

# THE COMPLEXITY OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN CROSS-CULTURAL MANAGEMENT

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## **Abstract**

*In this article an analytical frame model is presented, by means of which one can describe and understand the contents of important elements in an intercultural situation. The model accepts as fact that all individuals are affected by more than one culture at a time, even if by varying amounts, and introduces - for the purpose of being able to cope with this - the concepts of 'Cultural Categories' and 'Cultural Hierarchies'. In order to be able to describe and understand each of the involved cultures in a specific intercultural situation, three dimensions of culture are worked with: 'The Horizontal Cultural Dimension'; 'The Vertical Cultural Dimension' and 'The Cultural Dimension of Time'. These concepts, as well as the relations between them, are synthesized and illustrated in an analytical Model.*

**Keywords.** Analytical frame model, cultural categories, cultural hierarchies, horizontal and vertical cultural dimensions, cultural dimensions of time

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## **I. Introduction and the Concept of Culture**

When talking about "intercultural communication" and "cross-cultural management", we more or less have to accept that culture does exist, at least as an abstract concept or as an abstract "unit".

As a unit one can analyze and try to understand a culture, which may have vague or undefined borderlines separating one culture from another. These borderlines - which might move from time to time and from situation to situation - can, however, be crossed for various reasons, such as in connection with all kinds of intercultural co-operation, international tourism, cross-cultural management, etc. And intercultural communication, of course, is important in all of these situations.

One of the basic statements for this paper, therefore, is as follows: It is meaningful - from an abstract as well as from an empirical point of view - to consider "culture" as a continuously changing unit, the contents of which can be analyzed and compared with the contents of other cultures.

My understanding of culture will be covered by the following definition:

Culture is the philosophy of life, the values, norms and rules, and actual behavior - as well as the material and immaterial products from these - which are taken over by man from the past generations, and which man wants to bring forward to the next generation - eventually in a different form - and which in one way or another separate individuals belonging to the culture from individuals belonging to other cultures

By basing this paper - as well as my ongoing research on culture, intercultural communication, and cross-cultural management - on the above statement and the presented definition of culture, I first of all refuse to be characterized as a member of one specific scientific school, as I consider the study of culture far too complex to be studied only from the viewpoint of one specific scientific school, or to be based on one specific paradigm.

I believe that one can base his or her work on different paradigms and a differing understanding of culture depending on the situation and the purpose.

By focusing on the dynamics of culture and on the basic philosophy of life, the values and norms "...which are taken over by man from the past generations, and which man wants to bring forward to the next generation - eventually in a different form...", I find myself in agreement with Clifford Geertz, when he defines culture as "...an historically transmitted pattern of meanings...." (in "The Interpretation of Culture", p.89). When I add to the basic "philosophy of life, the values and norms" the "...rules and actual behavior, as well as the material and immaterial products from these", I also agree with Geertz and the following part of his definition:

"..embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life."

I will come back to this later as I consider the basic philosophy of life and values as the core culture of any culture. However, I also consider the manifestation of this core culture in expressed meanings, behavior, structures, and material and immaterial products - or as one might say, the symptoms or symbols of the core culture - as more or less equally important parts of the culture.

They are important

- 1) *partly* because the manifest components of the culture are an important part of the *conscious* elements of the life of people belonging to a particular culture, i.e., what we see, touch, hear, etc.;
- 2) *partly* because the manifest part of the culture is that part in which we first register similarities and/or differences between various cultures, i.e, how we eat, work, speak, etc.;
- 3) and *partly* - but not insignificantly - because we have only the manifest culture as a kind of *gateway* to the understanding of other peoples' core culture, or even our own core culture.

To me, therefore, culture consists both of "shared meanings" as they are conceptualized in the basic philosophy of life and values among a group of people, and of the way in which these shared meanings are visualized or manifested in people's social interactions, as well as in the results of those interactions.

However, I also find myself linked to a phenomenological tradition because I fully accept as fact that one can only understand other cultures through one's own culture - compared to one's own cultural foundation or through a cultural "lens"; and that one's own cultural foundation is influenced by interaction with people from other cultures in the same way as their cultural foundations are influenced by their interaction with me.

Finally, I find myself in agreement with a functionalistic understanding of culture. I also see culture as a particular grouping of people's conscious or unconscious attempts to find a way - maybe from among different ways - to meet their social and physical needs as individuals or as an organization - even as a nation - under certain environmental conditions. We see this from anthropological studies (e.g., studies of the Samoa people in Polynesia and of the Inuit people in the Arctic) and from studies of organizational cultures in different social and physical environments.

My definition of culture is a general definition that might be accepted for various social units and in differing situations and, therefore, for our study of cross-cultural management as well as intercultural communication.

I see many different places or areas in which cross-cultural management occurs and in which cross-cultural or intercultural communication plays a large role:

- a) Management of organizations based in countries with different cultures to one's own, e.g., Danish companies operating in Japan, Vietnam, South Africa, or elsewhere.
- b) Management of organizations employing people from different cultures, e.g., IBM, Shell, Volvo, Maersk Line, etc.
- c) Management of international organizations, e.g., United Nations, European Union, World Health Organization, etc.

