapping draws from a historical discourse about China. When our informants talk about the Chinese as hierarchical, formal and indirect, they activate a familiar discourse. What they say is well known and typical. The aim of a discourse analysis is precisely to point out the typical. There are many historical studies of how Europeans have perceived and articulated the Chinese (Zhang 1988). Even though discourses change over time, some elements remain. From the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, China began to rise as an important economic power, and now, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is a central, global actor. Changes of this kind clearly influence the discourse on China. At the same time, elements used to describe an older China can still be used to talk about a more modern China, such as references to hierarchy or Confucian balance. Some of the features used to portray an old or modern China are remarkably stable. There are historical explanations for this. The image of China has been formed by a more comprehensive, orientalist discourse that took shape with the European expansion into great parts of the Asian continent in the latter part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>22</sup> The opposition that our informants use between being and not being traditional is a typical example of the asymmetry between the modern (the West) and the non-modern (the rest) that we find in discourses on the Orient. The discourse on China works through an adaption of existing features to the changes that can be observed. With the ever growing importance of China for Europe, there is an abundance of information, which, to a large extent, is framed by the existing discourse (see e.g. Boden 2016). Our informants have obviously taken part of their knowledge from the massive coverage of China in the media.

#### *Us in the West, Europe, Scandinavia, Denmark*

The cultural maps are structured through basic oppositions within a system of asymmetry between the base culture and the other. If China often serves as the most radical other, the West/Europe is the position within which the base culture can be inserted. Just as with the Orient, there is rich archive to draw from when speaking about this position. Our informants are, however, more scarce with their references to the larger civilisational entities, particularly when describing their base culture. They can agree that Asia is a term that designates a cultural space; and the features ascribed to China or the other Asian countries that are being placed on the cultural map can be upgraded to an Asian level without difficulty. When, however, our informants speak of their own culture, they prefer to speak of their national culture. There might be a simple reason for this. It is simply easier to access discourses about one's base culture than the larger civilisational entities. We can identify cultural features that relate to national culture more easily than the more abstract civilisational entities. We therefore observe a symbolic movement from these larger entities to national cultures on the cultural map. If we look at our Danish informants, we notice that they easily frame and articulate their behaviour as typically Danish. They have no problems linking equality, opinion sharing, a relaxed attitude, humour, honesty, openness and straightforwardness in a solid chain of equivalence to Danish culture. If we look more broadly at discourses of Danish identity and culture, we have no difficulty recognising these elements.<sup>23</sup> Even if our informants select which discourse elements they include according to the specific context in which they construct their base culture, their choices always come close to the nodal point of hegemonic discourses of Danish culture. The qualities ascribed to their base culture are furthermore used to establish and uphold the asymmetrical relations with the others. The others will typically be seen as hierarchical, formal, humourless, indirect, or imprecise. They do not,

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<sup>22</sup> The analysis of the discourse on the Orient was made famous by Edward Said, who in his 1978 book *Orientalism – Western Conceptions of the Orient* showed how the Europeans justified and institutionalised their colonialism through a discourse that made the Orient a flexible concept within a discourse of asymmetry between modern Europe/the West and the traditional other. Said did not particularly study China, but he demonstrates the basic structures in the colonial construction of the other (Said 1978).

<sup>23</sup> For an excellent study of Danish identity, see (Knudsen 2002). For a more traditional, sociological investigation of the values Danes connect to being see (Gundelach 1981).

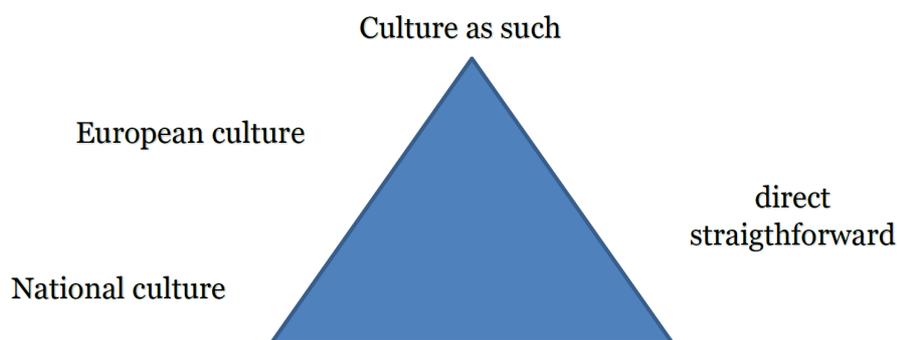
however, only describe these cultures in a rhetoric of deficiency (they are not..., they cannot...). The descriptions are also culturalised, that is, they are filled with features ascribed to what the Danes see as the national cultures of the others. We have seen how our informants explain the behaviour of the others with reference to face, network or excessive politeness. In the case of the Chinese, the informants recur to specific knowledge about mysterious networks using the Chinese word *guanxi* to emphasise how Chinese, and thus, how untranslatable, they are.<sup>24</sup>

While the qualities that are comfortably linked to Danish culture become weaker and more abstract as they are upgraded to the European or Western level, they can much more easily be embedded in a Scandinavian culture. Several of our Danish informants relate their Danish qualities with a particular Scandinavian style of management. By connecting Scandinavian management with the features of Danish culture, we arrive at a style characterised by equality, inclusion, openness, and opinion sharing. We also arrive at a style that is very difficult to decode by people that have no direct access to the discourse on Danish culture, because it is meant to be informal and thus invisible.

### Communication

As mentioned above, we find a remarkable consensus among our informants on the way they speak of their communication in the teams. A select number of concepts dominate the articulations of communication. Concepts such as straightforwardness, directness and honesty are the most frequently used positive denominators. They are both used to articulate behaviour in general and, more specifically, communication. Among the concepts that are used negatively, we find the antonyms of these concepts as well as the empty signifiers used to condense the traditional cultures of the others. Thai culture can be described as silent, formal, hierarchical and sustained by the omnipresent principle of seniority. The latter works as an empty signifier for Thai culture. We have also observed that the reduced number of concepts used by our informants can be moved from one national culture to another on the cultural map drawn. Sometimes Americans and Dutch are identified as the most straightforward and, at other times, this quality is awarded to the Danes or the Swedes. While the qualities are ascribed to national cultures, they can be moved around as long as they stay within the larger macrocultures on the map. The macrocultures function to represent the divides that cannot easily be crossed. Thais might adapt and become straightforward; Danes might try to act in a 'Chinese' and hierarchical way to gain respect, but there is always a risk that this imitation is disclosed. At an interdiscursive level, the linking of culture as such, of national culture, and of the most prominent quality of being cultural can be illustrated as follows:

Figure 3: Linking discourses of culture



<sup>24</sup> 'Face' appears both in popular description of China and in scholarly works. Chinese scholars are partly responsible for the discourse of face as being particularly Chinese (see e.g. Hu 1944) and (Zhu 2009). More broadly, 'face' together with 'politeness' have been placed at the core of studies of intercultural communication (see e.g. Ting-Toomey 1994).

An essentialist concept of culture can be expressed in a discourse on Danish culture that frames what it means to be an all-time Dane. What you do and what you value can thus be explained with reference to your Danish culture. When informants select a number of concepts to describe teamwork in their professional world, they draw from the discourse of national culture. Being direct is thus both a marker for culture in general – that is how you act in your culture – and for your national culture. For example, we could say that directness is what is most typical for Danes and it is what they value the most. The quality of directness has, however, also been important for professional discourses of intercultural communication. Since research on intercultural communication draws from linguistics of communication, cultural differences have been located in forms of communication. Language is made for communication and therefore contains a range of mechanisms for this purpose. In intercultural communication, the study of formality in the form of politeness has been given priority. There are many good reasons for focusing on politeness. It is fundamental for intersubjective exchange. Many scholars have looked at politeness theory as a universal mechanism, but the focus on culture in intercultural communication instigated an interest in politeness as a cultural phenomenon. The anthropologist Edward T. Hall, who is sometimes seen as the founder of intercultural communication, made his fame by combining communication and politeness with an essentialist understanding of macrocultures. In his 1976 book *Beyond Cultures*, he developed a model for distinguishing between cultures that were high context and cultures that were low context. In high-context cultures, people communicated primarily in less outspoken, more formal and opaque ways, while, in low-context cultures, people communicated in more literal and direct ways. With his model, Hall condensed communication (and politeness) to a question of how context was or was not addressed when people communicated and linked this to the cultural macro-divide of orientalist discourse. The book acquired a canonical status within the first generation of intercultural communication studies and served as inspiration for Hofstede’s model of the six parameters within which cultural diversity could be studied, including indulgence and restraint, which is close to Hall’s concept of context. Later, popular scholars such as Fons Trompenaar and Erin Meyer made the link between research in intercultural communication based on the models of Hall and Hofstede and the business world (Trompenaars 1997). Their research rapidly spread to HR departments in Western companies. We claim that, when our informants reduce the qualities they use to describe communication in their global teams, it is because they connect a discourse of Danish/Scandinavian/western culture with a discourse of directness as a central parameter in intercultural communication. In drawing from a discourse of national (or Western) culture as well as a professional discourse on intercultural communication, this interdiscursivity provides a stronger legitimation for the concept of directness.

## **5.2. Working together in global leadership teams**

### *5.2.1. Concepts of culture and preferred leadership styles*

As is the case with any team, the leader’s leadership style in a GLT is important for how the team performs, grows and achieves organisational goals. In this case, leadership style is regarded as the way a leader of a GLT uses his/her power to lead team members. The analysis below explores the case of eight team leaders of GLTs and the relationship between their concepts of ‘culture’ and their preferred leadership styles and practices. Since we recognise that leaders may apply a range of different styles depending on the context and complexities of team tasks, our analysis only explores the correlations between cultural perceptions and preferred leadership style as expressed and explained by the leaders themselves. In the section below, we moreover analyse the response of local team members to both the concept of culture and leadership styles in order to analyse their response in terms of possibilities for expressions of cultural difference.

We have not been able to assess the actual influence of the different leadership styles on team members’ performance or the accomplishment of the team as a whole in relation to the company’s key performance indicators (KPIs), but our results reflect that, owing to the clear relationship between cultural conceptions impacting the appreciation of cultural diversity and the preferred leadership style as analysed and described below, any intervention to develop team leaders of global management teams will

need to consider the effects of how ‘culture’ as a concept is perceived and applied to explain differences and similarities within the team.

The analysis in this section has been inspired by the research on global teams conducted by Distefano and Maznevski and their performance categorisation of global teams into ‘destroyers’, ‘equalisers’ and ‘creators’. In their study, the authors found that some GTs applied negative stereotypes to other team members, which largely impeded cooperation and destroyed team performance (‘destroyers’). Other teams acknowledged that cultural differences within their teams had surfaced at an early stage but that, over time, these differences had been resolved and equalised (‘equalisers’). While other teams had explicitly recognised and even nurtured diversity to leverage differences into creative and innovative solutions (‘creators’) (DiStefano and Maznevski 2000).

However, our interviews with both GLT leaders and GLT members do not reflect any such clear distinction between GLTs. We found no team that, in its entirety, could be considered as either a ‘destroyer’ or a ‘creator’, but our analysis shows that the cultural perceptions of the team leaders of the GLTs directly influenced their leadership styles and was to a large extent echoed by his/her team, although some local team members did not share the approach of their team leaders but instead revealed an overbearing attitude towards his/her cultural understandings (see section below). The analysis of the relationship between articulated cultural perceptions and preferred leadership styles of the eight GLTs leaders are divided into three categories and described in depth below:

- Leaders of GLTs who regarded cultural diversity as an inherent yet unimportant feature that was better ignored and preferred a ‘patriarchal’ or ‘hierarchical’ leadership style
- Leaders of GLTs who regarded cultural diversity as an inherent and manageable feature and preferred a ‘Scandinavian’ leadership style
- Leaders of GLTs who regarded cultural diversity as a dynamic source of strength and preferred an inclusive, diversified and analytical leadership style

#### *Preferred leadership styles when cultural diversity is unimportant and better ignored*

Two of the leaders (3 and 6) in our case study of eight leaders of GLTs shared an understanding of cultural diversity as an unimportant feature that was better ignored or suppressed in their approach to leading their global teams. They viewed cultural heterogeneity as a persistent threat, as a potential source of conflict, or as irrational emotional expressions that were undesired among the teams of GLT professionals. In leading their teams, our informants thus described how, in different ways, they deliberately ignored cultural differences in order to enhance collaboration based on commonalities brought about by a shared corporate culture or international culture.

