

# **Communication challenges in a multi-cultural environment**

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<p><b>Abstract</b></p> <p>Employees and companies do not stay within national borders anymore, which makes it vital to be able to understand people from different cultures. There are many verbal and non-verbal ways of communication that differ much between different cultures and, therefore, a good knowledge of them has an impact on how a person settles in his/her new environment or how a manager gets the most out of his/her multicultural staff.</p> <p>First, the concept of culture is explained, after which the different theories on intercultural communication are described. Finally, a research of communication challenges when working abroad is presented. The research was done mainly using the qualitative method in order to reduce the limits of answering to the minimum.</p> <p>The study results indicated that the awareness of intercultural communication and differences between cultures can be an important part of a successful experience of working abroad. Differences exist on many different levels and ignoring them may lead to undesired results.</p>			
<p><b>Keywords</b> intercultural, multicultural, cross-cultural, communication, cultural dimensions, working abroad</p>			

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

*"Culture is an integral part of all human societies" (Browaeys et al., 2008, 9)*

In the modern business world everybody wants to be international. Companies want to internationalize and individual workers do not stay within borders anymore. This leads to an extensive amount of intercultural communication in a multicultural work environment. Cross-cultural conflicts are likely to follow, and miscommunication between employees from different cultures can cause misunderstandings and make the business community weaker. Furthermore, due to globalization, people are in direct competition with everyone around the world, not only people from their own area (Cheung et al., 2010). In this thesis it will first be explained what is a culture and why it is important. Afterwards the biggest concepts in intercultural communication will be examined.

The thesis will include a research which aims to discover whether people who have worked abroad have encountered problems caused by cultural differences. The research results will be presented and analyzed. Furthermore, similarities between the theory and the practical examples provided by the respondents will be examined.

The reason this subject was selected for the thesis was the genuine interest towards these issues. The author of this thesis spent about 18 months abroad during his studies in two different countries and witnessed the cultural differences from a close distance. The fascinating experience of observing why someone acted the way they acted also contributed to the topic selection process. Some situations which caused non-deliberate misunderstandings were also a factor. After all, most problems of this kind could be avoided or at least understood better.

## 2 INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

*“Collective programming in our culture, begun in the cradle and reinforced in kindergarten, school and workplace, convinces us that we are normal, others eccentric.”*  
(Lewis, 1999, 25)

In this chapter of the thesis, the concept of culture and the importance of understanding it will be discussed. This is to provide the base for later chapters where these subjects will be taken more in-depth and categorized further. The guideline for these topics will be literature and articles about intercultural communication and cultural diversity.

### 2.1 Definition of a culture

Intercultural differences and conflicts are the main concepts for this thesis and therefore it is vital to think about what is meant by “culture”. Trompenaars (1997, 6) explains culture as “the way in which a group of people solves problems and reconciles dilemmas”.

Culture can be defined as something that is built in the system of every single person. It defines how he/she thinks, feels and acts based on what the person has gone through in life. Furthermore, much of this has been acquired in the early childhood, simply because of the fact that at that age a person is most susceptible to learning and assimilating (Hofstede, 2005, 2). Hofstede explains culture as “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others”. He continues by adding that “culture is always a collective phenomenon”. This is explained by the fact that the culture in which a person belongs to depends on what has surrounded him/her for his/her whole life. (Hofstede, 2005, 4)

Culture is something that is picked up on the way and learned, not something that is already built in a human being. It is more related to one’s environment rather than what kind of genes he/she has inherited. It remains undecided and debatable where the line goes between a personality and human nature but culture should not be confused with either of these (Hofstede, 2005, 4). To illustrate this concept, a pyramid figure is presented below (FIGURE 1) with further explanations of the difference between personality, culture and human nature.

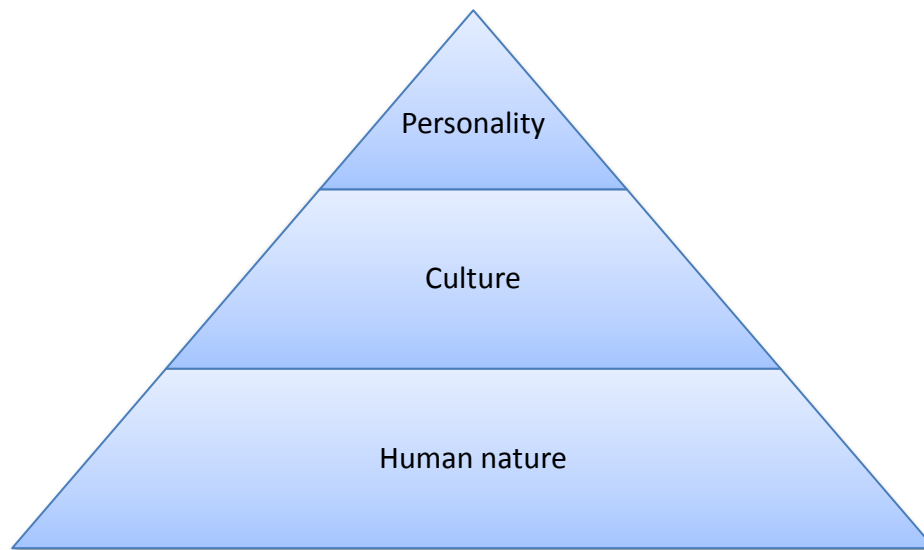


FIGURE 1. Three levels of uniqueness in mental programming (Hofstede, 2005, 4)

Richard Lewis (1999, 28-31) describes that a significant aspect of a culture are values and core beliefs which define what is normal and abnormal or legal and illegal. He continues to mention that every culture considers itself normal and everyone else more or less abnormal, and that our own *cultural spectacles* cloud our judgment of other cultures. Further categorizations of cultures and different ways to look at them will be discussed later in this thesis.

## 2.2 Importance of intercultural communication

The world is full of people who think, feel and act differently. These people divide into various groups and nationalities for which it is important to be able to work and cooperate together despite of all the differences in their way of thinking, because there are challenges and problems that go further than national borders. There are plenty of these sorts of issues, such as organized crime, terrorism and the economical crisis that is still going strong at this moment. Cultural differences are part of the reason why some worldwide problems have yet to be solved (Hofstede, 2005, 2). When stakes are this high, people simply cannot afford miscommunication due to the lack of intercultural understanding. Such a small issue as interpreting what an eye-contact means is actually one sort of communication that has a strong intercultural variation (Qureshi & Collazos, 2011, 13).

Successful intercultural communication is a must if one wants to have good and beneficial relations with people from different countries. Hofstede (2005, 20) presents that it is not possible to suddenly import a new culture to a country and change the way people think, feel and act. Therefore it is vital to be able to understand why they

act how they act instead of try to change their behavior, because that will not happen, at least not at all quickly. Furthermore, the corporate culture of a company depends highly of the national culture in which the company is located (Trompenaars, 1997, 157). Taking this into account beforehand will ease the troubles of switching from culture to culture.

It provides a significant help for a person who wants to understand other cultures better to try and think from their perspective. The concept of one's own culture as the most normal or the "right" culture might go through serious re-thinking after taking a deeper look into other cultures. The idea of legality, for example, is conceived very differently from culture to culture (Lewis, 1999, 31-32). Furthermore, better intercultural communication reduces shocks between people who are not familiar with people who think differently.

### 3 THEORIES OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

This chapter will introduce several main concepts of intercultural communication, which will show how there are differences of many sorts.

#### 3.1 Cultural dimensions

According to Hofstede (2005), national cultures can be divided to dimensions. These dimensions put countries in order based on their score of different cultural habits, ways of thinking and traditions. There are five dimensions of national cultures; power distance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, uncertainty avoidance and the long-term orientation. The dimension indices put countries in order in an easily comparable form; however, it is good to remember that all countries and regions are not taken into account. The following chapters will introduce the main elements of each five cultural dimension, with special emphasis on the aspects on working life to show differences in this context. After every subchapter a table will present statistics of how certain countries are placed on the cultural dimension indices.