In order to understand cross-cultural management and intercultural communication as abstract concepts as well as empirical phenomena, we need to create theories and analytical models enabling us

- 1) *to perceive and understand important elements of culture as well as the interrelations between them.*
- 2) *to perceive and understand the complexity of cultural studies as well as the complexity of cross-cultural studies.*

Below I will elaborate on the first of these two claims.

## 2. Important Elements of Cultures

In regard to the problem of how to determine which observations or elements of a particular culture are the most important ones and deserve deeper study, we must accept that this cannot be decided irrevocably, as that is a function not only of

1. the culture in focus for the study, but also of
2. the aim of the study,
3. the cultural foundation of the researcher or the actor, and of
4. the research methods and techniques.

We need, therefore, to reflect a little more on each of the following four factors:

1. In connection with empirical studies, might it create difficulties to delimit and define the culture we want to study? For example: How do we define a Danish culture? Is Danish culture the same for everyone living in Denmark or only the culture of people born in Denmark, whether they are living in Denmark or elsewhere? Does the Danish culture include everyone living in Greenland and the Faeroe Islands as possessions of the Kingdom of Denmark? And what about the people on either side of the border between Germany and Denmark?

2. What is the actual purpose of the study? Do we only wish to "understand" the other culture in order to know more about the people? Or do we wish to know them better in order to try to change part of their culture in such a way that they a) might wish to buy our products? b) might fit better into our organization? or c) fit better into our way of living, as we often want immigrants to do?

3. By being aware of the influence of the cultural actor himself, I am not only thinking of the influence of the national culture of the actor (as European studies of African cultures in the last century were very much influenced by the general European view of Africans) but also of the actor's own scientific paradigm and his professional background as such. (I will look further into this problem later on.)

4. By mentioning the influence of the many different research methods and techniques such as interviews, observations, and readings of existing reports, I am considering the fact that each method and technique focuses more specifically on some elements of the culture and less on others, which then gives alternative pictures of the culture in focus.

My understanding that all cultural studies are unique studies, depending on factors such as the four mentioned above, leads to the conclusion that no cultural or cross-cultural study can claim to be *the* study or to show how a particular culture must be seen and understood as an objective fact! We have to conclude that each cultural study - and each

cross-cultural study - has to be considered as only one study among many, and that the results of each study have to be seen as a result of the four factors mentioned above, to which a fifth factor could possibly be added:

5. The resources available for the study, which might include some way of studying the culture while excluding others.

For individuals, whether they are researchers or others, who have to rely on cultural studies made by other people - something many of us have to do many times in our lifetime - it is advisable, therefore, to

a) find out as much as possible about the background of such studies (factor 1-5), as well as to

b) read as many different studies based on as many different paradigms or research schools as possible, or to talk with persons who have a differing knowledge of the culture.

The different studies might vary considerably, but there may also be some overlapping between them, which might lead to equality and cultural understanding on a higher level.

So much for my first claim regarding theories and models for cultural and cross-cultural studies; now a few comments regarding the second claim.

### **3. The Complexity of Cross-Cultural Studies**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

The complexity of cross-cultural studies, as well as cultural studies, are especially related to the following observations or "facts":

1. the relativity of each culture
  - the cultural hierarchy  
(e.g., Danish-Scandinavian-European)
2. the co-incidence of the cultures
  - the cultural categories
3. the changeability of each culture
  - the cultural dynamic
4. the ethical problems related to cross-cultural studies
  - what can we allow ourselves to do in other cultures?

For these reasons, I strongly believe that we need theoretical and analytical models for cultural and cross-cultural studies formulated as frame models, or as a kind of skeleton,

where each researcher or cultural actor can relate to one other with his own data, observations, and experiences when trying to create an understanding of a particular cross-cultural situation, according to his or her needs, as well as to the four factors mentioned above. My presentation of such an analytical frame will begin with the discussion of the first two of the four factors in the complexity of cross-cultural studies, the relativity of the cultures and the co-incidence of the cultures.

Then I will present an analytical frame for how one might study and understand a culture as an abstract unit at a given point in time - a static model consisting of two cultural dimensions,

- (a) the Horizontal cultural dimension, and
- (b) the Vertical cultural dimension.

Then I will turn to the third of the four factors, the changeability of each culture.

In doing so I will turn the static model of culture into a dynamic model of culture by introducing the third cultural dimension into the model,

- (c) the Dynamic cultural dimension.

Finally I will place these three "cultural dimensions" and the complexity factors together into an analytical frame for cross-cultural studies.

The fourth of the four factors, the ethical problems related to cross-cultural studies, will be left out of this paper due to space limitations.

### ***3.2 The relativity and co-incidence of culture***

The definition of what is to be considered a culture is very relative, as the individual considers himself a part, or a member, of different cultures in different situations. He can also be considered by others as a member of a different culture, depending of the situation and the character of their intercultural relations.