In both cases, the understanding of culture that underpinned this approach to cultural diversity rested on a fairly essentialist view of culture as being part and parcel of a person’s stable personality traits. These cultural traits were considered as defined by national upbringing or socialisation and in a binary opposition, as analysed in the section above, such as European culture versus Asian culture or more specifically Scandinavian/Danish culture versus Chinese culture or Scandinavian/Danish culture versus Thai culture. Moreover, culture was regarded in a temporal continuum with cultural characteristics that were defined as ‘strong’ in relation to ‘traditional’ societies and ‘weaker’ in relation to more ‘modern’ societies, which apparently cultivated an ‘international’ culture more compatible with the culture of the informants themselves. In this sense, ‘traditional’ culture was associated with a person’s lack of initiative, excessive respect for authority/seniority, reactivity, indirectness, irrationality and an inability to make decisions and criticise; whereas ‘modern’ culture was associated with positive traits such as engagement, directness, transparency, constructive criticism, rationality, and effectiveness. As culture was also understood as an integral part of a person’s personality, it was viewed as emotional and, as such, as undesirable within the sphere of GLT of professionals.

This particular understanding of culture as nationally shaped and characterised by largely undesirable traits regarding Asian cultures determined our informants' perspective on cultural diversity as a team feature that was better ignored, tacitly suppressed, reformed or exchanged by a shared company culture to ensure harmonious and seamless team collaboration and effectiveness. In other words, these informants recognised cultural diversity as a feature of their global teams but wanted to ensure team homogeneity by downplaying the importance of cultures in relation to team performance. To reach this goal, the leaders applied different strategies, such as applying a patriarchal or hierarchical leadership style, which we will examine below.

For the leader of GLT6, 'culture' was a factor he consciously disregarded when adhering to company hiring regulations to ignore race, gender and religion. Instead, he states, "we look at competencies, skills ... logic abilities" and, as a result, team members were "not so hung up in their specific culture". For this leader, the solution to alleviating the cultural differences that, in his view, would nevertheless emerge primarily as expressions of emotions was to call for only "fact based knowledge" in order to avoid "emotional conversations". He mentioned the importance of showing mutual respect to different cultural expressions and adapting accordingly ("... if you fundamentally respect all the people regardless of race, religion, gender and so on, culture difference is a non-issue, why? Because you're naturally aware of those and adjust in behaviour"). However, as discussed above, adaptation may in some circumstances reinforce the essentialisation of national cultures, and it seldom involves reflections on who adapts to whom or at what levels adaptation takes place. 'Adaptation' suggest behavioural change e.g. in communication style, but, for the leader of GLT6 and others, this only alleviated the disruptions of cultural diversity and did not serve to promote productive team collaboration.

To establish alignment and commitment, the leader of GLT6 opted with his leadership style to develop 'trust' in his team (something the leader of GLT3 also did but for different reasons and using different methods). Head of GLT6 emphasised that trust in his GLT was based on mutual personal fondness that would neutralise cultural differences.

We have decided that the best way to work together is that we, you know, have trust in each other, that we like each other, that we can laugh at the same jokes ... open to how we are as individuals ... remove a little bit of that difference or the culture. (Interview 6.1.)

It is perhaps unsurprising that, apart from the leader and one local male and one local female, GLT6 consisted of five male members all in their late 30s and early 40s with European backgrounds, all hired by the same team leader.

Furthermore, to reduce communication challenges and misunderstandings that could derive from cultural diversity, the preferred leadership style of the GLT6 leader was to demand full adherence to the company's organisational hierarchy and keep to the chain-of-command in all situations. The underlining of fact-based communication and decision making as well as adherence to a predefined hierarchy to ensure the quality of production were all measures that left no room to play out cultural diversity. This kind of hierarchical leadership, or, as this leader puts it, 'military style', bears witness to an understanding that cultural diversity should be suppressed or kept under control in teamwork by a team culture based on harmonious social and personal relations.

For the leader of GLT3, 'culture' was a factor that defined the behaviour of his all-Asian team (apart from himself). He essentialised his team as 'traditional' (as described above) in the sense that team members' indirect and passive personal communication styles impeded voicing mutual critique as well as independent decision making. He thus also perceived cultural diversity as nationally determined and as an obstacle to the performance of the team, which he would like to be characterised by team members openly challenging each other.

I'm not trying to make a harmonious management team. I'm actually trying to challenge them individually to make sure that they are different. (Interview 3.1.)

Rather than minimising the effect of cultural diversity to create a harmonious team, as we saw in the case above, this informant stressed the importance of disharmony to enable members of his GLT to perform to their outmost. Furthermore, he also coached the team members to become more proactive and to challenge their peers by creating trust between him and the individual team members (“I have a way of getting a good trust going and once I have the trust then it’s very quick to make progress”); however, he did not mention trust between team members. Establishing trust was instead grounded in his professional credentials and reputation (personal integrity) as well as in his interpretation of his team members’ understanding of trust in a leader as best practiced through rewards and performance management:

I think that is part of the trust building that they know if they fuck up, I tell them right away. If they do something good, I have to tell them that this is good ... Chinese need to know where they have you, this is key - challenge and reward. (Interview 3.1.)

Also in this case, we observe a clear relationship between the leader’s cultural understandings and his preferred patriarchal or authoritarian leadership style based on a transparent reward and punishment system. In other words, this GLT leader recognised a need for his team members to change by emulating his understanding of excellence and, in order to realise this, he applied a leadership style of “Do as I do, now”. It is thus not surprising that, when asked to comment on culture, he answered:

So, your question was what is culture to me? What is culture? I think culture is what makes people stay in a company. (Interview 3.1.)

In other words, he had replaced cultural diversity with a team or company culture that facilitated a team dynamic defined by the team leader in opposition to his understanding of the cultural backgrounds of his team members.

In both the cases analysed above, we found a specific understanding of culture as either irrelevant for or an obstacle to successful global team collaboration. As such, cultural diversity is not regarded as potentially leveraging quality, creativity or innovation within the team. On the contrary, both team leaders made their own efforts to level out cultural diversity, either by recruiting team members with similar cultural backgrounds and enforcing a ‘chain of command’ culture or by challenging team members to behave and act in specific ways (contrary to their cultural dispositions) based on a ‘reward or punish’ system to establish a team culture in accordance with corporate culture.

#### *Preferred leadership styles when cultural diversity is an inherent and manageable feature*

Three of the GLT leaders (1, 5, 7) viewed cultural diversity within their teams as something beneficial yet cumbersome that did not seriously impede team performance. The leader of GLT5 expressed his attitude in this way:

I experience a diversity around the table which is beneficial for us as a team, but I don’t think that it’s a barrier for us. (Interview 5.1.)

All these leaders (like the leaders described in the previous section) had relatively strong essentialist understandings of culture as nationally defined dichotomies between the West and Asia, between China and Southeast Asia, or between Southeast Asia and Scandinavia/Denmark. These leaders also shared the perception of culture as classified in a temporal continuum with ‘traditional’ culture being part of premodern societies and ‘international’ or ‘global’ culture being part of modern societies, such as Thai

or Malay cultures. Chinese and Russian cultures were not considered as culturally modern but instead as unique cases of cultures which are extremely difficult to deal with.

The general understanding of the influence of modernity on cultural development in the direction of 'internationalisation' and 'globalisation' led these leaders to focus on cultural differences not only as an advantage for their teams and business development in general but also as potentially dynamic and adaptable to a preferred 'Scandinavian' leadership model. All three leaders thus favoured the Scandinavian leadership style without hesitation and expected team members to adapt to this specific way of team management, which, in many respects, was regarded as superior and the 'natural' choice for Danish team leaders.

The leader of GLT1 was in charge of a virtually distributed GLT of Europeans and Chinese and was based at the company headquarters in Copenhagen. He frequently visited the European service sites outside Denmark where a couple of team members were located, and the Chinese team member employed at a service site in China occasionally stayed in Copenhagen. The team leader experienced his team as primarily defined by the Danish team members as a majority and the non-Danish members as a necessary addition (owing to lower production costs elsewhere). From this perspective, a rather ethnocentric understanding of non-Danish team members emerged as the Chinese 'Other' in cultural contrast to the Danish team members. Danes were perceived as open, direct, creative and born decision makers, while their Chinese counterparts were described as closed, indirect, hesitant decision makers and reluctant to give feedback.

Similarly, he highlighted that Scandinavian management culture was uniquely based on a non-hierarchical understandings of authority ("Nobody cares about titles we have ... because we have a job that needs to get done"), which is a particularly attractive feature to global workers used to more hierarchical structures between managers and workers. However, the leader did not apply his recognition of the value of 'Scandinavian' leadership styles as empowering and stimulating for creativity and collaboration to his non-European team members. Creativity and collaboration within the team was somewhat hampered by distance and the necessity of virtual meetings, but it was mostly hampered by a predefined notion of Chinese team members' cultural backgrounds as impeding creativity and innovation.

In fact, he regarded the virtual meetings as more effective in terms of keeping to the agenda without much small talk compared with face-to-face meetings, owing to the rigid discipline required when conducting a video conference call in three geographic destinations. However, he also acknowledged that this effectiveness might be at the expense of discussions and innovation potential that he associated with the 'Danish meeting style', since, in his view, their weekly video conference calls were now conducted according to the "lowest common denominator". Yet he still preferred these virtual meetings, which allow him to be the dominant contributor of information ("I can see that we lose a little bit of what we were good at really, but maybe it doesn't matter").

The preference for reducing team meetings to effective information meetings seemed to rest on the premise that the cultural set up of the team made the development of innovative solutions for their services impossible. The team leader had decided that, owing to his cultural background, the Chinese team member was unable to contribute innovative ideas ("X [Chinese team member] needs something else than the Danes that's for sure, because he needs clear structures and he comes to me with a problem and he expects me to come up with a solution"). The team leaders' management solution was to engage only the European team members in developing solutions and to engage the Chinese team member in executing the solutions. He explained:

I would not expect X [Chinese team member] to come up with the good ideas on how we could do that, but he would be very good in executing. (Interview 1.1.)

From the perspective of this team leader's perception of 'culture', which was informed by wider societal discourses on major cultural differences between 'East' and 'West', essentialised norms and behavioural patterns were attributed to his team members and impacted on the leadership style applied. In

fact, he appeared to employ a split leadership style: the European team members were met with a democratic or ‘Scandinavian’ leadership style (which limited the team leader to a motivator and facilitator for reaching a consensus on how to best achieve the strategic objectives of the team), and the Chinese team member was met with disbelief and doubt regarding his abilities to deliver the necessary value and results when finding creative solutions. In this case, the team leader then shifted to a more *patriarchal leadership* approach, as we saw above, emphasising execution of what had already been decided by the rest of the team without making the effort to integrate the Chinese team member in decision making. By referencing his innate culture, the leader excluded him from specific team tasks. It is clear that implementing a leadership style that excludes certain members from engaging in team cooperation according to their cultural background may prevent a company reaping the benefits of cultural diversity in terms of differentiated information, perspectives and ideas.

The leader of GLT5 had worked almost all his professional life in Asia. For the last five years, he had worked for a Danish company with headquarters in Denmark as the leader of a GLT that spanned China and, for two years, also Malaysia. In describing his many years of international work experience, he also expressed fairly essentialising views on culture that he qualified as national through an ethnocentric perspective of being Danish or Scandinavian. He stereotyped specific ‘national cultures’; for example, he stereotyped the Chinese by drawing on centuries old discourses on the Chinese ‘Other’ as determined by a hierarchical Confucian value system (see section 6.2. above) and, in addition, by juxtaposing ‘Chinese culture’ with his own culture categorised as Danish and distinguished as particularly honest, genuine and caring.