##### 3.1.1 Power distance

The power distance index is a way to measure the relation between employees and the management in organizations in different countries. In countries that score low on the power distance index employees are not afraid of their superiors, they see them more as their equals, and they prefer a consultative leadership style. Nevertheless, it is considered normal that the boss takes the decision in the end. The hierarchical system in a work environment is merely an inequality of roles, not people, merely due to convenience and it is possible that the roles change. Organizations in low PDI countries are decentralized and hierarchical pyramids are somewhat flat. Salaries between the top and the bottom of the pyramid are not very different in the amounts of money.

Managers in the low scoring countries are usually not autocratic or paternalistic and they consult their subordinates more. Furthermore, in countries that score low on the PDI the employees are more independent from their bosses and the emotional distance between management and workforce is relatively small. This means that the managers are easier to be approached and contradicted. Moreover, Hofstede (2005, 51) mentions that the power distance thinking is not limited to only work life, in fact in

begins in early childhood; children in low PDI countries are brought up less authoritatively than children in high PDI countries.

In the countries in the high-end of the power distance index employees are not as likely to consult their superiors as in the low PDI countries. They are usually afraid to disagree with their bosses, and managers are the opposite of the managers in low PDI countries as they are paternal and autocratic. Actually, this type of management is preferred by the subordinates. In high PDI countries, the employees are seen as more dependant of the managers. This results in two possible outcomes from the opposite extremes; employees either prefer or totally reject the aforementioned dependence. This is known as *counterdependence* (Hofstede, 2005, 46). Where there is high power distance, higher and lower ranking members of the organizations are considered to be primarily unequal. Power is highly centralized and there are few people on the top of the hierarchical pyramid. Moreover, the salaries within the organization differ significantly. Employees are not used to consult managers and therefore they expect to be given orders (Hofstede, 2005, 45-56).

All in all, a few conclusions can be drawn from the power distance index. Higher power distance can usually be found in societies that are less equal, less wealthy, more populous, and geographically located closer to the equator (Hofstede, 2005, 41 & 68). Five highest and lowest power distance scoring countries are presented in the table (TABLE 1) below this paragraph.

Table 1 (Hofstede, 2005, 43-44)

Rank	Power distance index	
	Highest	Lowest
1	Malaysia	Austria
2	Slovakia	Israel
3	Guatemala	Denmark
4	Panama	New Zealand
5	Philippines	Switzerland (German)

### 3.1.2 Individualism vs. collectivism

Hofstede (2005, 76) defines individualist societies as “societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family”. He adds that the opposite of individualism is collectiv-

ism, which is a ruling characteristic in “societies in which people from birth onward are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups which throughout people’s lifetimes continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty”. Furthermore, Houston et al. (2012) define the relation between individualism and collectivism as “an important variable used to account for differences among cultures by focusing on the relative emphasis placed on the needs, desires, values and goals of the individual and the group”. According to Hofstede’s (2005) Individualism Index, the countries that score high are very individualist, and countries that score low are very collectivist.

In individualist societies the core idea is that an individual decides what he/she does and how he/she does it, and therefore one chooses his/her relationships on a voluntary basis, unlike in collectivist societies where relationships are usually predetermined by one’s family, roots and status (Hofstede, 2005, 80-81). In individualist societies, employees are expected to make decisions on their own and act in a way that benefits them. The key objective in companies in individualist countries is to make sure the individual goals of the employee and the company goals go along with each other. The more individualism is predominant in a society, the more frowned upon it is to mix family relationships with work as this would be considered nepotism. In contrast, collectivistic societies do not express strong disapproval of this. To illustrate, they even seem to look up to father-son work relationships. Furthermore, in collectivistic societies, a work relationship resembles a family relationship, whereas in individualistically thinking parts of the world a work relationship is mainly understood as a business transaction. There are clear differences in management between individualistic and collectivistic countries. Namely, the first-mentioned is about managing individuals and the latter one has to do with group management. Naturally all this varies, and it is possible to find collectivist thinking organizations in an individualist society and vice versa (Hofstede, 2005, 100-101). Moreover, in collectivistic cultures the wellbeing of the group comes before individual wants, while in individualist cultures there is a clearer distinction between the self and others (Finkelstein, 2011).

Power distance was introduced in the previous part of this chapter, and there is a relation between it and individualism. In the studies conducted by Hofstede (2005, 82-83), it can be read that high individualism is more common in the low power distance countries. It is also established that there is a connection between high individualism and the wealth of the country, and the country’s distance from the equator (the further away, the more individualist) (Hofstede, 2005, 111). Five most individualist and five most collectivist countries according to the Individualism index can be seen in the table below (TABLE 2).

Table 2 (Hofstede, 2005, 78-79)

Rank	Individualism index	
	Highest	Lowest
1	USA	Guatemala
2	Australia	Ecuador
3	Great Britain	Panama
4	Canada	Venezuela
5	Hungary	Colombia

### 3.1.3 Masculinity and femininity

Gender roles can be used to determine whether how masculine or feminine a society is, and equally important it is to stress that femininity should not be confused with feminism. Furthermore, there is no relation between the masculinity or femininity of a society and how jobs are distributed between men and women (Hofstede, 2005, 145). Oudenhoven et al. (1998) identify that “in masculine countries, differences between male and female role patterns are outspoken, whereas the sex role differentiation is much weaker in feminine cultures”. In masculine societies, issues such as opportunity for high earnings, recognition for a good job, opportunity for advancement and challenging work are of high importance. In contrast, a good relationship with one’s superior, good cooperation with colleagues and security of employment are highly valued in a feminine society (Hofstede, 2005, 118-119).

Masculinity of a society defines its customs of problem-solving; in highly masculine countries people are used to resolve conflicts by “a good fight” while feminine negotiate their conflict situations and try to reach a compromise. Countries in the middle, those which are not very masculine or feminine, have a tradition of “agreeing to disagree”, which means they go through verbally tough negotiations but in the end reach an agreement to continue working despite of the disagreement. This is particularly common in France. Companies and organizations in masculine cultures emphasize performance in their reward systems; the better one performs the more he/she is rewarded. Feminine countries on the other hand prioritize rewarding employees more equally, based on what everyone needs (Hofstede, 2005, 143).

There is a clear difference in how societies comprehend the meaning of work. In masculine countries an individual is expected to “live to work”, however in feminine

countries it is accepted to “work to live”. Moreover, an average person in a feminine society appreciates his/her free time more than his/her counterpart in a masculine society (Hofstede, 2005, 144). Five countries scoring highest and lowest on the masculinity index will be shown in table below (TABLE 3).

Table 3 (Hofstede, 2005, 120-121)

Rank	Masculinity index	
	Highest	Lowest
1	Slovakia	Sweden
2	Japan	Norway
3	Hungary	The Netherlands
4	Austria	Denmark
5	Venezuela	Slovenia

#### 3.1.4 Uncertainty avoidance

Some countries are more afraid of the unknown than others, thus also people reflect this general attitude towards avoiding uncertainty. Hofstede (2005, 167) gives uncertainty avoidance the following definition: “the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations”. One important feature found in people from high uncertainty avoidance countries is stress, anxiety and, to some extent, fear. This may result in characteristics that can make people from these cultural backgrounds seem restless, busy, emotional and suspicious. On the other hand, people with high uncertainty avoidance might perceive people from low uncertainty avoidance cultures as unintelligent, quiet, careless and lazy. It is vital to note that avoiding uncertainty is not the same thing as avoiding risks altogether, after all uncertainty avoidance has more to do with not appreciating double meanings and dubiety. People in cultures where uncertainty avoidance is high, tend to prefer organizations with clear structure and predictability but they do not hesitate to take risks to achieve this (Hofstede, 2005, 172). Furthermore, there is a connection between uncertainty avoidance and collectivism. Forbes et al. (2011) identify that “because of their strong emphasis on the avoidance of conflict and the maintenance of social harmony, it seems reasonable to expect that conflict-reducing techniques should be more common, and aggression and violence less common in collectivistic societies”.

According to Mariëlle Jippes and Gerard D. Majoor (2008), “uncertainty avoidance is the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by uncertain or unknown

situations". They continue by adding that these feelings are expressed through nervous stress and that there is a need for written and unwritten rules.