This situation is due to two different but interrelated aspects of the complexity of cross-cultural relations,

- 1) the relativity of the cultures, and
- 2) the co-incidence of the cultures.

When speaking of the relativity of cultures, we might refer to "national culture" or "macro culture" (like the Geert Hofstede-concept of "Culture" when talking about Danish, Swedish, and other cultures). Both the individuals themselves and others might consider them to be representatives of different layers of culture within the category of macro culture, e.g., my personal situation as a Dane, as a Scandinavian, or just as a European, or even as a "northern Jydlander".

This can be illustrated in the following way:

## Culture hierarchy

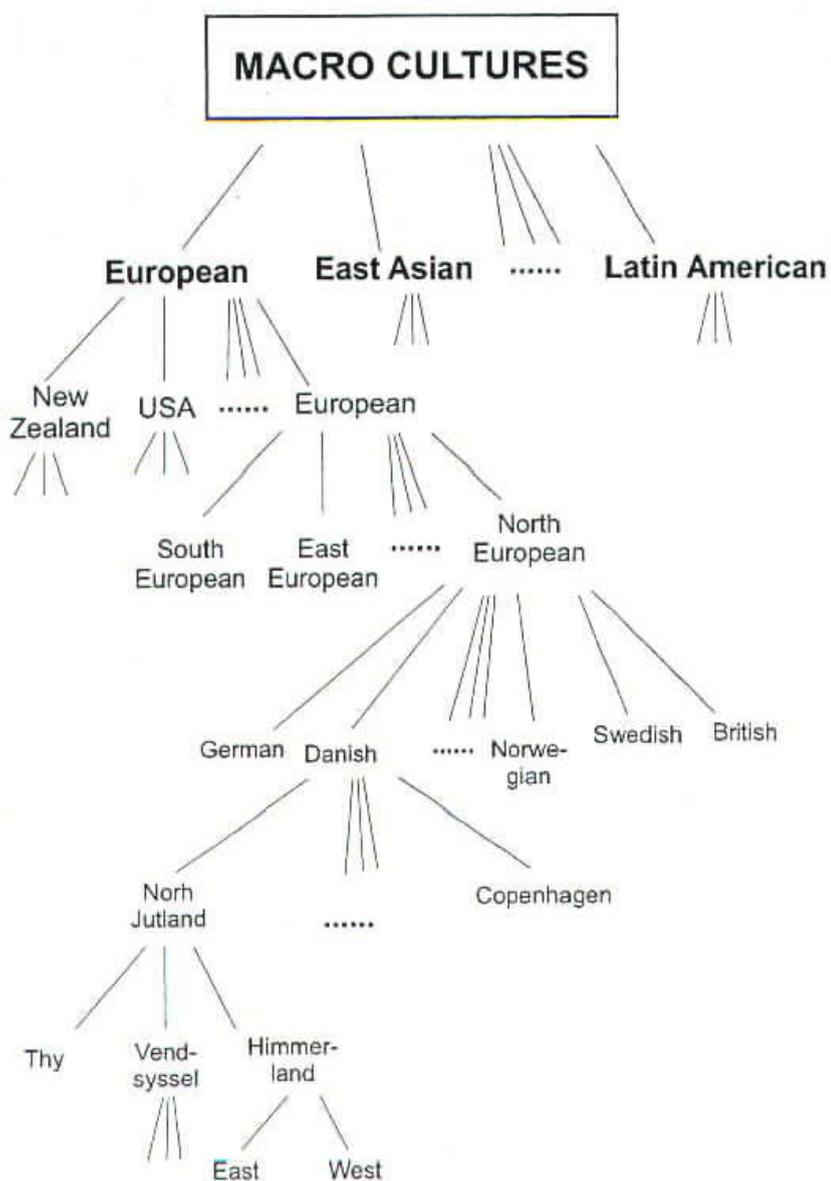


Fig. 1.

In this way we can talk about a cultural hierarchy within a specific category of culture consisting of different layers of culture (Kuada and Gullestrup, 1998).

By category of culture I mean:

A set of interrelated units of culture which, at a general (or higher) level of aggregation, can be meaningfully described, analyzed, and understood as one distinct cultural unit, which can then be broken down into its component units (cultural dimensions) for more detailed analysis for specific purposes.

And by layers of culture I understand:

A number of units of culture within a given cultural category, which together can be meaningfully described as a distinct cultural unit at a higher level of aggregation. This unit forms, together with other units at the same level of aggregation, another cultural unit at a still higher level of aggregation within the same cultural category.

In this way - theoretically as well as empirically - we have to count a hierarchy of different layers within a certain category of culture. And we never know whether the people involved in a cross-cultural relationship consider one another to be at the same layer in the hierarchy.

The complexity of cross-cultural relations is also caused by the fact that people are not only to be considered as members, or part, of one category of culture, but of many different cultural categories at the same time. This can be referred to as the co-incidence of cultures.