... if you look particularly at the Chinese system that is built on the Confucian philosophy, which is a hierarchic one, where everybody fits into their system and as long as I do my part of in that system it will take care of me and certainly my leader above me will take care of me. (Interview 5.1.)

... I think Danes genuinely care, Swedes genuinely care and then I sense, and maybe it is a racist thing to say I don’t know, but I think we care a little bit more than in so many other places where we really mean we care and when you reach out to people with your heart and you really want to develop and grow together with people then it’s -- it works. It’s a very basic thing. (Interview 5.1.)

By juxtaposing Chinese culture with Southeast Asian culture, he also indirectly accentuated Chinese cultural exceptionalism as being resistant to change, since he described Southeast Asian cultures as adaptable to a certain ‘international’ business culture in terms of values and responsibilities.

I think Southeast Asia is a lot easier than China. I mean - and China is China, China is completely different and I would say I’ve worked - I worked in two cultures that to me were really big cultural gaps and bigger than you thought and even in hindsight was even bigger; and one is working with the Russian culture and one is working with the Chinese culture and ... China aside, I think here the people that we have on the lead team here they are international profiles ... the commonalities in terms of business philosophy, business values and your self-understanding in a business context is very high. (Interview 5.1.)

This perception of GLT members as products of primarily national cultural standards was also reflected in this team leader’s understanding of his own leadership style, which, given his cultural background, was referred to as ‘Scandinavian’ and depicted as corresponding to Scandinavian cultural values, such as being inclusive, open, honest, genuine, trustworthy and encouraging equal participation.

I think the Scandinavian management culture if I would call it that is very participative so it’s inclusive, it’s open, you encourage people to speak their mind and you really mean it. (Interview 5.1.)

... and I think, you know, Scandinavians I think has a certain advantage in that we are - our trust level is so high so we trust people genuinely and when we come to an

[job] interview to the point that we are naive, particularly if you are in Russia and sometimes in China, but, you know, we're genuine and people, you know, people like that. (Interview 5.1.)

So, I think that there is an ability for Scandinavian leaders and I've seen that across to share enough of themselves and be strong enough to also admit when they're wrong and admit their own vulnerabilities to sort of generate quite a good respect, you know, around them. (Interview 5.1.)

This leadership style was not understood as difficult for Southeast Asians to adapt to given their international dispositions; in fact, this GLT leader did not mention any particular leadership approaches to accommodate Southeast Asian members, since he believes that these members always adapt to a particular management style with time:

After a while our colleagues who are from an Asian culture they get used to it [Scandinavian management culture] and they start participating and realize that maybe you don't have to be careful with what you're saying, but more have to be careful if you're not saying anything that's why we really want everybody to participate. (Interview 5.1.)

This leader would adapt his communication style according to the circumstances; however, he did not mention that he took any further steps to accommodate other team members' alternative styles that might be different from his own "very direct" style.

So, I probably have a leadership style which is very direct and that can be a little bit daunting sometimes when you just - that it's not sort of wrapped too much into other things than when you say things direct, but I think it's more - it's something that people get used to and it's also something that you or I can adapt as we go through the meetings. (Interview 5.1.)

On the other hand, Chinese team members being labelled as culturally extraordinary were also regarded as more inclined to misinterpret the 'Scandinavian' leadership style; although, as the harder edges of Scandinavian leadership were exposed through the topic of dismissals (for example), respect would still be earned from Chinese employees.

I have seen that, and that's in China, but also in Russia, that if you come with the management style as Scandinavian and in the beginning people will just think of you as soft ... There's a genuineness about Scandinavian leadership as I understand that we're soft, say okay, it's serious business ... this is about creating a performance culture ... so you're soft on people and hard on the numbers. (Interview 5.1.)

The 'Scandinavian' leadership style appeared as the default preference for the leader of GLT5, since it matched his cultural background and was clearly superior to other leadership models (similar to the reasons maintained by the leader of GLT1). The argument seems to be that being Danish instinctively predisposes you to a flat leadership style based on Scandinavian principles of 'equality', 'care' and 'trust' that engage and empower team members. For GLT5, applying this leadership style was fairly unproblematic, since the Southeast Asian team members adapted to it and he was seemingly able to handle the 'special case' of Chinese team members whose cultural dispositions ran counter to the ideals of non-hierarchical 'Scandinavian' leadership style. However, despite the predominant notions of 'equality', 'trust' and 'caring', team leadership still seemed limited to the Danes and the Swedes, since trust in others, as he explained, did not really extend to people outside of 'home':

Because if you look at a culture, which is decidedly open, but we're also very reserved but decidedly open, built on trust and has the highest trust levels in the world yet when we build the businesses we always want to have a Dane running it ... which doesn't indicate a lot of trust when you - so it's maybe, maybe we have this sense when we get out in the world, we may be able to trust everything at home, but once we get out, we may be also be taken advantage of right? (Interview 5.1.)

In other words, the specific stereotypical features of ‘equality’ and ‘trust’ as part of the cultural package of being Scandinavian did not really apply in relation to filling leadership positions, which is reflected in the dominant recruitment pattern of appointing only (male) Scandinavians to leadership positions in Asia and the Middle East.

The cultural division of power in this organisation (as well as other organisations) suggests to local team members that the business culture is non-negotiable and signals that locals are practically excluded from pursuing higher positions on the career ladder. The hegemonic national and corporate cultures, which go hand-in-hand, determine the business culture that all team members are expected to adapt to, and, according to the leader of GLT5, depending on their cultural backgrounds, some team members are better at this than others.

The leader of GLT5 considered cultural diversity an invaluable asset and financial necessity, due to the Danes’ (in particular) lack of local knowledge in relation to opening new markets (“... the learning curves that we are climbing particularly in understanding the markets ... When we put Danes in place, it’s too steep, it’s too costly, it takes too long time.” (Interview 5.1.)). However, he also believed that cultural diversity in a GLT could be a hindrance in relation to certain team members in casu those of a Chinese cultural background. These particular team members would obstruct team dynamics and impede central task issues such as strategy planning processes. He described strategy processes in his predominantly Chinese team as: “... trying to catch jelly fish with forks, because ... you get it up and immediately it slips off again, because the way strategy works there is acting your way into thinking”. He concluded that it was necessary for the team to “blend in what the Chinese side brings”, but he also expressed his reservations about the Chinese approach to teamwork, due to his interpretation that, in general, Chinese people tend to build trust in the person in charge rather than in the team as a whole:

... this is trust to follow [a leader], rather than trust to sort of co-create if you were - I think in Southeast Asia it’s different. I mean then I think that there’s more the ... trust to work together. (Interview 5.1.)

Following this cultural argument, the leader of GLT5 found it much easier to lead his Southeast Asian team, who had adapted to the type of ‘international’ strategy process based on team contributions.

However, adaptation or compliance to an ethnocentric ‘Scandinavian’ leadership style without much thought on the applicability in another cultural context does not necessarily translate into bringing a diversity of opinions and ideas forward that will enhance team corporation and performance. It is also doubtful that reducing the culture of the ‘Other’ to particular essentialised traits in disconcert with an equally essentialised ‘Scandinavian’ or universalised ‘international’ leadership style promotes cultural diversity and brings about potential advantages. Instead, by expecting assimilation to corporate culture, these leaders run the risk of instigating limitations in both their recruitment, assessment and leadership practices, which may result in teams striving for conformity.

The leader of GLT7 – the last of the leaders whose view of cultural diversity rests on a concept of local team members’ culture as potentially bothersome yet adaptable over time – had also worked almost all his professional life in Asia and half of this time in Thailand. He had led the relatively established and co-located GLT comprising Scandinavian members and Thai members for a dozen years.

This Danish team leader, whose team worked in production, viewed cultural diversity as indispensable. The asset of local team members to him was primarily entailed in local language proficiency, which was required to give instructions to operators in the production and to communicate with governmental departments (tax, revenue, labour) (Interview 7.1.).

His point of departure when discussing cultural differences was an essentialised national cultural approach (just like the leaders of GLT1 and GLT5). His perspective was also rather ethnocentric, since it compared Thai culture with his own culture and adhered to the dominant discourse of Thai/Asians as falling short of Danish culture by shying away from conflicts, from making decisions, and from taking responsibility.

Well for sure, it's two completely different cultures, whereas Danes in general are more outgoing, want to participate, want to take responsibility, want to be involved. Where Thai's they're more, do not - of course it's dangerous to generalize as such, but it can be difficult for them to take decisions, take their responsibility. (Interview 7.1.)

Well aware of the dangers of stereotyping, he still returned several times during the interview to the problem of micromanagement, which, due to Thai cultural dispositions, he was forced to engage in. He tried to find societal explanations for this behaviour (Well, the problem is that the culture in Thailand is that ... if you make a mistake then quite often you'll have to pay for that yourself. (Interview 7.1.)) and he explained how he adapted his management style to change this situation. However, for him, Thai culture seemed irremediable, as expressed below:

I'm trying to tell the Thais also .... if a mistake [has] been made then of course that they're not punished for that. (Interview 7.1.)

They always come, you know, to me to give a nod or say okay for what they propose. But of course, there I try to not always just take the decision or find the solution for them, but that they should come with proposals. But very often you see that the Thais they're not happy to take the big responsibility and take the risk. (Interview 7.1.)

I try always to yeah promote that they take the risks or they take their own responsibilities and they decide and I think they are doing that as well, but if -- it's not the same as it would be in a Danish team for sure not. (Interview 7.1.)

As was the case with team leader of GLT5, this team leader also viewed his own leadership style as the result of his Danish cultural background, and he believed it was up to the local team members to adapt to both his personality and his way of managing the team, as he explained:

Well, we have been together for many years and I think they know me by now. They will probably still describe me as one that is on the strict side or on the decisive side ... So, I think, they know that they can speak up to me, because they know how I react in certain situations ... we know each other and they know how I see things and what I want. (Interview 7.1.)

During the interview, this team leader was explicit about his leadership style or about bringing different leadership styles into play as a response to being in charge of a culturally diverse team (apart from encouraging Thai members to make independent decisions). Instead, he explained his way of approaching the team as primarily a personal or 'natural' leadership style (being me) that was more or less unconsciously adapted to the circumstances over time. He states:

Well, I think this is something you learn by doing. It is not that I had - I came and tried to introduce my [leadership] style. I think this will develop over time. This is something that you have to feel ... I don't think I did anything proactive ... other than just being me. (Interview 7.1.)

So, of course you adapt with time. So, with your experience, you -- let's see. I won't call it an act, but you adapt somehow over time. Knowing or not knowing how their culture is. So, I have of course also adapted, I was so many years in Thailand. (Interview 7.1.)

All the three cases presented above reveal a close relationship between cultural notions developed from fairly ethnocentric perspectives and prominence given to 'Danish/Scandinavian' leadership in the anticipation that, with time, local team members will adapt their behaviour accordingly. Our three interviews do not reveal much contemplation about how best to manage the intercultural teams in order to promote motivation, creativity, innovation and efficiency among all team members across cultural backgrounds and dispositions. For these team leaders, it seemed more important to remain 'authentic' ('genuine') to

themselves by applying a predominantly Danish way of team leadership, but thereby also running the risk of silencing team members with other managerial.

### *Preferred leadership styles when cultural diversity is the essence of the global team*

Our third group of GLT leaders (2, 4, 8) comprises three leaders who regarded cultural diversity as the very essence of their global team and deliberately tried to leverage cultural heterogeneity to inspire and bring forward new ideas, information and perspectives beyond merely 'local information' exclusively held by local team members. In fact, despite the extra resources required to run a culturally diverse team compared with a culturally homogeneous team, two of the leaders were enchanted by cultural diversity and one leader expressed positive benefits of cultural diversity for business.

When a team is culturally diverse, first of all we take a wide group think, you know, when you grow up in the same environment, the same type of background, same culture, I think we have a tendency of group think, you know, and then we just go deeper and deeper into a rat hole. When a team comes from different backgrounds we can leverage on rich experiences, different points of view, opposing ideas, right, opposing ideas, and that can only enrich a conversation, not to mention, it's so fun, I love it. (Interview 2.1.)