Structures are indeed a desired quality of societies in cultures with strong uncertainty avoidance. Therefore, they tend to have more laws, rules and regulations to define what employers and employees must or should do. Also the amount of internal regulation is relatively high. This, however, is also affected by the power distance mentioned in an earlier chapter. The reason for the quantity of laws and rules is based on the emotional need for structures, as this makes people feel comfortable. Countries with a low degree of uncertainty avoidance usually see this as undesirable and they think that a rule should only exist if absolutely necessary. Nevertheless, even if the law about something does not exist, people are in the habit of acting according to the moral code anyway (Hofstede, 2005, 182-183).

The work environment in a strong uncertainty avoidance culture differs much from the cultures on the opposite side. In uncertainty avoiding cultures, people prefer working hard and being busy. Moreover, they do not like to waste time and earning money is important and they hire many specialists in their organizations whereas cultures that accept uncertainty have an equally large number of generalists in their workforce. Weak uncertainty avoidance cultures also more relaxed about work and earning money but they can work hard if it is needed. Furthermore, they do not feel the constant need to be active and busy and they believe in common sense at the expense of rules (Hofstede, 2005, 183-184). The basis for motivating employees makes another big difference; where uncertainty avoidance is high motivation is reached by security and where it is low, the main motivation comes with achievement (Hofstede, 2005, 189). Five countries scoring highest and lowest in the uncertainty avoidance index can be seen in the table below (TABLE 4).

Table 4 (Hofstede, 2005, 168-169)

Rank	Uncertainty avoidance index	
	Highest	Lowest
1	Greece	Singapore
2	Portugal	Jamaica
3	Guatemala	Denmark
4	Uruguay	Sweden
5	Belgium (Flemish)	Hong Kong

### 3.1.5 Long- and short-term orientation

Perhaps the most obvious attribute of a short-term orientation is the desire for quick results. Indeed the countries which are determined short-term oriented by Hofstede (2005, 212) have a tendency of spending more money and a more substantial perception of status. In other words, they need to appear well-off *at this moment*. Additionally, short-term oriented cultures cherish the past and present, while those which are long-term oriented are more future-oriented (Hofstede, 2005, 210).

The abovementioned qualities reflect on business life in various ways. The management in a company located in a long-term oriented country is more interested in the profit to be made in the next ten years, rather than this year (Hofstede, 2005, 220). Also, family businesses are more common and the core ideas of family and work are connected more closely than in short-term oriented countries. Entrepreneurs that are long-term oriented tend to emphasize savings and more restrained spending, whereas for those who are short-term orientated the important aspects of taking care of their business are innovation and the ability to act quickly according to how the market changes (Hofstede, 2005, 218). Similarly to the people in low uncertainty avoidance countries, the people whose culture is short-term oriented think free time is important to them. For them, it is fundamental that they have freedom at work and that they can think for themselves, and they pay much attention to short-term profits. On the other hand, the values involved with long-term orientation are self-discipline, learning and honesty. Furthermore, free time is not of very high importance.

As a rule, most of the long-term oriented countries experienced a substantial economic growth between 1970 and 2000 (Hofstede, 2005, 211). Five countries scoring highest and lowest on the Hofstede Long-Term Orientation Index can be seen in Table 5 below.

Table 5 (Hofstede, 2005, 211)

Rank	Long-term orientation index	
	Highest	Lowest
1	China	Pakistan
2	Hong Kong	Czech Republic
3	Taiwan	Nigeria
4	Japan	Spain
5	Vietnam	Philippines

## 3.2 Value orientation

How people relate and react to other people depends on their value orientation. It also determines the way they do business or manage. According to Trompenaars (1997, 29) there are five dimensions of value orientations: universalism versus particularism, communitarianism versus individualism, diffuse versus specific, and achievement versus ascription. In this chapter the aforementioned value orientations will be explained and their work life context examined.

### 3.2.1 Relationships and rules

The first value orientation reflects on a person's tendency to react to others according to rules or relationships. This value orientation is also known as universalism versus particularism. It defines how a person judges other people's behaviour. The universalist orientation is rule-based and it emphasizes equality; all people who fall under a certain rule should be treated equally. The core idea is that if exceptions to the rule are allowed, the whole system might collapse. Particularism focuses on the exceptions; there might be a rule, but it can be excused because of a relationship between people. For example, someone who is an important person to someone should be considered as a person who doesn't have to follow a rule (Trompenaars, 1997, 31).

People involved in business from societies of both orientations tend to think of each other as corrupt. The universalist thinks that particularists cannot be trusted because they favour their friends. In contrast, the particularist will say that the universalists cannot be trusted because they wouldn't even help their friends. The way one individual sees this subject depends on the culture he/she comes from, his/her personality, religion, and the ties with those in concerned (Trompenaars, 1997, 31-33).

According to Trompenaars (1997, 39) some situations in an international business context, when universal and particular views might clash are *contracts, timing of a business trip, the role of head office and job evaluations and rewards*. Strict legal contracts offered by the universalist counterpart might be considered offensive by the particularist, because they are used to trusting their partners based on relationships. Precautions such as penalties for not meeting a deadline can result in a termination of the business relationship. When planning a business trip, the universalist should take into account that particularists do not appreciate being hurried, as they want to develop the relationship. Too much hurrying could result in the particularist partner

pulling out of the project. In countries ranking high on universalism, it is normal that the head office of the company coordinates global activities closely, while in the particularist countries the global decision making is left for the branch offices. If the head office is located in a universalist country, the branches in particularist areas tend to distance themselves as far as they can from the foreign head of the company. Concerning the rewards and job evaluations, it is a desirable strategy to base these actions on the location of the business branch, in spite of where the company is from. If these activities were done according to the country of the head office, employees with a different value orientation would be likely to feel distressed (Trompenaars, 1997, 39-43).

### 3.2.2 Groups and individuals

The second of the value orientation dimensions presented by Trompenaars deals with whether a culture sets the aspirations of an individual in front of or behind what is good for the public community. The value orientation is called individualism and the second one communitarianism. Trompenaars continues by describing individualism as “a prime orientation to the self” and communitarianism “a prime orientation to common goals and objectives” (Trompenaars, 1997, 50).

The key situations in international business management where group or individual orientation becomes a stressing issue are negotiations, decision-making and motivation. Furthermore, conflicts may occur when an individualistically thinking manager promotes or otherwise rewards employees based on performance (Trompenaars, 1997, 52). In a communitarian culture these practices do are a risky strategy, because it is likely that the employees do not want to be raised above their colleagues (Trompenaars, 1997, 62). In business negotiations it is vital to recognize the main difference between individualist and communitarian cultures; in the latter it is not customary to send just one person to represent the company. It is normal in communitarian cultures to assume that unaccompanied people lack status, thus it is understandable that they do not send a lonely representative on a business trip. Also, the negotiators from a communitarian culture often do not have the power to make final decisions and therefore they must first consult the head office. The communitarian decision-making can be a lengthy process and a consensus is a desired outcome. On the contrary, in individualist cultures the negotiators usually travel to meetings alone with full authority to make the final decision and the decision-making is faster. Moreover, if a translator is needed he/she has a different role in group and individual minded cultures. It is a communitarian habit for the translator to be more an inter-

preter and sometimes even the main negotiator, while the individualists use translators solely for translating (Trompenaars, 1997, 60). All in all, a distinction can be seen in what is the main difference about what the two sides wish to accomplish in the meeting or negotiation; the individualists aim to reach a quick deal while the communitarians are looking to establish a long lasting relationship (Trompenaars, 1997, 67).

Individualism and communitarianism can be seen vividly in an organization when a decision needs to be made about what to do with an employee who has made a mistake. The individualistically oriented organization wants to punish the person who made the mistake to make him/her a better employee. However, the communitarian way is to support him/her to achieve the same outcome (Trompenaars, 1997, 65).

### 3.2.3 Neutral and emotional

The amount of feeling and emotion people publicly show differs from culture to culture. Trompenaars (1997, 69) defines cultures where emotions are openly shown as affective and cultures where allowing others to notice one's feelings as emotionally neutral. In neutral cultures feelings are kept hidden and under control, which however doesn't mean they are cold or without feelings. Furthermore, even if emotions are not on the display, they are not repressed. In contrast, in highly affective cultures feelings are shown and they can usually be read on a person's face, interpreted from his/her gestures or heard easily. In neutral cultures big emotions are shown, but in affective cultures they have to be shown bigger and louder in order to get them noticed (Trompenaars, 1997, 69).