Relevant kind of cultural categories and parts of their hierarchies

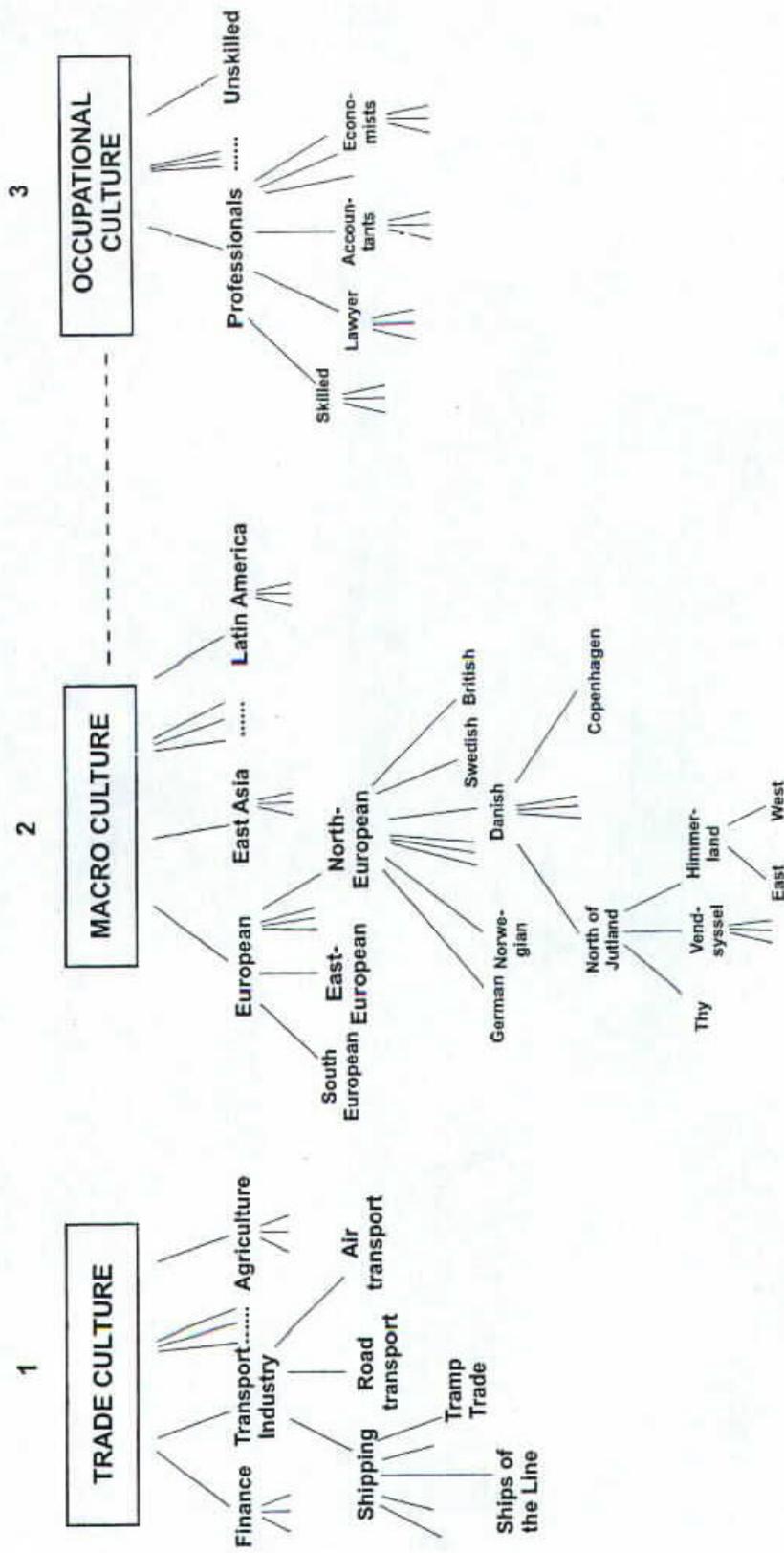


Fig.2.

This means that even though we want to analyze differences in macro/national cultures - like Hofstede's studies - we also have to recognize the fact that people simultaneously reflect other cultural categories than the macro/national culture, each of them with their own hierarchy of cultural layers.

When considering culture - as well as cross-cultural relations and management - in this way, one might expect that individuals, or groups of individuals, have to be understood according to a number of potential cultures in a number of different hierarchies within different categories of culture. Of the many different possible cultures, the one which could be expected to be the most important for understanding the people involved in the cross-cultural relations will, of course, depend on the actual situation and might change rather rapidly.

However, the intercultural actor, or manager, will have to predict which of the actual cultural categories and layers in the relevant hierarchy he considers to be the potentially relevant culture - or cultures - and which cultures he might try to understand according to this assessment.

Each of these potential and/or relevant cultures then has to be analyzed as an empirical unit in accordance with the analytical, theoretical cultural frame model or other models.