... it's actually what makes my day, you could say. It's, you know, I'm personally very excited about working in an international environment, that's why I chose to leave my home country and these things are incredibly visible. (Interview 4.1.)

... probably the team with more diversity will take longer time to reach decisions or reach consensus ... but the advantage will then be obviously that there is a higher chance that everybody gets heard or different views are incorporated into that decision. (Interview 8.1.)

In these three cases, cultural diversity was regarded as the essence of the team and unfolding this resource was a primary leadership task. Not surprisingly, all three team leaders acknowledged that culture was an extremely important factor and national upbringing had a cultural bearing, as reflected in this statement:

Culture is strong ... it's the result of years of school, education, living in a country ... (Interview 4.1.)

They outlined their cultural maps they used to navigate, which were based on fairly essentialised national differences in terms of communication styles, authority structures and decision-making processes:

In Denmark, we are probably a bit closer to America at least in the way of making decisions, right? Again, I would actually say that Thailand is somewhere in between if you put Denmark and Japan in the two ends of the scale, I would say Thailand is in between, but probably closer to Japan. (Interview 8.1.)

What I care for in my culture is the result, the outcome of that approach. I think for you guys, for the Danes it's much more important to be fair .... Be very direct, very transparent and put it on the table ... and then of course you have my Indian colleagues ... usually the numbers are wrong ... competitors are bad and ... the payers don't want to pay for it ... it's anyone's fault, but an internal fault... You are sitting at the same table, you are looking at the same issues, but you hear very different stories, right? ... and that's where the cultural context comes in. (Interview 4.1.)

However, significantly, in all three cases, cultural generalisations were not made from an ethnocentric vantage point that posited the counterpart in a position of cultural deficiency; instead, differences were either qualified by mixed experiences such as education abroad or gender or were regarded from a wider perspective as diverse approaches to specific issues depending on the context. For these team leaders, diversity was an asset that had to be leveraged by way of team leader intervention or engineering.

One informant described this task a piece of ‘art’ or ‘calibration’ (“I guess it’s an art and something you learn by doing in a company ... I’m trying as a general manager to calibrate”. Interview 4.1.).

In contrast to the team leaders described above, who preferred local team members to succumb or ‘adapt’ to their own dominant cultural style, ‘calibration’ results from being able to apply an ethnorelative perspective on a situation – in other words, being able to both observe differences as well as take into account how decisions may impact on team members as well as on their perception of your leadership style, as delineated above as ‘dobbelt blik’. By being able to react to potentially jarring behavioural and communicative styles, these leaders had developed a cultural sensibility or agility based on multifaceted cultural lenses or perspectives, which was transformed into analytical skills and intercultural tools and noticeably characterised their leadership styles and practices.

As examples, we will describe the leadership styles and practices of two of these leaders below.

The leader of GLT4 led a co-located team in Thailand for a Danish-based multinational company, but he himself had a Central Eastern European cultural background, international educational degrees and an international career in one European company before joining the Danish MNC. He had worked for this company for ten years in various positions, functions and locations, but he had only been general manager of the GLT in question for a little longer than a year. Apart from himself, his team comprised eight Thai team members and one Danish team member.

In contrast to the team leaders in group 1 and 2 analysed above, who managed their intercultural teams by emphasising adaptation to corporate culture or to a Scandinavian leadership style, this team leader described his leadership style as ‘dynamic’ and adaptable to the specific circumstances of his co-located team in Thailand. He underlined an ethnorelative approach to manage his GLT by arguing that, even though corporate culture was extremely strong, it was insufficient for him in his pursuit to bring all team members into play.

I think within X we have what we call the X way and that’s a very powerful set of principles. We have 10, we call them essentials ... it’s like ... a bible ... people really can recite it to you from A to Z any day of the week, right. It still doesn’t mean that we’re all the same. So, yes we have -- we treat each other with respect, we have the patience as a center ..., but within this cultural context, you can immediately see the differences, right. (Interview 4.1.)

Instead, he opted for developing a team culture mirroring that of a *family*, in which all team members would feel ‘safe’, included and responsible for contributing to the team. This also included participating in relationship building himself at numerous social activities with team members and their departments, which he was used to in Europe (see section below for details).

I use it [family] very much..., because imagine I had 13 nationalities in one team. If we played by any of the team members rules, it would had been a disaster because they were at were odd, the cultures were very different. We had - I had - super direct aggressive Americans, I had super indirect and non-aggressive Chinese, right. I had people from Greece, from El Salvador, from Germany, you know, ... It was very different. So, in that case, the only way to make it work is actually to somehow not try to adapt to anyone, not impose a certain culture, but rather say, how are we as a team? (Interview 4.1.)

... you try to manage and solve, not change, because they’re not changeable as people, but actually they can for the sake of the team and for the sake of discussions ... actually restrain themselves, right, in terms of the tone and the way they are leaving the others to also contribute, right. But otherwise, I’m not trying to change the culture, but rather say, here’s a team right. The way we work as a team to achieve results is that everyone speaks out. That everyone contributes, that actually we participate nine hours in this meeting, please say something, because, you know, otherwise it’s non-efficient regardless of your culture, right. Then, you know, we all lose out so ... (Interview 4.1.)

In addition, he explained how he was alert to the diversity of communicative and behavioural styles within his GLT regarding the degree of directness in responding, giving and receiving feedback, and authority relations. Based on his general observation that seniority was an important marker of difference in Thai culture, he noted that he would “look for cues” when a younger person had an opinion which might contradict that of a more senior team member.

Another tool he used was to avoid too direct confrontations of opinions, since there was a risk that this would lead to face loss, which might have negative consequences for the teamwork. In potentially conflictual situations, he would ‘calibrate’ team members after first having taken time himself to ‘reflect’ on the culturally sensitive issues at stake, and he would then invite individual team members to pre-discussions in order to better raise the relevant issues at a meeting without causing concern around the table (“When I found an issue that I want to discuss in the management team meeting and where it has to do with something that goes wrong, I usually invite for a pre-discussion, a one on one discussion.” Interview 4.1.).

In his experience, the practice of and preference for “transparency” and “putting everything on the table” as practiced within European teams would be directly counter-productive in his global team. Cultural awareness thus shows itself as an analytical competence that was further turned into tools used to conduct meetings in a way that promoted the voicing of views, ideas and attitudes of all team members. This management approach differed from the team leaders interviewed in group 1 and 2, who described themselves primarily as being ‘very direct’ in order to avoid cultural misunderstandings and to apply a Scandinavian leadership style to empower their team members.

The Danish leader of GLT8 led an almost co-located management team of six members in Thailand and one member in Myanmar for a Danish-based MNC. He had trained and worked in this company for 13 years in various positions, functions and locations, but had only been general manager of the GLT in question for one year. Apart from himself, his team comprised six team members of primarily Thai but also Japanese and Philipino backgrounds.

His company had globalised decades ago and had recently deliberately diversified its staff composition in terms of gender, educational and professional backgrounds, work experience and cultural backgrounds to reap the benefits of diversity and reduce costs. Yet, at the same time as it diversified culturally, GLT8 also reduced in staff numbers, which made it necessary for the team leader to emphasise the need for alignment within the management team.

So that was also one of the things that we sat down [and ] talked about ... that we can't have these like, we sit in the meeting, we say we want to do it this way and we all say we agree and we leave the room thinking that we're going out and do that. But then reality two of us goes out and does something else. It doesn't work ... It's not the way that our staff would expect to see a uniform management team working together .. we need to ensure we are aligned ... (Interview 8.1.)

With this entry, the leader of GLT8 ensured that teamwork was different from what it had hitherto been. He was also keen to ensure that his communication style was not misunderstood as being offensive, realising that he might unintentionally come across as too direct to his Thai-dominated team.

So, for instance when I first came as a new line manager ... one of the first things I talked to them about: so, I'm from Denmark and my style is different, so I will probably say something sometimes that will offend you. It's not because I'm an evil person, ... but it's just our style is more direct. I don't know your individual style or preferences so you need to tell me when I cross the line. At the same time I really appreciate to get honest feedback so I would love for you guys to be able to come to me and just tell me things that you see are wrong and I'll fix things out. (Interview 8.1.)

Being explicit about cultural diversity was also reflected in his management style, which, like the leader of GLT4, was marked by cultural awareness and analytical competence that he turned into different methods to encourage feedback and the sharing of opinions at team meetings. At meetings, he was observant of team members' non-verbal communication and would follow up on a one-to-one basis on potential disagreement. As he explained:

They would not do it in front of 20 other people, but you can go to them, close the door and say, "Hey, so I just saw your facial expression when I said this I could see you didn't really agree, so what do you really think about this?" And they will tell you if you are just two people together. (Interview 8.1.)

Moreover, the preference that some of his team members had for an indirect communication style made him apply a double process of ensuring an exchange of opinions, both directly at formal meetings but also beyond meetings, due to his analysis that certain team members felt uncomfortable with a direct style of communication.

... even if you go and ask that direct question, they won't give you the answer directly. So, you'll have to sort of talk around the issue and say, "Okay. So, practice, this really needs to get done and my idea was like that, but maybe there's another way or perhaps we would come up with another?" So, you have to really softly talk around the issue to get to that - to the middle and sometimes you won't even get it directly and they won't say a lot, but then maybe later or the next day they'll come to you or they will send you something on an email instead ... maybe they didn't feel comfortable to talk about it, because they didn't feel like this is good enough or there could be things like that. (Interview 8.1.)

Cultural sensitivity and agility was also required at formal meetings, due to cultural issues of authority, when the leader applied a similar leadership style that promoted the exchange of opinions.

That sometimes you know that this person really has an opinion about this topic, but doesn't speak because he or she considers the other person sitting next to him or her as being more senior and therefore doesn't want to offer the opinion before the other person has spoken. So, then you've to promote it, you have to invite the person to talk to get them to get the information. (Interview 8.1.)

This team leader applied his cultural knowledge to generalise about team members' potential reactions at meetings in relation to decision making and would diversify his leadership style accordingly without passing judgement from an ethnocentric perspective about Asian team members being unable to express their opinions.

In Japan, if you want to make a decision in the meeting you need to have the people in the meeting who are the decision makers. You need to have their acceptance or buy in to your solution before the meetings. So, before the meeting starts you individually walk along and talk to those people and tell them what it is you're going to present or propose in the meeting. Then when you present in the meeting everybody would sit around the table and nod and say yes on your proposal, because you have already agreed that this is how we're going to do. (Interview 8.1.)

Thailand is a little bit in between Denmark and Japan. It's not as informal ... but it's still something going on that you can present something in the meeting and you can see your Thai colleagues exchanging opinions without using words. Then after the meeting you'll have to follow up again and say, okay guys what was going on there? Or what do you really think about this? (Interview 8.1.)

The team leader's cultural sensitivity towards the working ambiance during formal meetings resulted in him changing his meeting style compared with his experience of Danish meetings; just like the leader of GLT4, who also aimed to create a safe and family feeling in his team, this team leader also diverged from corporate directives. This also entailed a more personal and intimate approach to team members as opposed to a more professional distance, which would often be the case in Denmark.

The general atmosphere in a meeting in Thailand is more relaxed than in Denmark. So, in Denmark ... if you know the purpose of the meeting is a business meeting then you immediately start to talk about business. If you do that in Thailand people will not feel comfortable. So, you have to talk about a lighter subject to begin with, and it's best if you could find a subject or if you could pick a subject that can make everybody laugh ... being happy or having something to laugh at or to smile about it's very important ... I don't think we have had any meetings where we haven't had the full table laughing, because it's just a part of - so that won't happen a lot in Denmark ... it's a very different way of working.

[In Thailand] you can't work together, if you don't know each other. So, that's also - if you as the manager, if you don't open up, if you don't offer something of yourself or your private life to them, they won't I wouldn't say respect you, but they would not consider you a part of their organization or team in the same way. (Interview 8.1.)