The amount of emotions and how emotional people appear to be depends of the background of a culture. For example, smaller countries are usually understood colder or less emotional than the bigger ones. In small countries people are likely to have known their friends for a very long time while in larger cultures acquaintances change and there is less time to get attached. People from small countries do not feel the need to make friends with strangers as much as people from ever-changing surroundings. Furthermore, cultures have different ways of how much emotions are supposed to be separated from reasoning and whether it is appropriate to raise one's voice and get excited in a business meeting. Also, the acceptability of humour is one of the aspects producing most cultural differences. In certain countries humour is used as a relaxation mechanism, for example to start a meeting, while in other countries humour has no place in a serious and official business discussion (Trompenaars, 1997, 71-73). Moreover, humour can turn out to be a dangerous tool in a

multicultural group, as humour is not universally same everywhere and therefore part of the group will inevitably be outsiders to some kind of humour (Hofstede, 2005, 329).

Communication problems are common when the affective and the neutral collide. Misunderstandings can be caused by numerous ways, such as tone of voice, frequency of interruptions when someone is talking, amount of eye-contact, touching or perception of private space. Furthermore, the neutral person in a conversation does not usually reveal what he/she is thinking while the affective conversationalist aims to reveal thoughts and feelings verbally and non-verbally (Trompenaars, 1997, 74-79).

#### 3.2.4 Diffuse and specific

This value orientation is closely tied to the one of affectivity and neutrality explained in the subchapter above. Cultures described as diffuse are different from the specific cultures when the degree of how much people engage with others is considered. In specific cultures relationships are segregated between different areas of life. For example, the authority of a higher ranking person at work loses his/her authority when people meet outside of the place of work. In a specific culture a person's boss is his/her boss only at work, while in diffuse cultures the title, rank and authority doesn't stop there. Furthermore, the degree of how close people allow others can be defined as diffuse or specific. An employee in a specific culture has a specific relationship with his/her superiors, which means they only let the boss a little amount into their personal life. In contrast, in the diffuse culture this is the opposite and the employee is more likely to treat his/her manager as a boss outside of work (Trompenaars, 1997, 81).

One possible conflict between a diffuse and a specific person is when their perceptions of private and public space collide. In this case, one person sees something as very personal while the other thinks the same thing is impersonal. Also, a diffuse oriented person who makes friends with a specific oriented person might assume that he has been let in the whole diffuse life area, while the person from a specific culture does not necessarily think so. This might be problematic in a workplace, when the specific thinking person criticizes the other one who will see this as a personal insult from a close friend. Moreover, in diffuse cultures it is a far worse incident to lose one's face (Trompenaars, 1997, 85-86).

### 3.2.5 Achievement and ascription

The last value orientation defines how people acquire status or how people automatically give them authority. The core idea behind ascription is that what a person is, defines his/her status, while achievement emphasises what a person does or has done. When status is set by achievements, skills at what one does count more. Furthermore, issues such as age or gender are less relevant. On the contrary, in ascription-oriented cultures age, class gender and education are the qualities that are the most important. They define one's status and being a highly skilled person can be left without recognition (Trompenaars, 1997, 102).

The aforementioned differences might cause difficult meetings between people from differently oriented cultures. During a business negotiation the ascription-oriented participants of the meeting might get frustrated if their achievement-oriented counterparts are young and aggressive negotiators who seem to think too much about themselves. The people from an ascription-oriented culture these young business people can get insulted because for them it appears that the younger negotiators are thinking they needed fewer years to achieve the same as them. Furthermore, a serious lack of authority is likely to be noticed and cause problems. On the other hand, the achievement-oriented might get disoriented because their meeting counterparts can rarely make a decision as they have to consult their superior (Trompenaars, 1997, 108). According to Trompenaars (1997, 110-111) the ascriptive-oriented people have to believe that the achievement-oriented person who is negotiating with them has authority in his/her own organisation and that he/she is the person in charge or close to him/her. Also, it is important to acknowledge that many ascription-oriented countries have real reasons to show a lot of respect for the employees with more age, as they pay a lot of attention in their training in order to make them better employees. Therefore, for example in Japan, the older, more experienced employees indeed are more skilled than the young ones (Trompenaars, 1997, 109).

### 3.3 Stereotypes

Nurit Zaidman (2000, 45) defines stereotypes as generalizations about a group. The truthfulness and accuracy of national stereotypes is known to vary from side to side. The reason of the inaccuracy may be partly explained by the fact that many people have not travelled abroad and therefore they have no experience with people from other cultures (McCrae et al., 2007).

Stereotypes can be divided further into two categories, namely the heterostereotype and the autostereotype. Heterostereotype refers to how one perceives members of the other culture, while autostereotype is what one thinks about his/her own culture group. Reducing misleading stereotypes requires mixing people from different cultures as equals to each other, such as students or employees, however this does not automatically guarantee mutual understanding (Hofstede, 2005, 327). Trompenaars (1997, 26) points out that a stereotype is very limited as a view of behaviour and it tends to exaggerate and caricaturize other cultures. Also, in all cultures an individual can be extremely different from what the stereotype suggests.

### 3.4 Culture shock

One of the most common consequences of relocating to a new culture is the culture shock. According to Edward Dutton (2011), “culture shock is a widely examined model of how expatriates and other sojourners react to new cultural environments”. Most foreigners who have moved to a new country experience it to an extent determined by how experienced they are at accustoming to new cultures. This is basically caused by our basic values clashing with the new environment (Hofstede, 2005, 323). People in different parts of the world are taught to behave according to local norms (Lynn Chih-Ning, 2011). To mention a few examples, culture shock can be caused by differences in behaviour, laws, traditions and language. Furthermore, the newcomer might mentally feel like a child; everything he/she encounters is new and needs to be re-learned. Symptoms of a culture shock include anxiety, helplessness, hostility towards the new culture and maybe his/her physical health (Hofstede, 2005, 323). Culture shock might be difficult to completely prevent, but to overcome some problems that cultural differences cause one should study at least the basics of the new culture. Also, it is not necessary to start thinking, acting and feeling exactly like people in the new culture (Zhang, 2011, 32-33).

Culture shock can be divided to four phases, namely *euphoria*, *culture shock*, *acculturation* and *stable state*. These phases are called the *acculturation curve* and it is pictured in the figure (FIGURE 1) below. The first phase, euphoria, is a period of time when the expatriate is enthusiastic and finds his/her new cultural environment fascinating. Moreover, he/she feels the greatness of travelling as he/she experiences a new country. It is also known as *the honeymoon*. The second phase, culture shock, takes place when the feelings start to change into a negative direction. Sometimes referred to as the phase of frustration, the culture shock period happens when “the real life” begins and the expatriate starts to feel homesickness. The new environment

does not seem so exciting anymore; it might even feel something one wants to reject. The third part of the acculturation curve, known as the acculturation or understanding phase, takes place when some learning about the new culture has happened, and coping in it has become easier. Local values have become more familiar, self-confidence is starting to return and integrating to the new culture has begun. Furthermore, the former stranger has made friends and the view of the new experience in a new culture has become more balanced. Also the homesickness is fading away. The last phase is the stable state. Sometimes known also as the acclimation phase, the fourth stage of the acculturation curve the new culture starts to feel like a place where the expatriate belongs and the moments experienced in the former phases are something to laugh about. Naturally, things do not always happen the way they should, and therefore the person might still feel alienated. The last phase is always somewhat uncertain, as it depends substantially of the individual. As illustrated in the end of the curve in the acculturation curve figure below, culture shock may end positively, negatively or neutrally (Hofstede, 2005, 323-324 & Diversity Abroad, 2012).