As mentioned before, a particular culture might be described and understood at a given time by means of two cultural dimensions, the horizontal and the vertical.

#### The horizontal cultural dimension

Common to all living creatures is the fact that their survival as individuals, or as a species, depends on the relationship between their own fundamental biological needs (e.g., the need for food, the need for protection against the climate, and the need for a possibility to bring up new generations) and the opportunities offered to them by the natural and social environment surrounding them.

If more than one human being is present at the same time in nature, man will try to fulfill his or her fundamental needs in a kind of joint action, which may be characterized by social cooperation and solidarity or by some kind of oppression and exploitation. Even though the natural conditions are the same, the actual ways of fulfilling the fundamental needs and in which the joint action is organized may, thus, vary considerably over time and space and from one group of people to another - or from one culture to another. So one might be able to observe differences and variations in the way in which the individual cultures try to fulfill their fundamental human needs.

At the same time, however, it will also be possible to observe a certain pattern in the tasks or functions that make up the central parts, or the central cultural segments, in this human joint action. In this connection it is meaningful to operate with eight such cultural segments which are all manifested in any culture, but which may individually and in relation to each other manifest themselves in very different ways.

The eight cultural segments mentioned below jointly make up what I call the horizontal dimension of culture; horizontal because the eight cultural segments are manifested at the same level, and because they are all of equal importance to cultural understanding.

1. How nature is processed - technology.
2. How the output is distributed - economic institutions.
3. How the individuals live together - social institutions.
4. Who controls whom - political institutions.
5. How knowledge, ideas, and values are disseminated among individuals and groups - language and communication in the widest sense.
6. How the individuals and the unit are integrated, maintained, and developed - reproduction and socialization.
7. How a common identity is created and preserved - ideology.
8. How the view of the relationship between life and death is manifested - religious institutions.

The individual segments may be manifested in numerous ways and combined in different ways. As an example, nature may be processed via fishing, agriculture, or heavy industry based on the culture's raw materials, and the output of such processing may be distributed via free market forces, via a planned economy, such as in the former Soviet Union or as is the case of the present Common Agricultural Policy of the EU, or via cultural traditions. In principle, the individual segments may manifest themselves independently of each other or of nature, but in practice it is a fact that in the same way as a given nature offers certain opportunities and sets certain limitations for the processing of nature (for example, it is not possible to set up farming in Greenland, nor is it possible to extract iron ore in Polynesia), then in the same way the actual manifestation of the individual cultural segments will offer certain opportunities and set up certain limits for the manifestation of the other segments of the culture.

#### The vertical cultural dimension

When encountering a foreign culture, some immediate perceptions will push to the forefront and thereby create a kind of first impression of the culture observed. Actual behavior, clothing, and various kinds of existing products will form the basis of such first impressions. Soon after, however, the underlying norms of morality and social structures, more difficult to observe, will stand out and in many ways introduce variation to the first impression of the culture.

For these reasons, not every observation is decisive for the understanding of the culture. Some, especially the immediately "visible" cultural traits, may only be an expression, or symbol or symptom, of the more fundamental cultural traits, such as attitudes and values. At the same time they may - and usually do - have importance for the cultural understanding within themselves. It is therefore meaningful to talk about a hierarchy of observations - a vertical cultural dimension - in which a deeper penetration from the "immediately observable symbols" to the "fundamental legitimating values" and the

"fundamental philosophy of life" will create a continuously deeper insight into the culture observed.

It has been meaningful for me to work with six different levels of culture, although I do realize that this stratification is based on a subjective assessment. Three of these levels belong to the visible part of the culture - the manifest culture - whereas the other three levels represent the more hidden but also more fundamental core culture. The six levels of culture can be characterized in the following way:

1. The level of immediately observable symbols or symptoms.
2. The structures that are difficult to observe.
3. The governing morals, patterns, and norms.
4. The partially legitimating values.
5. The generally accepted highest values.
6. The fundamental philosophy of life.

As already mentioned, human behavior and its material output are important elements within the level of immediately observable symbols. However, this behavior is only rarely coincidental. It is rather based on more or less fixed patterns within the structures that are difficult to observe. The individuals within the culture behave in a particular way towards other individuals according to the age and status within society of these individuals, just as they follow particular rules and laws to a certain extent, if for no other reason than to avoid sanctions from others. In this way certain connections and systems are created which somehow form a skeleton for the culture observed. These patterns and norms whose structures and contents vary from one culture to another are very central to the understanding of a given culture. Even if they cannot be seen or heard, the knowledge of their existence and their contents may be inferred from an empirical analysis, and together with the other two cultural levels mentioned above they make up the manifest part of the culture.

Partially legitimating values are those values which only comprise part of the culture, such as general values concerning competition and trade. But the generally accepted highest values then become valid for the entire culture. An example could be the individual's rights in relation to the rights of the community. The fundamental philosophy of life says something about man's view on other human beings; about man's relation to nature; about man's attitude towards life and death, and about his relation to the past, present, and future. The three last mentioned levels make up the core culture.