Interviews with the leaders of GLT4 and GLT8 reflected leadership approaches based on cultural sensitivity, self-awareness, strong interpretative capacities, and a well-developed level of analytical skills. Even though they still resorted to rigid understandings of cultural differences to navigate cultural diversity, their observations were not trapped in an negative essentialising discourse of the cultural "Other". In other words, the two team leaders had developed methods and tools to cope with cultural challenges within their teams while acknowledging the asymmetrical power relations within them. However, they seemed to manage to deconstruct prevalent ethocentrism – their own and their team members' – and move towards a more ethnorelative perspective.

The leader of GLT4, for instance, compared his own approach with a Danish team member whom he criticised for being too ethnocentric: "whenever [the Danish team member] thinks something is going wrong, he regardless of - that he knows, that he is going to create some issues at the table and someone is going to lose face, he does it". We know from ordinary life experiences as well as research that ethnocentrism, which is often practiced through stereotyping, is a main barrier for intercultural cooperation. Raising awareness among team members that we perform and communicate from particular cultural vantage points is a first step to lowering these barriers; the two team leaders addressed this issue through their ethnorelative, dynamic and analytical leadership styles.

### *5.2.2. Local and European team members on team work and cultural diversity*

Based on our analysis above, we concluded that, in the specific contexts of global leadership teams in this study, cultural perceptions informed by dominant global and more local discourses seem to have a direct bearing on the team leaders' practice of diverse leadership styles in relation to managing their global teams. In this section, we take the analysis one step further and explore how cultural discourses are related to the practices of global teams when it comes to the teams' capacity for teamwork. We will show that, within the context of the GLTs in question, team members both adhered and objected to the dominant cultural discourses applied to the team by its team leader regarding decision making processes, establishing relationships, and communicating within the team.

The analysis of how prevailing cultural discourses are sustained or demurred and, as such, how they affect global teamwork will be undertaken following the categorisation above: 1. GLTs whose leaders ignore cultural diversity, 2. GLTs whose leaders manage cultural diversity, and 3. GLTs whose leaders emphasise cultural diversity. The analysis will focus primarily on the perspective of the local members of the GLTs in order to explore the dynamics of global teamwork from the subject position of the least powerful team members but also the team members with the potential to contribute additional skills, competences and local knowledge.

#### *Team work from the perspective that cultural diversity not important and is better ignored*

In our interviews, team leaders in this category favoured playing down cultural diversity within their teams and emphasised team homogeneity and coherence by leveraging a shared corporate culture and/or

a dominant ‘international’ culture. The team members – either local (Thai, Chinese) or European – echoed this very same discourse of being ‘international’ in terms of the way they worked and communicated in their respective teams.

As analysed in the section above, the Thai and Chinese team members positioned themselves as ‘untraditional’ from a national cultural understanding by emphasising overseas graduate studies and/or careers in international companies or by simply reducing cultural diversity to personality differences. Similarly, European team members underscored some universal values of team members and highlighted their own ‘atypicality’ of their national stereotype. They also described themselves as typically ‘international’, which allegedly made the teams culturally coherent when it came to working together. These positions came across in the following quotations:

I would say the core value of people regardless where they come from is quite the same. People want to be part of a team that works towards the same goal. (Interview 6.2.)

Professionally, we could almost all come from the same country. (Interview 6.6.)

I think you cannot say a group of people what is the characteristic. It also depends on the individuals. (Interview 3.2.)

Still, it was also widely understood by local Thai and Chinese team members that the dominant so called ‘international working style’ was, by default, ‘European’ and that it was mainly defined by a Danish company culture. In these particular GLTs, the only cultural differences mentioned in terms of diverse communication norms and working cultures were culture-specific communication preferences of being either ‘direct’ or ‘indirect’ in team discussions or when giving feedback.

In linguistic and communication studies, explicitness-implicitness in the coding and bluntness of a message is widely referred to as discourse practices and strategies of politeness employed in different ways by social groups and by some more than others (Brown and Levinson 1987, Lempert 2012, Spencer-Oatey 2008, Scollon 2012). However, our informants in this particular category of teams (and most of our other informants) did not talk about (in)directness in terms of a diversity of preferred communication norms characterising team work. On the contrary, indirectness was construed as a problem to be curtailed, since this implicit communication style was, as described above, typically associated with lack of clarity, disengagement and dishonesty, which were properties incommensurate with an ‘international’ and modern work environment. In addition, informants correlated the preference for indirect speech acts with particular ‘national cultures’ such as Thai, Malay and Chinese, thus distinguishing entire peoples in terms of preferences for indirect and direct speech preferences. In doing so, they perpetuated cultural stereotypes about their team members to leverage their own preferred communication and working styles, thus awarding their style an ideological value in spite of people’s choice of directness-indirectness being relative and contextually determined (Spencer-Oatey 2008, 31).

As an example, one of the European team members in this category of teams reflected on his observation that an ‘international’ communication style, such as openly expressing your opinion on something beyond your own area of expertise, was more difficult for the local Thai team members:

I do think that’s also in the directors’ team, that yes there’s probably a tendency of having an opinion about something beyond your own area of control, that is probably ... easier given by somebody who is from a Western culture. (Interview 6.2.)

Nevertheless, it was expected that local team members would adapt to the so called international communication style of ‘directness’ (Interview 6.5.) and they themselves stressed that, since the Danish company they had joined was international, they needed to adopt an international working style. One Thai team member, practically reciting the importance of this ‘international’ communication style, explained:

It is very important that we get feedback ... take the point for you to improve it. That’s the thing. We are very open ... (Interview 6.4.)

The emphasis in GLT6 on coherence and unity without cultural friction was underscored by the team leader's recruitment of team members of a similar age, gender and culture (Interview 6.1.):

I believe that that is also how [company name] has promoted or assigned these particular individuals, because they have a very strong connection with the culture that [company name] has. (Interview 6.2)

The neutralisation of cultural diversity by implicitly enforcing a working style more familiar to Europeans may have inhibited both local and non-local team members' reflections and analysis of cultural diversity in performing teamwork. Emphasising an 'international' approach to teamwork easily represses or conceals other perspectives and communication styles. Although local team members vehemently underlined their capacity to adapt to the dominant 'international' style of team work, they were still perceived as different and placed in an inferior position by other team members (see section above) and also partly by themselves. And, as we will also show in more detail below, it may not be as easy as European leaders and non-local team members think for local team members to adapt their communication norms. A Thai team member in the same team described how difficult it was for her to practise 'direct' communication with an authority of power:

... when they talk to [name of team director], I feel like, you know the Thai person is quiet yeah ... just like it is in us ... This is Thai culture, plus we are very quiet. (Interview 6.3.)

Underscoring cultural coherence in this leadership team, however, seemed to reduce the cultural tool kit and ability to observe cultural diversity among this leadership and team members. The informants mentioned no other cultural preferences beyond the communication style of (in)directness, which was 'solved' by enforcing a specific communication style in relation to working together, decision making and establishing relations (as was the case with the other informants analysed below).

Team members in this team all spoke passionately about the value of alignment in a friendly and unconflictual working atmosphere and bonding on the golf course, but, as we know from other teams, emphasising unity and downplaying differences in general also runs the risk of compromising too easily (Plum 2013). This was also the case in this team, in which one team member observed that the emphasis on coherence and 'similarity' meant that the team gave up too easily in their discussions with the regional head office.

We have a group that is very nice to work within and everybody praises us for that, but it has a downside to it ... so it could be a nice balance, if you talk about diversity in the future to have somebody that's a little bit more strict mindset ... that would benefit us. (Interview 6.2.)

While we did not observe this team in action, we can only speculate that they also run the risk of making decisions too easily among themselves, since unity and coherence was a value eclipsing complexity and cultural diversity as disruptive forces.

In GLT3, a patronising leadership style that did not value cultural diversity also prevented a closer look at cultural diversity and cultural sensitivity. However, the leader of GLT3 also mentioned that he acknowledged a communication style of indirectness by his Chinese team members and employees informed by the attention they paid to maintaining 'face'. For him, this simply implied that he was aware of not scolding employees in public, but, aside from this, his own personal communication style remained that of being "extremely direct" to ensure that his messages were understood (Interview 3.1.). As we will show below, this strategy differed from that of GLT leaders with a more dynamic perception of culture, who were aware that a communication style of directness could be interpreted as imposing and unnecessarily assertive.

This leader's conscious choice to express himself by generally applying a 'direct' communication style also implied imposing his own direct communication style onto the team, which he also justified by saying that team members need to be able to directly challenge each other's performance (see above).

Similar to the team above, team members, seeing themselves as very ‘international’, were able to adapt to this communication and working style. However, forcing everyone to adapt to a certain communication and working style in fact restricted the team members’ opportunities to express their assessment and feelings on how, for example, a ‘direct’ and ‘consensus oriented’ communication style impacted on the dynamics of teamwork. Requiring that team members adapt to a certain ‘international’ working style also constrained his cultural sensitivity towards other important cultural aspects of teamwork, such as relationship building outside office hours.

As examples, the Chinese team members in GLT3 related the particular company working style of ‘openness’ and ‘directness’, which encompasses the exchange of various opinions, to rather low efficiency in decision making, risk taking and work discipline compared with American production companies in which they had worked previously. In this regard, a Chinese team member expressed his dissatisfaction with the Danish company culture in which he worked as follows:

... decision making is very slow. If you want to get something clarified, it’s a long process ... in an American company, we have quick response for quality or technical development ... you are demanded to make quick response even to take some risk ... but in [company name] they don’t want to take so much risk (Interview 3.2.)

As for building relationships within the team, this leader’s working style was to shy away from social activities outside of work, whereas the Chinese manager within the team was keen to strengthen team relations within his own all-Chinese team by arranging and participating in social events after work. In other words, team performance and professionalism is also raised by strengthening social bonds after work, which was never part of the discourse of the dominant working style that emphasised team work based on professional interaction only in the workplace.

I would say that we in business ... need to be more strict ... business is business. It’s performance you know, you have to be specific, but we still need some personal contact. I believe we need both ... , when people after work on Saturday and Sunday ... do some activity together, then you feel we’re a team, we really fight together. (Interview 3.3.)

I spend actually a lot of time with my team ... I often encourage them to plan ahead to have some dinners or play *ping pong* after work ... I try to attend as much as I can and also we would have some family days, do some activities together. (Interview 3.3.)

This team member clearly demonstrated that paying attention to managing working and communication styles so that they include several approaches without ideological preferences better enables the whole team to realise and capitalise on the advantages of diversity.

### *Team work when cultural diversity is an inherent and manageable feature*

The team leaders in this category of GLTs (1, 5, 7) had a fairly neo-essentialist perception of national cultures and therefore understood cultural diversity as requiring management in order to regain a sort of cultural equilibrium. From ethnocentric perspectives, they all favoured a so called ‘international’ or ‘Danish/Scandinavian’ leadership style, which entailed enforcing specific notions of working and communication styles and promoting a high degree of ‘directness’ to ensure engagement, exchange of opinions, feedback and transparency. In the section below, we analyse how particularly the Chinese, Thai and Malay but also the European team members reacted to the leader imposing such a working style that restrained cultural diversity.

Unsurprisingly, as subordinate managers, the Chinese, Malay and Thai team members of the teams in question accepted and complied with the behavioural and communication norms enforced by the team leaders of their GLTs. They did not explicitly lament any loss of ‘local’ communication or working norms, but, as described above, took the position of being ‘non-traditional’ from a given ‘national culture’ (“I’m more vocal than the average Asian” (Interview 5.4.); “I think, I’m not anymore, you know, traditional

Chinese” (Interview 1.3.)). In doing so, they also underscored the easiness with which they had adapted to what was described by most of them as an ‘international’ communication and working style. However, some of the local team members with work experiences from other international companies – typically American companies – challenged a number of working practices in their present GLTs based on their previous experiences and stronger ethnorelative perspectives.