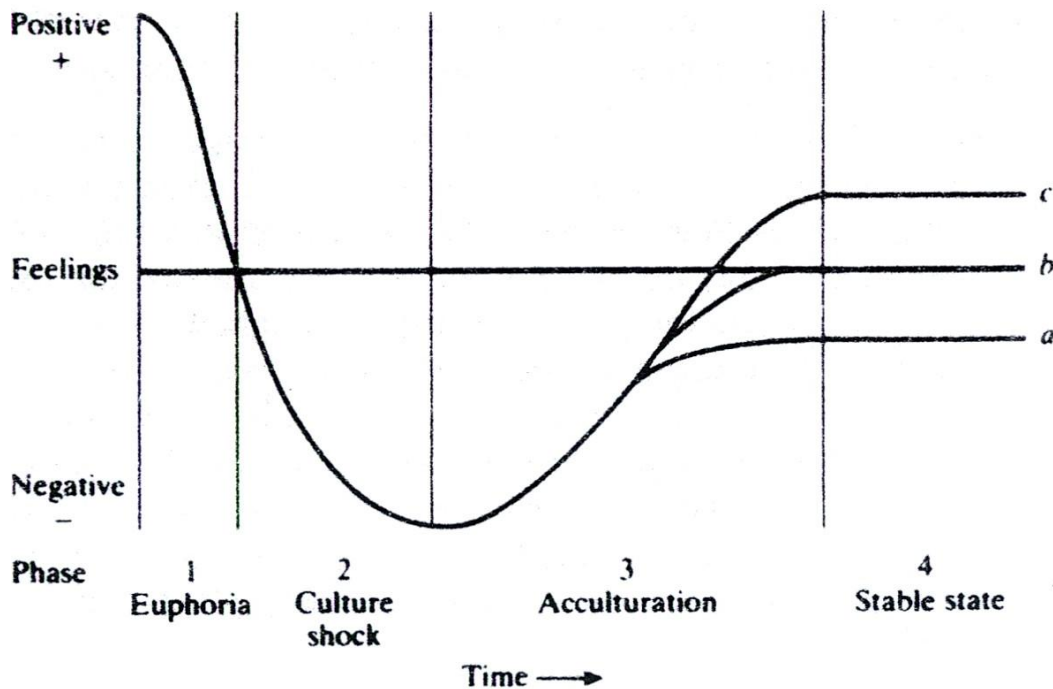


FIGURE 1. Acculturation curve (Hofstede, 2005, 324)

The negative ending of the acculturation curve is the outcome which is most undesired from the perspective of intercultural management, as this might mean the expatriate cannot handle his/her job in a new country and wants to move back to the home country. Furthermore, culture shock is an extremely personal phenomenon, and virtually the only person who can make this easier is the expatriate him/herself. On the other hand, the expatriate who has successfully survived from a culture shock and

moves back to his/her home country may go through the acculturation curve again. This time it would be the case of a reverse culture shock and it proves that culture shock is environmentally tied; every new environment means a new shock (Hofstede, 2005, 325).

### 3.5 Perception of time

In a simplistic way of thinking, time can mean “before” and “after”. However, in modern day societies the meaning of time and how people perceive it is more complex than this. The perception of time can be categorized into two major notions; the sequential, also known as linear and monochronic, and the synchronic, also known as polychronic, time. Furthermore, there are differences between societies in their orientation towards the past, present and future.

When time is perceived to be sequential, it is imagined to be a line of events, passing by at regular intervals. In this thinking, everything has its time and place, and all changes are undesired and they will disturb the sequential person. In everyday life this idea can be seen in the tradition of standing in line and waiting for one’s turn. Every event has its time, even if doing something in a different order was more convenient and punctuality is a vital tool to make life work. Moving from the beginning to the end in the least possible time is the core idea in this time perception and it is known as efficiency. The weakness of this is that the imagined straight time line is not always the best way to do things; in fact it ignores the possibilities of doing more than one task at the same time (Trompenaars, 1997, 120-123).

The synchronic cultures do not value punctuality highly as they think that time wasting is not catastrophic. Furthermore, they prefer that a person is “given time”. This means that one’s schedule cannot get in the way of his/her relationships. For example a businessman from a Latin country can be late from a meeting if he meets a friend on the way, as it would be considered impolite to pass by a friend and rush away. Linear people, for example Northern and Western Europeans and people from North America, waiting for the synchronically thinking businessman would be offended by this. Furthermore, in synchronic cultures the starting time of a meeting is less precise and more approximate. Linear people also tend to pay much attention how to reach a goal, while synchronic people with the same goal in mind emphasize the goal and not as much how to get there. Moreover, the synchronic cultures put emphasis on the amount of activities done at the same time. This can be very disturbing for someone not accustomed to it (Trompenaars, 1997, 124-135). Naturally, most

cultures lie somewhere between the extremes in this matter, and it is possible for the time perceptions to overlap and connect (Trompenaars, 1997, 136).

In many Asian countries there is a time perception that cannot be categorized into synchronized or sequential, the cyclic time. The main idea of cyclic time is that time is unlimited and it is on a repeat. Therefore, they do not believe that time can be wasted. In contrast to the linear timeline which is shown in the figure below (FIGURE 2), time is like a revolving circle, instead of a straight line. When a person who thinks of the time in this way gets tasks at work or elsewhere, he/she does not start immediately. He/she circles around them for some time, he/she decides which tasks are worth doing, which are not at all important and which task he/she should start with. The cyclic time is illustrated in the figure (FIGURE 3) below (Lewis, 1999, 57-58).



Figure 2. The linear time (Lewis, 1999, 59)

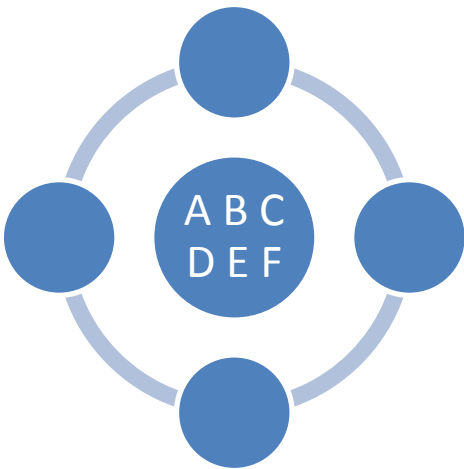


Figure 3. The cyclic time (Lewis, 1999, 57-58)

In addition to the aforementioned time concepts, cultures have differences in how they perceive the past, present and future. Others think the past is irrelevant and should be forgotten, while others live in a nostalgic past and make decisions based on their history. Some cultures and individuals on the other hand emphasize the present (Trompenaars, 1997, 122). In the business context, this is particularly visible in meetings with foreign visitors, or going abroad for a meeting. The past- and present-oriented people prefer talking about history, traditions, cultural heritage and they appreciate if the visitor has knowledge of these issues. They also do not appreciate fixing strict deadlines, even if they agree to do something in the future. On the other

hand, the future-oriented people have a preference for discussions about freedom, opportunities and unlike the past- and present-oriented people, they prefer setting strict deadlines. Furthermore, the future-oriented appreciate when the visitor shows he/she has learned something about the future prospects of the company beforehand (Trompenaars, 1997, 139).

### 3.6 Ethnocentrism, polycentrism & geocentrism

Different cultures react to strangers in different ways. Ethno-, poly-, and geocentrism are three points of view to process visitors from foreign cultures and what kind of standards of behaviour they are expected to follow. Ethnocentrism can be defined as “ethnic group self-centeredness, with four intergroup expressions of ingroup preference, superiority, purity, and exploitativeness, and two intragroup expressions of group cohesion and devotion” (Bizumic et al., 2009, 871). Moreover, ethnocentrism is evaluating other cultures based on one’s own culture, which usually tends to be unfair for the representative of the foreign culture. However, in a culture where people are frequently in contact with foreigners, they might start to be polycentric. In polycentrism people start to recognize how people from different cultures ought to be measured based on different standards. Furthermore, if polycentrism is taken far enough, it might turn to xenophilia, which is the idea that everything in other cultures is better than in one’s own (Hofstede, 2005, 326). In geocentrism nationalities are given minimal importance. For instance, company management seeking a person for a worldwide job, will choose the best person, regardless of his/her origins (Perlmutter, 1969, 13-14).

## 4 RESEARCH PROCESS AND METHODS

As a part of this thesis a research was conducted about experiences from people who have worked abroad. The information was gathered by sending out a questionnaire with open questions. In this chapter the research aims and goals will be explained along with discussion of the research method decisions. Furthermore, the questions of the questionnaire which was used to collect data will be undergone and the data collection process reviewed.