By means of the horizontal and the vertical cultural dimensions - or rather by trying to describe and understand the individual segments and levels of the two cultural dimensions - the actor or manager will be able to obtain a static snapshot of a given culture at a given time. Which information and data should be included in such an analysis, and which segments and levels might be relevant, will depend both on the object of the cultural analysis and on the resources that are available as mentioned above.

Thus, the static cultural model introduced here is an abstract cultural model which, as already mentioned, must be made more definite in connection with a concrete analysis and empirical analysis. As examples of such studies, these models have formed the basis of two comparative analyses, one of management theories developed in the West and management cultures in Ghana and Kenya (Kuada, 1995), and one of Danish playground technology and French, German and Dutch children's culture (Gram, 1999).

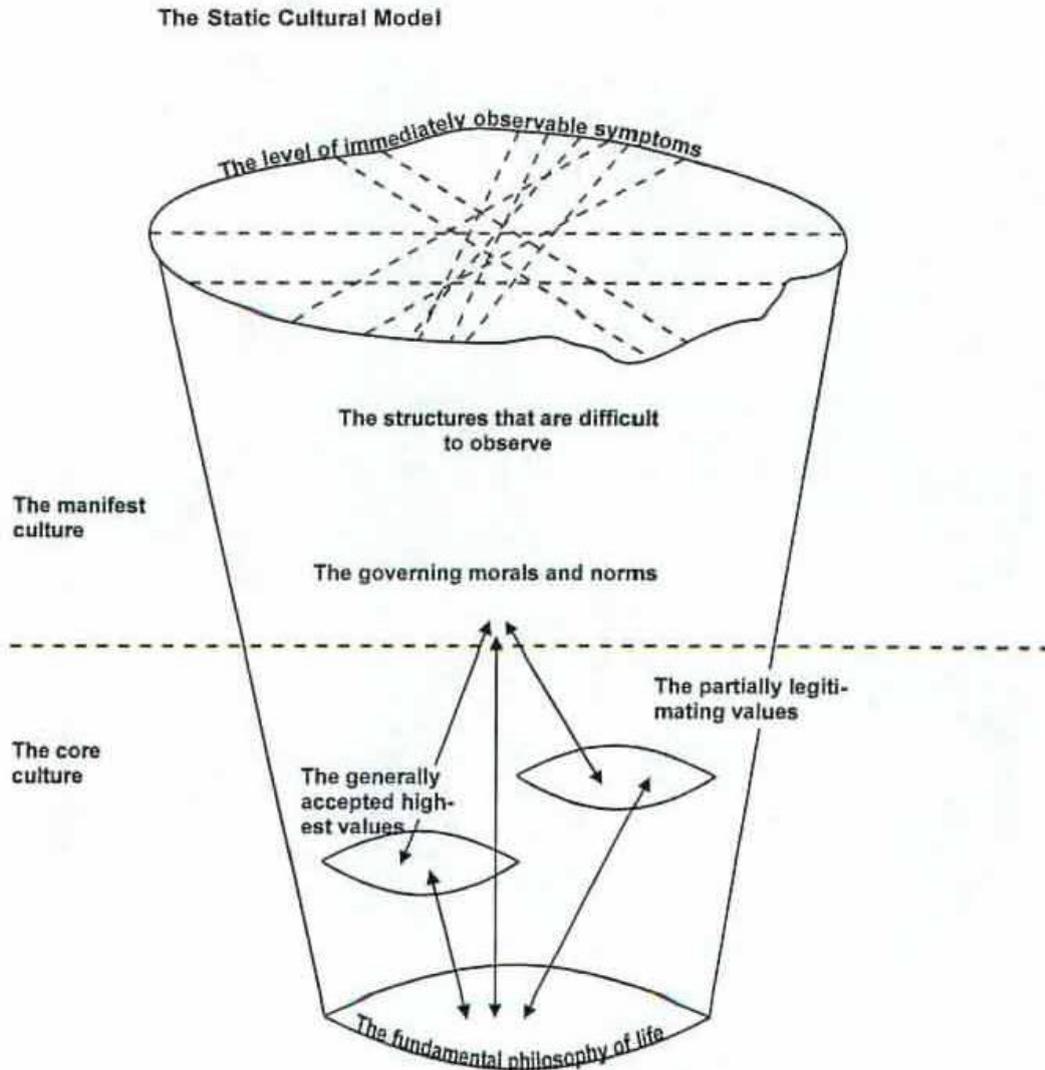


Fig. 3.

### ***3.3. The dynamics of culture or the changeability of culture***

A culture is not static. Quite the contrary, actually. It is constantly subjected to pressure for change from both external and internal factors - what I will refer to as initiating factors of change. The reason why they are called "initiating" factors is that they may well press for changes in the culture, but they do not determine in the same way whether or not a change will actually take place in the culture observed. Whether a change does occur, and the direction such a change would take, will be determined by another set of factors, the determining factors of change.