In the analysis below, we show how imposing specific behavioural and communication styles in teams relating to communication, working goals (working together and decision making) and social rights and obligations (relationships and leadership) were experienced by the local team members for whom European norms and conventions of working demanded so called adaptation. These three focus areas of interaction were of course interlinked when informants described team work in their GLTs; however, the most prominent issue identified by the informants in this group was without question the expectations of adapting to communication and working norms related to being ‘direct’ and ‘expressive’. Linguists have explored a number of intercultural conversational preferences or strategies as expressed in various ways of managing turn-taking, back-channelling, conversation openings and closings, greetings and leave-taking, jokes and laughter (Bowe, Martin, and Manns 2014, 95-117). However, our informants mentioned that, for them, the most prominent intercultural challenge was by far applying a conversational style of directness. One informant explained his observations in this regard in relation to his Danish colleagues:

I often heard ... people from Denmark say ‘I talked for an hour, but nobody gave feedback’ ..., but for Chinese, we don’t really ask questions even when we have questions. So, that’s, you know, that’s .... Is very challenging for both Chinese and Danish people. (Interview 1.3.)

A Danish team member and manager of his own team confirmed such expectations with these words:

We often speak out loud that we also expect the Chinese people then to change, to do challenge and take a risk and speak their mind, also because ... [name of company] is still a little believe me an international company and a lot of these people that we are working with they do come from international backgrounds which probably makes it easier. (Interview 5.2.)

A Malaysian informant explained her observations of a communication style of ‘directness’ of a non-local peer and the implication on the GLT:

So, we have one character of a person in the management team who’s really very outspoken and loves commenting about everything and everybody else’s business. So, when he does that then it does cause friction, because his personality is also quite strong and he’s sort of not conflict averse at all. So, he goes sort of really questioning the work of someone else and I think that could be a problem ... (Interview 5.4.)

It appears that the adaptation of local team members to a communication style of self-assertiveness with an overt and direct exchange of personal opinions was not as uncomplicated and undemanding as it was sometimes articulated by our informants and anticipated by the leaders of GLTs. Even GLT members who had graduated from overseas institutions and who had several years of professional experience with global teams in different Euro-American companies had to make an effort to code switch between different communication norms. Indeed, overtness and directness led one Chinese informant to feel angry and Thai and Malay informants to feel discouraged:

When I try to talk to the technical persons, they’re very direct. They just say what they want to say. So, I feel sometimes, you know, a little bit angry. (Interview 1.3.)

So, when you know someone talk very direct ... I always tell myself this is only work ... this is nothing personal (Interview 7.3.)

I find it much harder when you’re commenting about sort of personalities, attitudes because that’s very soft right so I have -- I’m still working on it. I’ve always sort of

tried to ask myself why am I struggling with this? Is it just because I'm very sensitive towards peoples' feelings and therefore see myself too much in your shoes and therefore have problems or could it be sort of from my background where people keep up appearances from an Asian cultural perspective? So you're never really sure ... People don't talk about things that are not nice and I think that could partially explain it, but I can never really find the real reason to just many different explanations when I'm reflecting on it. (Interview 5.4.)

You know how the British, when they disagree with something, they go 'oh, this is interesting, ... but actually really it's not interesting. So, they're sort of very polite about doing that right, here you don't get that, they're just in your face. If they think something is not good they will just say it, which actually I prefer, because it's easier to understand it, but it's strict. I mean it's obviously harder to sort of swallow the first incidents, but then you appreciate the directness, right? (Interview 5.4.)

Furthermore, informants paid attention to a specific working style in their GLTs that they identified as corporate culture or 'Danish', which implied a relatively flat organisational structure based on values that highlighted equity of roles and positions in the team. As one team member mentioned, the flat hierarchy of the Danish company in which he worked had at first both impressed and engaged him:

The general manager ... his table was exactly the same as any other colleague and he does not have any private room ... in China we have a very strict hierarchy, you know, ... [but] the people from Denmark, they treat people equally. That's very much different. I ... was very much impressed ... my conclusion is that [it] actually can encourage the people, you know, to be part of this company ... we call this 'open and honest attitude'. (Interview 1.3.)

Downplaying authority in GLTs was unfamiliar to this Chinese team member and to other local Asian team members interviewed, though it was relatively well received (as expressed above). However, a number of implied communication and behavioural norms and conventions are associated with a flat hierarchical structure, which the leaders of these GLTs praised as engaging for global teams and as superior management styles and, hence, enforced. As in the quotation above from Chinese team member, the implications of 'equity' entail that everybody is expected to participate, which, in terms of communication styles, translates into unconcealed feedback and overt disclosures of opinions and ideas within the team in order to be considered as an 'engaged' team member. 'Openness' in this sense was correlated with 'honesty', inferring that being anything other than 'open' would be considered 'dishonest'.

Local team members explained to us that it was difficult to apply a particular communicative style of expressiveness regardless of authority and status. Local team members more used to communication conventions of implicitness and indirectness in social interaction also expressed preferences for deference and respect when addressing those who are senior in age, experience or status. Of course, colleagues who had worked together for a long time may be less formal, but, for many local informants, in public, conventional deference to seniors was mandatory. One Malay team member explained this difficulty as follows:

It's quite hard to learn this kind of behavior especially, because the upbringing plays a very strong role ... The parents are figures of authority so they make the decisions and you follow so the hierarchy is there within the family. And when you grow up in a situation like that you learn to not challenge power or figures of authority and so when they come into sort of a multi-national company they are reluctant to speak their minds or disagree with someone that they perceive to have higher authority. (Interview 5.4.)

Yeah, I have to think about it a little different, but I will not say I'm totally being that, you know, as Danish people or sometimes I also think about before I, you know, speak out, I was thinking is there any consequence? What should I express in the most, you know, good way so people can understand me better or, you know? Sometimes I have this kind of concern also, but in most of time, I think, I'm pretty confident the way to express my opinion. (Interview 1.3.)

As these statements show, more or less explicitly or consciously enforcing particular communication and behavioural norms and conventions familiar in Danish social contexts in the anticipation that all team members – regardless of cultural background – will adapt and attune to them may underestimate the importance of values and principles associated with language use. People’s use of language is related to principles such as showing concern for the addressee and relative importance of conveying modesty and deference, which is not an easily adjustable or a relatively simple skill to learn.

This raises the question how and under which conditions local team members adjusted their communicative style to unfamiliar conventions. In these GLTs, comfort and security was stressed as well as soliciting opinions on a one-to-one basis and developing close relationships to strengthen social relations:

Sometimes people do prompt others, but then if they’re not comfortable saying their mind they will also feel very uncomfortable to have sort of the spotlight shown on them right ... but it’s also very much that the Asian culture needs comfort and security that they will not be punished if they speak their mind if they disagree, because that is the way of a very strictly Asian culture of management or style of management.

So the more the leader prompts and the more the leader supports different opinions or different comments the more they feel empowered and also secure in saying and speaking their minds and in challenging decisions or in giving comments. (Interview 5.4.)

We have both, you know, the formal conversation and the informal, you know, relaxing time ... we have couple of beer and we enjoy the sunshine and we have some team building all together ... So, I think that gives me a lot of the, you know, confidence when I’m talking to them. We’re, you know, very much relying on the, you know, the feeling of the people ... I think that we can build our kind of a trust, because without trust, we cannot make things happen. (Interview 1.3.)

The team performs better when relations are made after work such as eating together and doing sports together. Helping each other and achieving as a team is based on personal relations and trust built up after work. (Interview 7.2.)

I think that definitely we can train, you know, ... but if they [Danish managers] want to have some feedback, take it private, you know, not in front of all people. So, people, you know, are concerned about talking in front of a lot of people. So, they just take - - if we have one-on-one talk, I think the people can well explain their opinions. So, that’s the kind of tips, I can give to Danish colleagues or Danish managers. (Interview 1.3.)

It appears that local team members made interconnections between confidently adapting to a direct communication style of expressing personal opinions and giving feedback with managers positively encouraging the exchange of opinions and mitigating fears of being dismissed due to being too critical and accepting the exchange of opinions in smaller groups or on an individual basis. As explained by the Danish manager, this was also performed in his predominantly Chinese team in the following way:

Usually when we sit together and we discuss, we make sure to be maybe slightly more disciplined than we would have been in a Danish only team. We also try to (-) the Danish people try to shut up until the Chinese people have spoken, we try to ask the Chinese so what do you think? At least air your opinion. If anything needs to be discussed or more importantly we can (-) we’ll break out in smaller teams, we should probably do it more, but if there’s one thing that is very different in a Chinese context to a Danish context, is that Danish doesn’t (-) it’s okay to sit ten people in a room and discuss important things and tell the boss that his idea is stupid, in China that is not okay at all. (Interview 5.2.)

In our interviews, it also became apparent that local team members linked the successful adaption of a direct style of communication to interpersonal relationships or the ‘behavioural expectations’ component in managing harmony-disharmony (Franklin 2007). In other words, for them, a precondition for being expressive and assertive was to establish personal, trustful and amiable relationships to other team members outside of work.

Several informants, including European informants (1.4.; 5.2.; 7.4.), highlighted the advantages of such social activities after work for team cohesion and ultimately work performance, while team leaders (1.1.; 5.1.; 7.1.) seemed less occupied with the social aspect of team management – something which the members lamented.

Local team members in this second category placed emphasis not only on the direct style of communication as an apparent and challenging feature of adaptation but also on the aspects of equity in relation to reaching task-based goals of team interaction. As pointed out above, the dominant communication style of directness in these teams implied that, in order to be seen as engaged and ‘honest’, everybody was required to participate. For local team members, this aspect created widespread frustrations and annoyance, since they considered these unfamiliar communicative conventions ineffective. Malay, Chinese and Singaporean team members made the following observations:

my observation is that because everybody is so willing to speak their minds and give comments, we end up getting too much comments, because everybody wants to speak their minds ... So, I find it quite hard to get them to come to conclusions or to come to agreements, because everybody speaks their mind and they all have different minds right and therefore it's slower for decision making and I notice also even though everyone speaks their mind, when the big boss says something, they will still confirm, they may disagree, but ultimately they're comfortable with the big boss taking the call essentially. (Interview 5.4.)

So, I think maybe we spend too much time on discussion. We should ... I'm the person, I want to make quick decisions and implement and change along the way. (Interview 1.3.)

Apparently, an ‘international’ or ‘Danish/Scandinavian’ working and communication style based on norms and conventions of ‘openness’ in terms of explicitness in expressing opinions and giving feedback in larger social groups could cause frustrations, anxieties, misunderstandings and prejudice about the level of engagement and professionalism among team members. The Chinese, Malaysian and Thai team members in particular, for whom such working and communication styles were more or less unfamiliar, reported having adapted their behaviour and speech acts accordingly, though for most of them, it remained a matter of concern and attention. On the other hand, non-Asian team members, including team leaders, did not always assess that the local team members had adapted and attuned successfully to the dominant working and communication styles in their GLTs; in some cases, local team members were interpreted as lacking team dedication or, even worse, as lacking the necessary creative mindset to be included in decision making (Interviews 1.2.; 7.1.; 5.1.; 5.2.).

In interviews, local team members explained how team work in general was carried out across ‘cultural divides’ by establishing of a space in between two or more cultures into which they all adapted their cultural norms and conventions. This notion of a ‘third space’ as an amalgam of two cultures that creates a frictionless in-between room is well-known in intercultural literature (Holliday 2011). One Thai team member expressed the ease by which adaptation was achieved as follows:

So, the difference in terms of nationalities or different cultures, only happens right at the beginning and once you know a little about, you know, their background, their culture, then you're starting to blend in with them and accepting that okay, he's just gonna be more direct than the others. (Interview 4.3.)

However, the idea of a ‘third space’ rests on the premises of neo-essential understandings of cultures as closed national entities and adaptation as a process of ‘just getting used to each other’; it also ignores the inherent power relations that are always entailed in social interaction and neglects that language conventions are more than simply a choice of words. In the GLTs examined in this section, the cultural hegemony of specific communication and working preferences of directness and expressiveness were exercised, which established expectations of ‘adaptation’ and restrained a more diverse and dynamic approach to working together in GLTs. Obviously, working and communicating on these premises may succeed, but the underlying risk of team members withholding opinions, feedback and ideas or feeling

frustrated by a dysfunctional working environment exists. Some perspectives may be suppressed and not included in processes of problem solving and discussions, thus hampering the potentials of cultural diversity represented in the team.