### 4.1 Goals of research

There were three main goals for the research. Firstly, the aim was to discover experiences about intercultural encounters from people with experience of working abroad and in general to find out if cultural differences really exist. Secondly, it was also a goal to see if the research results go along with the theory part which was presented earlier in this thesis. The third goal was to get information about whether people have taken courses of intercultural communication in their studies and how useful they think these courses were. The lastly mentioned goal was motivated by the relatively large number of intercultural communication courses I have taken.

### 4.2 Research methods

In the beginning of the research process, a significant decision had to be made about which research method to use. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were considered, but in the end the qualitative method proved to be more suitable for the research for this thesis.

The reasons to use qualitative method were numerous. First of all, the idea was to give the respondents the maximum amount of freedom to think about what they had experienced. This was conducted through a questionnaire with open questions. Also, the main reasons for choosing qualitative method and the relatively open questionnaire were to make answering as flexible as possible but still acquire relevant answers. Furthermore, the respondents needed space and not limited answering possibilities, mainly due to the fact that they were a very heterogenic group of people. Qualitative method is also more suitable for a smaller number of respondents, rather than a large sample of people (Saint-Germain, 1997).

### 4.3 Research questions

The questionnaire which was sent to the respondents included 11 questions. Four of the questions were simple questions to get information about the demographics of the respondents.

The first four questions were the following:

1. *What is your gender?*
2. *What is your age?*
3. *Where are you from?*
4. *In which country do/did you work?*

The four aforementioned questions enable the origins, the age, the gender and the country where the respondent works or worked to be analyzed. Furthermore, the age and gender distribution can be examined.

The first actual question supporting the research goals was the fifth one. The questions from the fifth to the eleventh will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

5. *What kind of problems or challenges have you experienced in your work abroad because of cultural differences?*

The aim of this question was to be a possibility for the respondents to mention their experiences abroad on a general level. Also, the question is purposefully not going into specifics in order not to scare the respondents with anything too difficult in the beginning. The question gives some freedom to the respondents regarding what they consider as “cultural differences”. The basic idea was that all the respondents already possess some knowledge about the subject.

6. *How is/was the style of leadership of your boss or bosses different to your home country?*

This question was included to the questionnaire to be able to show how the style of leadership differs between countries. Also, the question would clearly make it possible to gather answers that relate to some or all of the topics discussed earlier in the thesis, namely the five cultural dimensions such as power distance.

*7. How should a manager of a multicultural team act differently compared to a manager with a team that consists of one nationality only?*

This question is quite self-explanatory. Indeed, its aim was to find out how people wish their multicultural teams were lead. Furthermore, the question aims to discover what kind of qualities a leader of a multicultural team should possess in order to be suitable for the job. On the other hand, some people might not think it is necessary to do anything differently.

*8. Have you noticed a difference in how people from different countries think about time and how important time is for them?*

This question is directly related to chapter 3.5 discussing the perception of time. The purpose of the question is to find out if the respondents consider time perception different between cultures. The second part of the question, namely the importance of time, is supposed to clarify the question in order to make the respondents think about time from two points of view.

*9. Explain how you have been judged based on a stereotype?*

The subject of this question was discussed in chapter 3.3 called “stereotypes” and it seeks to clarify is how many of the respondents have been victims of a stereotype and how would they describe what happened.

*10. Describe how easily you adjusted to your new home country?*

This question would use the term “culture shock” which was discussed in chapter 3.4, but after consideration it does not, because the term might be unknown to certain people. The question was included to the questionnaire to discover if the respondents experienced troubles in settling in their new home country. The idea behind this question was also to see if the “culture shock” is common or something that never occurs.

*11. If you had any courses in your school about intercultural communication, describe the usefulness of them. If you didn't, do you think the subject would have been useful?*

One of the aims for the research was to discover if the respondents had taken any courses of intercultural communication during their studies and do they think the courses have proven useful. If they had never been on any such course, they were asked their opinion about the usefulness of them. These opinions could give an idea about whether courses of intercultural communication teach relevant topics regarding normal life or if they are merely full of useless theories.

#### 4.4 Data collection

Two kinds of people were selected to send the questionnaire with open questions to:

1. People currently working in a country that is not where they are originally from
2. People who have worked in a country that is not where they are originally from

All in all 24 people were asked to fill in the questionnaire, and 21 of them did answer. The questionnaire was made in Google Documents to make sure it would be as easy as possible for the people to respond. Since the main questions in the questionnaire were open-ended, the answers from the 21 respondents were analyzed manually.

## 5 RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this chapter the results of the questionnaire will be shown, and based on the findings possible similarities and variances will be processed. The questionnaire was sent to 24 people with current or previous experience of working abroad, and 20 responses were collected. Therefore, the total answer rate is 83%, which seems quite high. This can partly be explained by the fact that every possible respondent was approached personally and asked if they could fill the questionnaire, instead of sending the questionnaire to a number of people at the same time mechanically.

### 5.1 Results

As mentioned above, 20 people took part in answering the questions of the questionnaire. The distribution of gender and age can be seen in the table below (TABLE 6). Out of 20 respondents, 9 were male and 11 female, which makes the percentages of the gender of respondents 55% female and 45% male.

TABLE 6. Gender of respondents

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Gender of respondents</b>	
	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Female	11	55
Male	9	45
Total	20	100

As it can be seen in the table on the next page (TABLE 7), age of the respondents varies from 19 to 43. However, the majority of respondents are in their mid-twenties. The largest respondent group regarding their age are the 23 and 24-year-olds. There were four respondents of both age groups, making it 20% each.

TABLE 7. Age of respondents

<b>Age</b>	<b>Age of respondents</b>	
	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
19	1	5
20	1	5
22	3	15
23	4	20
24	4	20
25	2	10
26	2	10
27	1	5
28	1	5
43	1	5
Total	20	100

Where the respondents were originally from can be seen in the table below (TABLE 8). The countries with most respondents were The Netherlands with 7, Finland with 4 and Estonia with 2 respondents. All in all, 35% of the respondents were from The Netherlands. One respondent was from France, Belgium, Spain, United Kingdom, Hungary, Lithuania and Vietnam.

TABLE 8. Respondents' countries of origin

<b>Country</b>	<b>Respondents' country of origin</b>	
	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
The Netherlands	7	35
Finland	4	20
Estonia	2	10
France	1	5
Belgium	1	5
Spain	1	5
United Kingdom	1	5
Hungary	1	5
Lithuania	1	5
Vietnam	1	5
Total	20	100

As it can be seen in the table below (TABLE 9), most of the respondents work or worked in Spain. Spain was the country of employment for 13 people, which means 65% of the respondents. One person works or worked in Finland, Greece, Germany, China, The Netherlands, United Kingdom and Indonesia.

TABLE 9. Respondents' countries of employment

<b>Country</b>	<b>Respondents' country of employment</b>	
	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Spain	13	65
Finland	1	5
Greece	1	5
Germany	1	5
China	1	5
The Netherlands	1	5
United Kingdom	1	5
Indonesia	1	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>100</b>

The following table (TABLE 10) will feature all the respondents individually. The respondents will be given codes such as Respondent 1, Respondent 2 etc. in order to make the analysis of the questions and how they were answered clearer and more valid. The respondents will be listed in the order in which they replied. Later in the text, Respondent will be shortened to R.

TABLE 10. Background information of respondents

Respondent	Background information of respondents			
	Country of origin	Country of employment	Gender	Age
Respondent 1	Finland	Spain	Male	24
Respondent 2	Hungary	Spain	Female	25
Respondent 3	The Netherlands	Spain	Male	22
Respondent 4	France	Germany	Male	23
Respondent 5	Spain	China	Male	24
Respondent 6	The Netherlands	Spain	Male	26
Respondent 7	Estonia	Spain	Male	25
Respondent 8	United Kingdom	Spain	Male	43
Respondent 9	The Netherlands	Spain	Female	22
Respondent 10	The Netherlands	Spain	Female	22
Respondent 11	The Netherlands	Spain	Female	24
Respondent 12	The Netherlands	Spain	Female	20
Respondent 13	The Netherlands	Spain	Female	19
Respondent 14	Vietnam	Greece	Female	23
Respondent 15	Estonia	Finland	Female	27
Respondent 16	Belgium	Spain	Female	28
Respondent 17	Finland	Spain	Female	26
Respondent 18	Finland	England	Male	24
Respondent 19	Finland	Indonesia	Male	23
Respondent 20	Lithuania	The Netherlands	Female	23

The fifth question inquired about problems and challenges the respondent might have experienced because of cultural issues when he/she worked abroad. First of all, it needs to be mentioned that only one respondent (R12) said she had not experienced any problems related to cultural matters.