Among the external initiating factors of change in a culture are changes in both natural conditions and conditions in other cultures. The mere fact that nature constantly changes with or without the interference of man means that the joint action of men, whose explicit object is to make it possible for a group of people to exist under certain given natural conditions, is also subjected to a pressure for change. Thus, any culture is in a kind of double relationship towards nature. On the one hand nature forms the framework to which the culture - i.e., the total complex of cultural segments and levels developed by a group of people over time - will have to adapt; on the other hand, this culture at the same time, for better or worse, is involved in changing that very nature. Research, technological development, and trade and industry also play decisive roles in this double relationship, and the same applies to their relationship with other cultures from which new input within the three areas may have a change-initiating effect on the culture observed.

The internal initiating factors of change are, as the term signifies, initiating factors which have developed within the culture observed. All kinds of internal research, technological development, and trade and industry are internal, initiating factors of change.

Determining factors of change affect whether an action for change will actually lead to a change in the culture observed. Decisive factors in this understanding will be the degree of integration - this applies to the existing values - and the degree of homogeneity of the culture in question, but the existing power structure within the culture also plays a part. The degree of integration is an expression of the degree of conformity among the different values within the culture, whereas the degree of homogeneity is an expression of the width and depth of the total knowledge and insight of the culture observed.

In a strongly integrated culture, almost everybody agrees on certain values - such as the values of "technological development at all cost", the "prioritization of economic gain" over resource gain, and the "individual's right to consume and the freedom of the individual in general". Reciprocally, the value could concern the "individual's responsibility towards or dependence on the group or the whole", whether this whole is based on a strong religion, a strong family, or on fixed organizational relations. Usually, modern industrial cultures are very integrated around liberalistic freedom values, economic values and individualistic freedom values.

By synthesising the three cultural dimensions - the horizontal, the vertical, and the dynamic cultural dimensions - into a dynamic whole, we get a picture of part of the "cultural reality" as shown in figure 4. (overleaf)

By synthesizing the three cultural dimensions and the cultural categories and hierarchies we get a picture of a more complex cultural reality, of which trade and industry form a part and, at the same time, contribute to changes in the cultures. But we will also achieve a picture of the cultural reality, which, indirectly and for better or worse, governs the very same trade and industry and the development of the societies as such. See Fig, 5 overleaf.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The aim of this paper has been to present an analytical model for understanding the complexity of cross-cultural relations theoretically, as well as in the "real world", in very few pages. It has been stated many times that each cross-cultural relationship is not only a complex situation, it is also a unique situation which has to be understood individually in each case. Consequently, the presented model is more like a "frame model" acting as a skeleton, which must be completed by specific data and information for each specific study. The model has been used for studying intercultural relations between many different cultures in the past, and I hope it might contribute just a little towards a better understanding of the various intercultural possibilities of Vietnam's development in the future. For further elaboration on the model, please consult the mentioned literature or contact the author.