### *Team work from the perspective of cultural diversity as a dynamic source of strength*

In our study, there were three GLT leaders who, from an ethnorelative perspective, managed their teams with the intention of cultivating cultural diversity. By applying a dynamic understanding of culture and observing power relations within the team, these team leaders were reluctant to expect certain team members to adapt to specific working or communication styles. Instead, they expressed rather sensitive and analytical approaches to the diversity of work and communication styles represented by their team members to ensure the realisation of the potential values of cultural diversity. In particular, they highlighted their conscious investment in time resources when it came to communication and negotiations in between meetings and to relationship building, thus focusing their attention on the challenges of intercultural communication and establishing social relationships to enhance trust and underscore team collaboration. In the analysis below, we will explore the impact of this diversity-focused leadership style and show how exercising an ethnorelative and culturally sensitive and analytical approach to diversity was received by Japanese, Malay, Singaporean, and Thai team members.

It was argued above that ethnocentric notions of culture held by the GLT leaders determined specific leadership approaches that were reproduced by team members and impacted on the working and communications styles of these teams. Similarly, the GLTs in which team leaders cherished cultural diversity by recognising differences in working and communication styles as an asset, rather than a liability, was reflected in the interviews with their team members. In these GLTs, team members were somewhat watchful of stereotyping and being ethnocentric while at the same time recognising that cultural differences were played out in their teams by unique individuals, thus suggesting a more dynamic and contextualised cultural approach. Such a cultural notion was expressed in the following ways:

... when you say Asians, right, people just stereotype them under one umbrella and that's not the case, you know, Indians are so different from Chinese, Chinese are so different from Korean, everyone is so different and unique. So, I think, you know, recognizing that and then, you know, recognizing that difference and saying that okay, we can understand there is a difference, but then everybody, you know, everybody needs to have an equal opportunity, you know, to say something or do something, etc. and not stereotyping and saying, "Okay, this is how Asians are and this is how it's going to be." (Interview 2.2.)

People are different, right, people are unique so what I have told them is I'm a straightforward person and I always tell the Indian team that I'm working with whenever there's a newcomer. (Interview 8.2.)

I don't know what's a typical Dane. (Interview 8.4.)

And with culture and (-) because Japanese, I don't want to stereotype, but giving me the impression that they're very hard working and ... they commit to a job then they're at that jobs for a long time and at least that's true within this office. (Interview 8.3.)

However, it was also apparent that these GLTs were not working in isolation but were in fact part of larger companies that had had a globalisation agenda for decades, which involved embracing and increasing cultural diversity as reflected in recruitment strategies, carrier development, corporate values and translated into aspects such as cultural training and mobility of staff members (see also section 6.2.1). One team member explained the impact of this deliberate diversity agenda on her own and her colleagues' attitudes in a conversation in which she compared her previous experiences in different global companies with the Danish company in which she currently worked:

I think [company name] has a big-big agenda on globalisation and that's what we really-really kind of be very deliberate in terms of, you know, even when expatriates are moving here, you know, there is a training that the family goes through, the employee goes through, etc., but otherwise, do I think (-) because of the way [company name] is structured, you know, colleagues get to come here, we get to go to other places, so we really understand those differences and appreciate them rather than saying, "Okay, that's different and we don't know how to deal with that." So, I think that appreciation is happening now. (Interview 2.2.)

... 'open' for me is open to ideas, open to thoughts, open to other cultures, open to (-) so, it's not like, you know, because (-) not stereotyping because you are an Asian, you know, maybe you come with that mindset, etc., but it's also about knowing people and a very genuine interest in knowing people, I would say that. (Interview 2.2.)

Enhancing diversity as a deliberate strategy and encouraging employees to be conscious, curious and inquiring about each others cultural backgrounds, differences, family and interests underscored perceptions of colleagues as individuals with a multitude of identities rather than simply identifying team members by national cultural labels or neutralising them as 'international'. The recognition of cultural practices related to individual diversity and discourse styles (Scollon 2012) was also reflected in team members' own understandings of their teams as being simultaneously 'international' and localised. A Japanese team member described his company as "an international company, but at the same time like very domestic, very local ..." (Interview 8.4.) and thus implied that both perspectives were equally and flexibly applied, in contrast to teams in categories 1 and 2, who dismissed local cultures as 'traditional' and preferred to identify their teams as simply 'international'. Similarly team members in category 3 were less inclined to identify themselves as 'non-traditional' Japanese, Thai, Malay, or Indian to underscore successful adaptation to a 'European style'. Instead, they stressed their cultural agility and alertness in describing how they managed different cultural dispositions according to circumstances (see below).

Still, a more dynamic and contextual approach to the notion of culture did not make local team members of these GLTs (2, 4, 8) identify intercultural team challenges any differently than team members in team categories 1 and 2. Local team members also pointed to prominent intercultural challenges as being constituted by different communication and working styles directly related to the focus areas of this study, being sensitiveness to 'face', behavioural expectations (relationship building) and interactional goals (decisions and strategy making; working together at meetings) (Spencer-Oatey and Franklin 2009, 109). One Thai team member explained how she observed a Danish team member's communication style in relation to cracking jokes during meetings; her colleague only narrowly misunderstandings and offending team members, because the other Thai team members could not quite comprehend his use of language and humour:

I would be like OH! You did not just say that! You know, like that is a funny way, but is not like in a way that is abusive or a harassing or anything, but I think most people don't really understand ... In Thailand, we don't really crack jokes at work places that much, which is a shame and that's to do with the fact that we don't know how the other people might feel. If you have more senior people in your team then you want to offend them or even when we do crack jokes [it] is not going to be anything like dark humor or offensive. (Interview 4.3.)

However, the tools and strategies employed by these team members to overcome challenges were mostly different than otherwise described by GLT members in the categories above. Hence, the solution mentioned by many as almost a magic ward, namely of employing 'directness' as a specific and necessary communication style for the team, was also referred to by some of these local team members (Interviews 4.3.; 8.2.), while others had realised that 'directness' by itself did not preclude misunderstandings nor necessarily induce discussions and decisions with everybody on board (Interviews 2.2.; 2.3.).

The following statements illustrate just how different perceptions of employing 'directness' as a communication strategy were experienced by a Thai and a Japanese team member within one team located in Thailand. The Thai team member, who herself was an adamant advocate of communicating in a

‘direct’ style, described her own frustrations with a Japanese colleague’s application of a direct communication style when probing and requesting:

So, if anything happens, so he will, you know, kind of, you know, be asking why, why, why, why and you have to explain. So, he has the way of asking, the way of communication, so sometime in Thai cultures we (-) my staff also come to me and say hey, this is not easy to manage, since he’s like asking, asking, asking and you know keep on, why not, why not, why not and can you do this? (Interview 8.2.)

The Japanese team member, on the other hand, expressed enjoyment with what he experienced as an open and direct communication style of his Thai colleagues compared with a typical Japanese communicative context:

Yeah, I can say whatever I want, whatever I think to my staff and also my colleagues ... In Japan, we worry, because of the Japanese-Asian culture. [In Japan], I think of how I’m talking to like colleagues, is this the right thing to say or not, and another thing is seniority. In Japan, obviously the seniority is too big a thing. I have to communicate differently. Here, I have to communicate much more than as in Japan. (Interview 8.4.)

However, he was seemingly unaware of his Thai team members’ concern with his communicative style. He, perhaps mistakenly, believed he had adapted well to the Thai context. This clearly created significant tensions among his colleagues. He was also unaware that his ‘adaptation’ still did not go as far as making critical proposals together with colleagues to their team leader, which a Thai member explained as culturally determined, but, nevertheless, generating feelings of unfairness.

I think, you know, in the way that [name of Japanese team member] san does things, he cares a lot about seniority, he cares a lot like he cares about the boss and what the boss’ opinion is and (-) I’m sorry, I cannot put it into words and I don’t want to say anything bad ... some things, you know, I would say directly to [name of head of GLT] like: ‘this doesn’t work’. Like, I think this could be better and [name of Japanese team member] san feels the same way. I know his feelings, because we’ve had discussions, this is (-) it’s really not good. He would not be the one (-), you know, would not be the one who would, you know, be fighting for these things (-) kind of, but let me be in the front, which I think is ‘smart’ ... (Interview 8.3.)

Neither of the team members had reflected on the simplicity of their single shot solution of being ‘direct’ for managing diversity in communication styles. Neither had they reflected on how language is more than just stylistic differences. As for the leader of this team, he led the team with a high level of cultural awareness, alertness, and agility (Interview 8.1. and section 6.2.1.), but these issues had not been resolved. Instead, tensions were produced that the GLT leader apparently knew nothing about, most likely because he was focused on the differences between himself (Danish) and the rest of his Asian team members (Interview 8.1.). This again could be ascribed to the dominant cultural discourse of West versus East that may have impeded an analytical approach to managing cultural diversity also among Asian team members.

In other teams within this third category, team members stressed the importance and challenge of communication issues within intercultural corporation, but rather than relying on ‘directness’ as a solution and thereby labelling some cultures in positions of deficiencies, they focused on analysing particular cultural practices and finding contextual solutions. One member in an all female team, who attached a great deal of importance to gaining advantages from cultural diversity, expressed her experiences and strategies to limit misunderstandings and enhance the possibilities of everybody’s contribution in these words:

... maybe it’s one of the things I’ve learned in the companies I’ve worked for (-) communication is everything. Sometimes it’s a matter of whether, you know, over-communicating is good or communicating less is better ... It’s a matter of really communicating and taking a step to even ask. So, are you clear what we’ve discussed? ... I know that in some of the organizations I’ve worked for, besides communication, talking verbally, I need to follow up with an email of what’s been discussed. So, it’s

also appreciating the different style of that person and the different environment that that person works in that, you know, we just need to adapt our style accordingly. (Interview 2.3.)

This informant sought clarifications both verbally and in writing after discussions and meetings to avoid misunderstandings, but this was based on an approach of adapting to cultural styles of unique individuals depending on the circumstances, rather than specifying a national cultural category to colleagues. This strategy was supplemented with the experience of a team member from the same team of making room for opinions and feedback by explicitly probing colleagues to share their thoughts and opinions (Interview 2.2.). Another way of approaching the same problem was mentioned by her as rotating the role of being the facilitator of meetings as well as making roles and responsibilities clear for everyone in the team:

... when I am sparring with some of the leaders and they come to me sometimes and say, in my team, I don't see people speaking up often, so then I ask them to do it, you know, reverse the roles, rather than you asking them, okay, do you have any points? Ask, you know, ask one of your team members to come up and facilitate ... So, I think it's also up to the leader and how are they really training their mindset and making sure that everybody has a chance to speak and say something. (Interview 2.2.)

... sometimes it's really about clarifying roles and responsibility instead of assuming that your colleague knows what you're thinking even though, you know, we may be the best of friends and we know each other. But clarifying roles and responsibility in all cultures, in all, you know, context helps and sets the stage and then it brings us closer together better. (Interview 2.3.)

However, a precondition for all local team members in these three GLTs to feel free and encouraged to voice opinions and criticism was to establish a 'comfortable' and 'secure' communicative space that defined the team. One team member described the importance of such a 'comfortable room' as being able to inspire all team members to enter into discussion without threatening the social involvement of team members by what she perceived as 'aggressive' behaviour.

Confident in a good way. Like confident, but not being too aggressive ... with [former team leader] it was more ... like whatever he said, everybody does ... it was more like a one man show, if you know what I mean, whereas [present leader] is more like a team player. (Interview 4.3.)

Another team member described her team as having developed a 'safe zone', which, within a few months, had empowered all team members to engage in open discussions and equal exchange of opinions.

... within our team, we don't face or have such inhibitions, so we speak out, we speak our mind, we just say what we are thinking about, so, we don't have to really -- so, it's more like a very safe zone if I can say that ... over the past few months, six or seven months that we have transformed in this team that we are able to openly speak up and say, you know, speak our mind and, you know, we really feel comfortable within the team. (Interview 2.2.)

