The Intercultural Momentum.

A Survey in the South on Meeting with People from the North

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ABSTRACT

Most sociologists and economists view North-South relationships in terms of either financial interests, or (whether conflicting or not) different systems of values. They tend to use a macro-approach, which often takes place on the basis of either purely deductive grounds or very broad empirical databases. Only rarely is the intercultural momentum examined: what happens when people from North and South come across each other at a meeting, e.g. for establishing a project together. By deploying an explorative survey, we let people from the South give an interpretation as to what happens during an intercultural meeting. One striking result is that such intercultural momentum is often grossly underestimated by the Northern partners.

Keywords

Intercultural partnerships, North-South, survey

THE AIM: A POLL BASED ON DISCERNMENT AND EXPERIENCE

In a study carried out on intercultural partnerships (Elsen, Pollet & Develtere, 2007) we decided to focus our empirical component on intercultural meetings in professional practices and the respective impressions of those involved from the South. Diverting from the usual theoretical introductions like the ones of Hofstede & Hofstede (1991) or Schwartz and Sagiv (1995), the idea was to have a Southern view on the culturally biased behaviour of Europeans. Rather than to poll for immanent stigmas, we wanted to zoom in on the intercultural 'momentum', however in a manner which would go beyond the hasty and the anecdotic. The research method would therefore be a survey, but because of the explorative character of the thematic, without any pretensions of representative random sampling. Representation is a difficult requirement if one has as a starting point that the population is 'the population of the South'. Pragmatically, it was decided to carry out the survey via email with consultants, researchers and other professional points of contact situated in the South (Africa, Asia and Latin America) with whom our research team has had professional contact in the last five years.

Hence, because of practical considerations the object of the survey was narrowed to people from the South professionally dealing with Europeans. Although the remark was often made that there are differences between European nationalities, the respondents showed common sense by basing their answers on a sort of imaginary average.

The questionnaire itself consists of a series of statements (38 in total) where the respondents must choose their answer according to the Lickert-scale (a scale of 5: totally agreeing, mostly agreeing, neither agreeing or disagreeing, mostly disagreeing and totally disagreeing). The survey was carried out in the second half of 2006 and produced a total response of 106 valid, complete questionnaires.

A first look at the response showed us the following: out of the 106 respondents 57 come from Africa, 25 from Asia and 24 from Latin America. As for the professional distribution, we counted 12 businessmen (self-employed), 37 working in the NGO sector, 41 academics or consultants and 16 working for the government.

In this paper, we pooled the results of the survey around the following themes: dealing with time; distinction between the personal and the professional; how one reaches decisions; interpretation of leadership.

The presented numbers mirror perceptions. Perceptions are realities, often themselves important realities because one attaches to them behaviour and expected behaviour. At the same time perceptions are often unreliable or deformations of the reality to which they refer. They can be based on one's own experiences as well as on discernment and hearsay. One's own experiences may have been, by coincidence, positive or negative. Hence we ask the reader to interpret such results with the appropriate caution.

BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER: DEALING WITH TIME

A number of questions aimed towards the perception of behaviour of Europeans and of own compatriots in connection with:

- to inform beforehand that a meeting is to take place;
- preparation for a meeting;
- how quickly one arrives 'to the point';
- how quickly one demands results;
- regarding a meeting as a step in a longer process.

According to our respondents from the South, Europeans appear to announce a meeting well in advance and be well prepared contrary to their own compatriots.

Table 1 Preparation of a meeting: perception of Southern professionals

	% who agree
Europeans usually let us know long enough in advance when they want to have a meeting	90.6 %
People from my country usually let their foreign partners know long enough in advance when they want to have a meeting.	35.8 %
Europeans usually come to a meeting well prepared.	87.7 %
People from my country usually come to a meeting well prepared.	48.1 %

Europeans have also a different use of time during the meeting: they want to wrap up faster than people from the South. Apart from that, Europeans want a meeting to produce results more than the people from the South, who consider the meeting to be more like a step in a longer process.