**A SYNTHETIZING DYNAMIC MODEL OF CULTURE**

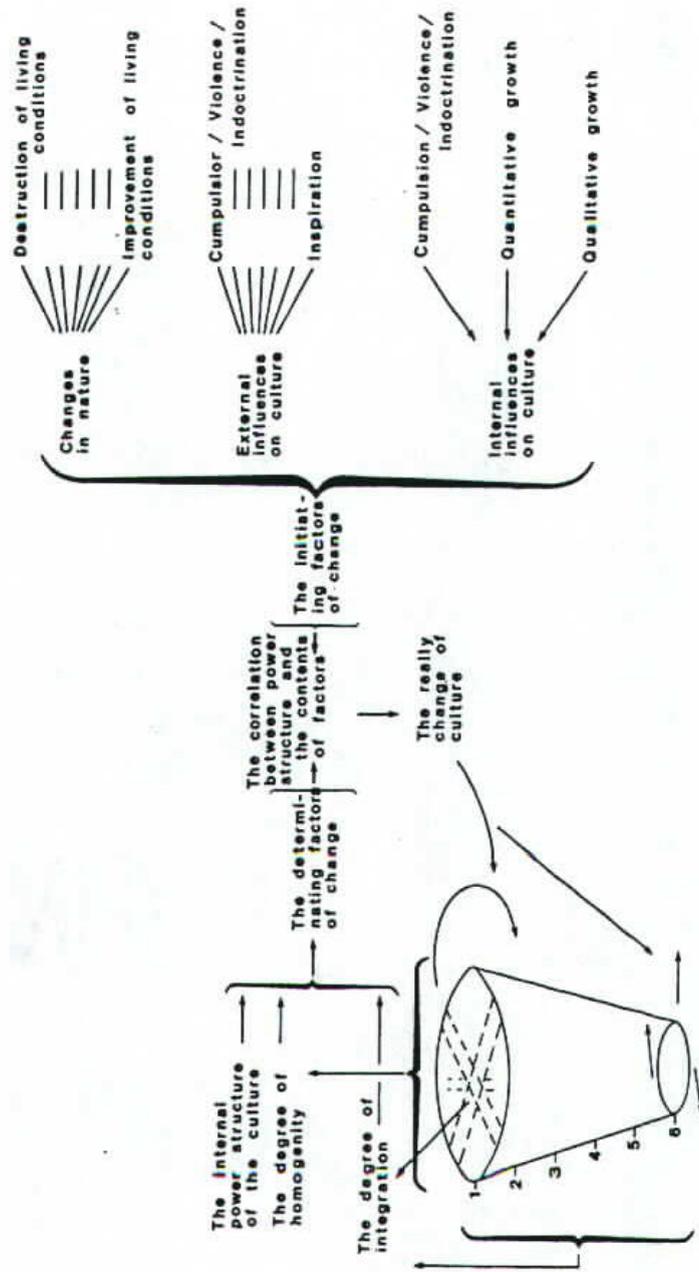


Fig. 4

Outline of a specific inter-cultural situation of social life with the specification of expected relevant categories and levels of culture to each of which specific culture analyses must be conducted.

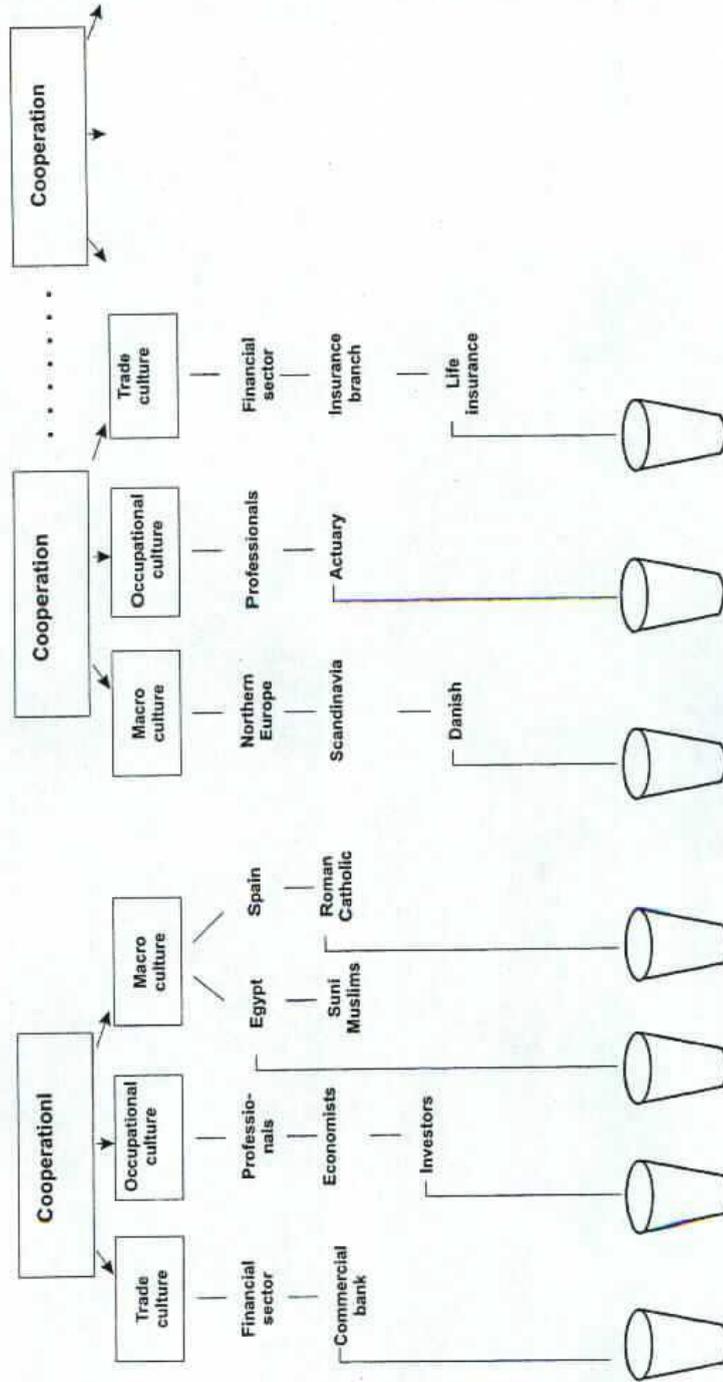


Fig. 5

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## Biography

**Hans Gullestrup** is a professor in social and economic planning at Aalborg University in Denmark. As a member of the Centre for International Studies, he is mostly involved in cross-cultural studies in general, and cross-cultural management more specifically. At the moment he is working on the improvement of a cultural theory and an empirical, analytical model to be published in the beginning of next year. He is interested specifically in the South Pacific Area (Samoa), China, Ghana, and Greenland. At the moment, he is chairman of The Danish Social Science Research Council and the Steering Committee of the Danish Red Cross.

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