According to team members, these teams had apparently developed into a condition of communicative 'safety' or, in other words, a type of space free of fear of punishment. This meant that potential *face-threatening acts* (Spencer-Oatey and Franklin 2009, 109-110) related to the individual or the group to which the individual belongs, such as criticism, disagreements, apologies, requests or any other communicative act interpreted as impacting on sensitive attributes, were no longer perceived as threatening. Establishing such 'non-threatening communicative spaces', according to team members, depended extensively on the team leader and the level of trust between team members.

Team members expressed these different conditions as follows:

I think a lot also depends on, you know, how the leader makes the team feel comfortable, right. How is a leader really, you know, building that trust within the team that, you know, okay, when you speak something, you know, you won't be penalized for

that. So, it's more like how is the leader bringing in that thing, that element. (Interview 2.2.)

No, we have a very fantastic relationship and I think it's also a reflection of the leadership (-) Even though some individuals are less inclined to share personal things, but that's the other piece where, I think, because we are so people-focused, there's a lot of empathy and there's a lot of respect. I know my team really well. (Interview 2.3.)

I think it's very important to know each other. It's important to know the hobbies or what's the experience and you know so it's easy to talk and it's easy to understand. So, sometime you know we just like come to the meet (-) like five minutes before the meeting we just have a chit chat. (Interview 8.2.)

I think through trust and I think relationships and trust needs time to build. So, it usually requires years of friendship of working together and literally helping each other through work to begin that trust. So, even if you go hang out every now and then, it might not necessarily mean that you will be (-) how do I say it? I think (-) okay. What I meant is, for me I'm sure that for Thai people, if you help each other at work and once you have a friend, a colleague who helped you in a certain project or whenever you're in difficulty, that's when you gain the trust and the relationship much more than just hanging out. (Interview 4.3.)

## 6. Conclusion and recommendations

Studies of Euro-American companies show that these companies often globalise and apply cost-effective corporate solutions by minimising cultural diversity, due to their headquarters' more or less intentional ethnocentric preferences and world views (Reilly 2015). As we have shown in this study, global leadership teams may still be able to function under these circumstances, but they do this at the risk of missing out on local talents and competencies. When members of GLTs fail to demonstrate intercultural competence, team members will disengage or cease to contribute their ideas at the expense of global corporations who will be unable to leverage the benefits of cultural heterogeneity and leave 'money on the table'. Cultural diversity, however, is also risky business, since it is susceptible to producing conflicts, miscommunication and social disintegration when intercultural competence is not part and parcel of the GLT.

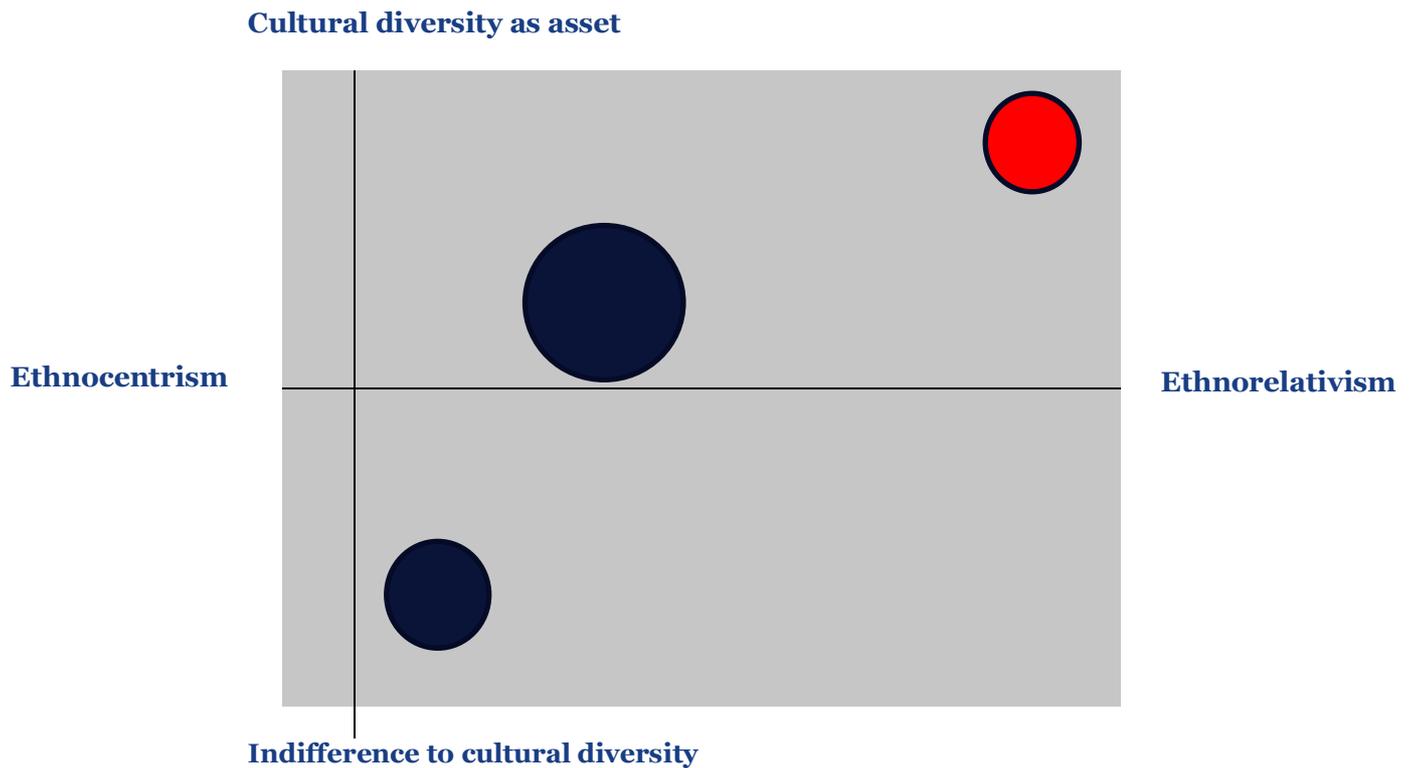
This study shows that, in order to understand the dynamics and practices of GLTs, it is paramount to explore the concept of culture that underpins the leadership style of the team leader, since his/her cultural perceptions have a direct bearing on team members and how the team as a whole manages intercultural teamwork. Team leaders' cultural understandings from neutralising or essentialising national cultural traits and behaviours to holding more analytical and dynamic perceptions of culture were reflected in their views on the benefits of cultural diversity for teamwork and team achievements. These relationships are demonstrated in the diagram below.

The more ethnorelativistic a team leader conceived of 'culture', the more he/she also understood cultural diversity as an asset. On the direct opposite scale, some leaders who held quite ethnocentric understandings of 'culture' as a concept acknowledged the existence of cultural differences, but they were indifferent to culture as a dynamic element and neutralised this aspect of global teamwork. The last group of team leaders, who may include the dominant part of all GLTs, were led by leaders with rather nationalistic and fixed conceptions of 'culture' and who predominantly regarded diversity as somewhat of a liability that had to be resolved within the team.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> For similar research results on three different discursive constructions on intercultural work (one-sided adaptation, mutual adaptation and plurality discourse) made by staff in a Danish-owned global company, see (Askehave and Holmgreen 2011)

Figure 4



GLT leaders who approached culture and cultural practices from an ethnorelative position and expressed high expectations of cultural diversity in global teams typically emphasised a leadership style of inclusiveness and equality by underscoring contributions and responsibilities of all team members whilst applying diverse means to facilitate feedback and opinions from all team members. In this manner, team members categorised as belonging to the ‘Other’ culture in terms of the dominant or hegemonic culture of the company were not placed in positions of deficiencies nor expected to adapt to specific unfamiliar cultural norms; instead, they were encouraged to contribute with ideas and opinions beyond their localised knowledge and local language proficiency.

On this basis, we recommend that global team leaders develop their intercultural competence based on developing an *awareness* of culture as dynamic, changing and open for negotiations, which will produce a conscious non-centric, open and respectful engagement with cultural diversity. Acquiring such a perspective would minimise an ethnocentric leadership style that either attempts to neutralise cultural differences or regards cultural practices as nationally determined norms that should be adapted to one’s own (dominant) norms. Moreover, an awareness of communication styles could prevent all too readily rationalisations of causal relationship between, for example, politeness and national characteristics, which seriously inhibit successful communication in intercultural teams.

As visualised in the diagram below, this perspective would serve as the basis for developing and increasing cultural *alertness* and *agility*. Being alert involves being sensitive to cultural practices in different contextual settings of the team and not taking cultural differences for granted in every situation; it also involves being actively mindful to observe and listen to team members’ communication preferences (including non-verbal behaviour, such as eye movement, voice quality, and gestures), working style and interactional goals in different specific contexts. In particular, being alert involves observing team members’ silent clues during and outside meetings, which should be followed up in another setting, such as on a one-to-one basis. This kind of alertness should give rise to a spatial opening of attention to leadership and management styles of ‘local’ team members, including criticism of, for example, the ‘Scandinavian management model’.

Alertness also encompasses paying attention to how trust is established within the team by observing preferred ways of establishing personal relations. In some cases, social activities after scheduled

working hours may be expected with the active participation of the team leader, and, in other situations, trust may develop when team members are able to extend mutual assistance to each other. For the team leader, it is important to be attentive to potential expectations of personal relationship building in his/her team and to follow up on these with analysis and solutions. We call this phase of intercultural competence ‘agility’ and define this as proactive analysis based on observations and listening, which enables a leader to consciously develop solutions and tools that will enhance different cultural practices making the exchange of opinions and positions as well as feedback thrive within the team.

Solutions may encompass the application of different communication styles and conventions flexibly to suit different purposes instead of relying on the notion of unconscious ‘adaptation’, which invariably implies adaptation to dominant cultural practices and suppresses others. Interchanging facilitation of meetings among team members may provide better understandings of different approaches to communication and problem solving at meetings. Solutions could also imply checking and clarifying words used and meanings attached; for example, by probing or writing down decisions for everyone to read and/or comment on.

Developing awareness, alertness and agility in relation to cultural diversity is not only important for the team leader but also for all team members in GLTs as well as teams in general. However, it should begin as an exercise of the team leader and spread by example to all team members to enable teamwork to be facilitated in a careful and systematic manner, which will ensure that different cultural perspectives are not suppressed but properly understood and applied in the working practices of global teams.

**Figure 5**

**Intercultural competence model for global teams**



## 7. Acknowledgements

So many political, economic and social issues of contemporary societies can be related and explained by a lack of intercultural competency, but, strangely enough, intercultural understanding and tools to manage cultural diversity are often missing from our school and higher education curricula. Even within our own academic field of global studies, students complain about the lack of opportunities to learn and practise how best to manage cultural diversity. It is therefore not surprising that, in the business world, where global transaction has become the new normal, there is an increasing demand to find solutions to many intercultural challenges. However, despite this demand, developing intercultural skills is not necessarily something all HR staff and consultants can successfully help facilitate; as researchers, we were thus more than grateful when the consultancy company UKON expressed interest in collaborating with us as researchers in order to develop new knowledge and methods for intercultural training.

We are grateful to the founder of UKON, Kenneth Albæk, for his initial support entering into this joined project with Aarhus University and to UKON's head of research, Anders Trillingsgaard, for his flexibility and patience in submitting our joint application to the Innovation Fund Denmark and keeping the project with its numerous stakeholders on track. We also would like to extend our thanks to UKON's staff and to staff at Danish-Thai Chamber of Commerce for their friendly support during the project and for their many comments and suggestions at several workshops as we developed our analysis and conclusions. We would also particularly like to thank Sarah Jennings for copyediting parts of the text.

Our sincere gratitude also goes to all our informants in this project. Without their generosity and support, this project would not have been possible. We promised complete anonymity to all our informants, so, although we would like to acknowledge every one of them by name, we will instead say that their hospitality, openness and interest in the topic of intercultural teams has had a profound impact on the results of this study. We hope that the conclusions presented here will prove valuable for their future teamwork.

Finally, we wish to acknowledge funding support from Innovation Fund Denmark (grant no 5179-00711B).

It goes without saying that all shortcomings and errors are entirely ours.

Mette Thunø and Jan Ifversen, October 3, 2018

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