In the answers, the following challenges recurred the most and therefore had caused the respondents the most trouble regarding cultural differences:

- Verbal and non-verbal misunderstandings and miscommunication (R1, R7, R14, R19)
- Language barrier (R3, R6, R9, R14, R15)
- Differences in work ethic (R2, R11, R16, R20)

- Differences in the pace of life (R8, R17)
- Different level of authority at work (R6, R11)
- Differences in company hierarchy (R6, R11, R14)
- The amount of bureaucracy and the lack of efficiency (R8, R17)
- Different working hours (R6, R17)

After the aforementioned matters, the following themes had caused some challenges which were related to cultural difference related:

- Differences in talkativeness (R1)
- Differences in the preferred tone of voice (R1)
- Different perception of punctuality (R4)
- Different sense of humour (R2)
- Differences in the general way of thinking (R5)
- Differences in goals in negotiations (R5)
- Higher level of superficiality (R2)
- Importance of rules (R4)
- The feeling that a foreigner must work harder only because he/she is not a local (R15)
- Bad attitude towards foreigners in general (R18)

The subject of the sixth question was differences in leadership style between one's country of origin and the country where his/her intercultural work experience is from. One respondent (R5) had a boss from the same country as him, thus he did not answer this question, and one respondent (15) did not find any differences.

The following three differences in leadership recurred the most in the answers:

- Distance between management and employees (R6, R14)
- Level of authority (R11, R14, R17, R18)
- Relaxedness (R9, R10, R12, R17)
- Flexibility (R12, R19)

Differences in the following areas were also mentioned:

- Style of giving orders (R1)
- Superficiality (lack of honesty) (R2)
- Following of rules (R3)

- Need for manager to show authority (R3)
- Openness for ideas and discussion (R11)
- Openness for communication (R13)
- Strictness and aggressiveness (R14)
- Masculinity (R14)
- Friendliness (R16)
- Punctuality (R19)
- Familiarity (R20)

In the seventh question respondents were asked to tell how they think a manager of a multicultural team should act differently compared to a manager in charge of a team consisting of only one nationality. One respondent (R15) did not think there needed to be any difference.

The following qualities of a boss recurred the most:

- Awareness and understanding of cultural differences (R4, R6, R7, R8, R9, R10, R11, R13, R17, R20)
- Taking the backgrounds of employees into account (R1, R12, R18)
- Open attitude (R11, R12, R13, R14)
- Treating the multinational team as individuals and not as a whole (R17, R18)
- Flexibility (R5, R7, R12)

The following qualities were also mentioned:

- Understanding of the fact that different things motivate different people (R6)
- Allowing of different approaches (R6)
- Tolerance (R2)
- Lack of prejudice (R2)
- Respect for other ways of thinking (R3)
- Taking time to observe how team members communicate (R14)
- Usage of 1 on 1 chats (R17)
- Abundance of communication (R4)
- Making an effort to integrate the team (R5, R19)
- Refrain of imposing his/her own style of working (R5)
- Long-term thinking (R7)
- Friendliness (R14)
- Ability to speak more than one language (R16)

- Experience in travelling (R16)

The eighth question was about differences in time perception. All respondents except one (R8) had noticed differences, and one (R20) did not specify her notions.

The following differences were mentioned:

- Importance of time in general (R2, R9, R14, R15, R17)
- The perception of what it means to be "on time" (R1, R3, R13)
- Importance of "own time" after work (R7, R19)
- Acceptance towards sleeping in meetings (R5)
- Importance of punctuality (R2, R4, R9)
- Different working hours and the lack of the 9 to 5 mentality (R6, R12, R18)
- The amount of time allocated to human relations (R11, R16)
- Attitude towards time (14)

It was also mentioned by respondent 17 that apparently people tend to adjust their time perception to the host culture. Furthermore, the importance of punctuality was noticed to be a part of the behaviour towards rules in general by respondent 4.

The ninth question was about stereotypes. 9 out of 20 respondents said they had been judged based on a stereotype, 10 said they had not, and one respondent (R15) was not sure.

The stereotypes that were mentioned were the following:

- Quietness (R1)
- Directness (R11)
- Heavy drinking habits (R19)
- The idea that people from north like cold weather (R17)
- The idea that a person must possess certain skills because he/she is from a certain country (R18)
- Spanish stereotype in northern countries (R6)
- "All Asians are Chinese" (R14)

Furthermore, some larger themes were mentioned:

- A respondent was judged based on what the government of his country had done (R4)
- A respondent had heard positive sarcastic comments or jokes about his origins (R4)
- According to one respondent, stereotypes tend to disappear with higher level of education (R20)

The tenth question dealt with adjusting to a new home country and the easiness of it. Of 20 respondents, 11 specifically mentioned that their settling in was easy, quite easy or very easy, and one person described the settling in process as really difficult.

The respondents mentioned the following notions about the adjustment to the new country:

- It helps to have a network already in place (R8)
- It gets easier when one gets to know locals (R6)
- The easiness of the adjustment depends on how open one is and whether he/she accepts bad things and enjoys good ones. Furthermore, his/her own efforts are of high importance (R5)
- If the locals have a habit of spending time away from their homes helps as it makes easier to meet people (R11)
- Language barrier makes adjustment more difficult (R16)
- Holidays and student exchange do not necessarily prepare for professional life abroad (R17)

Some respondents had also mentioned how long it took to adjust to the new culture, and the time ranged from one week to 7 months.

The eleventh question inquired whether the respondents had taken courses of intercultural communication during their studies. If they had not taken the courses, they were asked to tell if they think the courses would have been useful. Of the 20 respondents, 13 had had courses of intercultural communication and of them 12 said the courses were useful. One person (R3) did not think the course he/she took had been useful. Six respondents (R10, R12, R13, R15, R16, R18) told they had not taken such courses at all, and four of them (R13, R15, R16, R18) thought such courses would have been useful. One respondent (R8) did not specify whether he had taken courses of intercultural communication.

The following reasons were mentioned regarding why such courses had been useful:

- They help realize that people do not think the same way about same issues (R1)
- The courses were a good preparation for moving abroad (R2)
- They arose interest and awareness of cultural differences (R4, R6)
- They help realize that what is strange in one place, might be normal somewhere else (R4)
- The courses make students from different cultures interact (R5, R20)
- Students learn how other people do business (R9)
- The courses give information of culture shock, cultural dimensions, cultural behaviours and intercultural communication in a theoretical sense (R14)
- They create a basis for understanding how to operate in a multinational team and organization (R17)
- One can learn how to communicate better (R19)
- The courses could make people move more (R15)

The following reasons were mentioned about why courses of intercultural communication were not useful:

- The courses on intercultural communication can perpetuate stereotypes (R8)
- The course content was too general (R4)

Moreover, respondents (R6, R7, R8, R11) said the best way to learn the topics of intercultural communication is to travel and that experience is more important than the theory taught on the courses.

### 5.1.1 Limitations

There were some limitations for the research. Although as the data was collected with a qualitative method, it can be argued that 20 respondents is not enough to provide a broad view. However, by keeping the questionnaire open ended the answers were less limited. Another limitation for the research was the possible lack of knowledge of the respondents. For example, in order to be able to answer the question about stereotypes, the respondent was assumed to know what a stereotype means.

## 5.2 Discussion

The first conclusion that can be drawn after analyzing the results of the research is that cultural differences indeed do exist. Of the 20 respondents, an overwhelming majority reported of having faced problems, challenges or other incidents caused by cultural differences.

As it can be seen in the previous subchapters, majority of the respondents were from countries which can be generalized as “northern countries”, such as The Netherlands and Finland. Also a clearly analyzable fact is that most of the respondents work or have worked in Spain, which can be labelled as a “Latin country”. Therefore, it is not a surprise to discover that the respondents reported of differences in such issues as authority, time perception, punctuality and pace of life. The results in general seem to correlate with the theories of intercultural communication introduced in this thesis.

More than half of the respondents had taken courses of intercultural communication and most of them thought such courses are useful. However, such points as the importance of actual experience about cultural differences instead of knowledge of theories and the danger of intercultural communication courses perpetuating stereotypes was also considered highly meaningful. Keeping this in mind, it needs to be remembered that there is no way of knowing whether the answers were all based on experiences and not at all on stereotypes.

As mentioned in chapter 4.1, the research had three main goals. It was already mentioned that the first goal was reached by discovering many different examples of what cultural differences can be and what problems or challenges they can cause. Furthermore, it was indeed realized that cultural differences do exist. The second goal was to see if the theory of intercultural issues fits together with the experiences. Although the research does not give a full answer for this question, there are many points that can be found also in the theory part of the thesis, such as time perception, power distance and stereotypes. The third goal was to find out if the respondents had taken courses of intercultural communication and if they thought they were useful or not. As a result, some respondents also mentioned that another efficient way of learning intercultural differences is to travel. As already mentioned already in this chapter, the majority had taken such courses and majority of them thought they were useful to them. Also, it is good to mention that many those who had not taken such courses had a positive image about the usefulness of them.

The research added knowledge about communication challenges in multicultural environments, since the subject can hardly ever be totally discovered and all the problems about it solved. The research could have been wider and it could have included more respondents from many more countries. This would have made the results more reliable in a wider context. As discussed earlier however, this research gives an idea of the different thinking between north and south in particular, and especially about Spain. Furthermore, the reliability of the research even as it is now should not be underrated because the respondents did not have to give their names and therefore did not have much of a reason not to tell the truth about how they feel. Although, it is true that it can never be known for sure whether some respondents do not like to report negative experiences. The validity of the research would rise along with the raised number of respondents.

As mentioned in the introduction, companies and workforce move around and do not limit themselves to only one country anymore. As presented earlier, people have noticed cultural differences and therefore learning to be aware of such issues could greatly benefit the company and the employee and make the success easier to reach. However, the emphasis of thinking should not always be on the learned differences of cultures, but more importantly on keeping an open mind.

If the research was to be taken further, it would provide more accurate information about national and cultural differences. Even this research would have benefited much if there had been more respondents. This research however makes it easier to form further questions for the possible questionnaire or interview. One of the reasons to choose open ended questions in this case was not to limit the possibilities to only one person's world view and imagination. Now that there is a base of what people have reported it would be easier to form questions and probably it would also be possible to use a quantitative multiple choice questionnaire and much more respondents. Making a larger survey would obviously demand more time, of which there would not have been enough this time. One other possibility would be to narrow the aims and concentrate on a specific culture or few, for example Finnish expatriates in Sweden and vice versa. This would provide country-specific information that could be used by companies involved in the aforementioned locations. Also, the age group of the respondents in this research is somewhat limited as they are mostly under 30 years old. Using a sample group of people whose age varies more would naturally provide more perspective.

The methodological choice for the research process was to use mainly the qualitative method. However, the quantitative method was also taken into use in the first few questions in order to gain demographical knowledge of the respondents. For the rest of the research, the qualitative method was seen better for a number of reasons. First of all, it let the respondents to answer the questions without the influence of the researcher's ideas about the subjects. Therefore, the answers provided were, for the most part, touching a wider array of issues than it would have been possible if they had been given multiple choice questions instead of the open ended questions. This, however, was also one of the weaknesses of the research. Since the respondents were able to answer how they liked, the answers they provided were from a very wide range and sometimes difficult to interpret. For example, three different respondents were talking about the same issue in three different ways. This caused a fair deal of difficulties when the data was analyzed. Also, the qualitative method made it easier for the respondent to give an answer that did not exactly answer to the question and thus it was relatively useless. Furthermore, a weakness for the research was the fact that the respondents' English skills and the assumption that they had had intercultural experiences were given much weight. In the end it is safe to say that they did not lack of experiences, but sometimes they probably could not communicate what they wanted to say because they were not answering in their native language. All in all, the qualitative method provided much more data than the quantitative method could have provided and despite of the occasional difficulties of interpreting the data the choice of method was right.

When talking about practical methods used in the research, they can be listed shortly; Google Documents was used for conducting the questionnaire and Microsoft Word for analyzing the results. Analyzing the results was a delicate process as all the answers had to be gone through one by one instead of just calculating how many respondents answered a certain question in a certain way. The critical point was to find similarities in answers that were possibly not expressed in the same words, in other words, it was important to read between the lines. This issue also raised thoughts that some questions could have been formulated differently either to make them easier to understand or more precise. If something about the practice should be changed it would be the amount of time. If there was more time available for the research process, everything could be thought through more thoroughly and errors due to carelessness could be minimized. Also if the number of respondents was to be set higher, the quantitative method would probably work better than the qualitative one due to the bigger sample.

It is possible to generalize this research into a wider context. However, its sample size makes it somewhat unreliable when talking about specific cultural differences. Furthermore, it is presumable that cultural differences beyond the sample group of this research vary considerably and therefore it remains questionable whether this topic can ever be generalized to cover the whole issue of communication issues due to cultural differences. Having said this, even a research with only 20 respondents gives an idea of possible intercultural problems that a person could face when he/she moves to work abroad, or when a person works in a multicultural team in his/her home country.

There were some limitations to the research, firstly the number of people involved in the questionnaire. Naturally the bigger sample there is the more reliable the research gets. Although almost everyone who was sent the questionnaire answered, there could have been more respondents if the questionnaire was sent to more people. However, this was limited by the restriction of wanting only respondents with work experience from a foreign country. Secondly, the literature used for the theory part of the thesis was quite thin as it largely relies on two significant sources. Thirdly, time is always a limit. As all research, also this one needed to be finished and it puts pressure on the process.

In the end, all theses that touch the same subjects as this one are probably very much alike regarding the theory parts of them. However, the research part about working abroad should add some new knowledge in the field. Also, as mentioned before it can be used in practice when a person is in a situation which demands intercultural awareness. Therefore, the thesis possesses some real relevance and can be used.

Regarding the whole process from my own perspective, it needs to be said that a long project like this was truly challenging. It was longer in time and in pages than any school-related task before, and therefore it was not surprising that it was difficult to start and equally difficult to finish. There were some already familiar topics in the theory part but also some subjects that were still a little or completely unknown. Plenty of analytical skills were needed to interpret the qualitative data which was the core of the research. Knowledge about the theory subjects was raised during this process and the research part in particular revealed many new sides to different topics. There was already interest towards these issues even before the start of the thesis project and it surely did not vanish during the process, although it may have suffered some inflation at different parts of the process. Lastly, it is difficult to think a subject more

related to the study field of international business than communication problems in multicultural environments and therefore it should prove to be very beneficial for future studies.

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## APPENDIX 1 Questionnaire

### Questionnaire

This questionnaire is a part of my final thesis and your answers will provide important information regarding the research part of it.

The aim of this questionnaire is to find out information about your experiences of working in a foreign country.

Please take a few minutes to answer these 11 questions.

- Olli Harjunen, student in Savonia UAS

\* Required

1. What is your gender? \*
2. What is your age? \*
3. Where are you from? \*
4. In which country do/did you work? \*
5. What kind of problems or challenges have you experienced in your work abroad because of cultural differences? \*
6. How is/was the style of leadership of your boss or bosses different to your home country? \*
7. How should a manager of a multicultural team act differently compared to a manager with a team that consists of one nationality only? \*
8. Have you noticed a difference in how people from different countries think about time, and how important time is for them? \*
9. Explain how you have been judged based on a stereotype? \*
10. Describe how easily you adjusted to your new home country? \*
11. If you had any courses in your school about intercultural communication, describe the usefulness of them. If you didn't, do you think the subject would have been useful? \*

Thank you for answering, please click "submit".