Table 2 Results from a meeting: perception of Southern professionals

	% who agree
Europeans tend to come to the point very quickly.	82.1%
People from my country tend to come to the point very quickly.	22.6%
Europeans usually want very quick results from a joint-undertaking.	75.5%
People from my country usually want very quick results from a joint-undertaking	54.7%
Europeans see a meeting just as a meeting and not as a step in a long-lasting relationship	52.8%
People from my country see a meeting just as a meeting and not as a step in a long-lasting relationship.	25.5%

As people from the South see it, the emphasis in time management for Europeans lies on “before”: one plans well in advance, so that the meeting will proceed faster and with no surprises. Above all Europeans work towards results: a meeting is an investment that must deliver. With people from the South the emphasis lies on ‘during’ and also on the timeless: we are partners, therefore it is important that we listen a lot to each other. A meeting is not an investment but a constituent part of a process. If one engages in a partnership, it is not for a short while – as we shall see in the following paragraph.

These differences regarding time perspective can lead to misunderstandings and be a source of aggravation. Europeans attending a meeting in Africa observe that the planning is only made when everyone is around the table. This has practical reasons. The context has many contingencies which cannot be foreseen in advance: who is going to be present? Who is stuck in an airport? Will the equipment work? But there is also another fundamental, culturally determined reason: first see with whom we sit around the table, first learn about each other sufficiently, so one thinks in Africa, then we can do business. Africans, but also Latin Americans, are inclined to announce formally a simple intervention in a conference with the appropriate attention, formalities and placements. The fact that this requires much (expensive) time is taken into account. These cultural differences may be explained by several of the Hofstede’s dimensions, such as dealing with insecurity and short/long term focusing (Hofstede, 1991).

Trompenaars (1993) attributes the emphasis that people in the South put on the ‘now’ to the dichotomy between sequential cultures and concurrent cultures. In the trail of Hall (1959) one may suggest that for many people from the South a meeting is a ‘low context’ moment in a culture which is essentially ‘high context’. Hence the inclination to explicitly deal with each detail, out of fear of making ‘a mistake’.

Away from the elucidating models, what it comes down to in practice is that one must not try to outdo one another but to be willing to come half way. The difference in time conception is not disconnected from another cultural ‘schism’ between North and South: universalism and particularism. The following paragraph is dedicated to this.

Nothing personal, only business – or is it?

Social scientists like Parsons (1959) and Trompenaars (1993) work with dichotomous (being diametrically opposite each other) cultural variables. The characterisation on the basis of universalism vs particularism is a striking example. In cultural terms universalism means that one is driven in his acts in all situations and facing all people by the same rules and principles; whereas particularism means that the kind of relation one has with someone determines the ways one handles the other person with. This means concretely that there is a different set of rules, for example, for people of the same group (familial, ethnic, nationality) than for ‘outsiders’: one borrows or lends with no interest, one closes the eyes in case of breaching of rules, one favours relatives with promotions.

One of the questions in the survey probed the desirability of mixing personal and business interest. In the South it is very desirable to have a closer personal acquaintance between ‘business contacts’, much more than for Europeans. 44% of the participants find the fact that Europeans are not interested in getting acquainted with them as a hindrance to the establishment of connections. Above all it is assumed by friends that they shall be friends for life. In this sense people from the South are often disappointed at the long radio silence from Europe.

Table 3 Business as a personal relationship: perception of Southern professionals

	% who agree
Europeans are eager to get to know us personally	52.8 %
People from my country are eager to get to know their European partners personally.	89.6 %
Europeans usually keep in touch after they have returned to their country	49.1 %
People from my country usually keep in touch with their European guests after they have returned to their country.	73.6 %

In the series ‘characteristics of Europeans harmful to setting up ties’ 39% of the respondents declared: they do not maintain contact after they have left. This is not the ‘biggest sin’ of the Europeans, but it shows that duration and sincerity of contacts in the South (primarily Africa) is held in high esteem.

The fact that the personal is clearly important in the South, has extreme implications for intercultural contacts. It is in

one's interests to send the same person whenever a European organisation is to establish a partner organisation in the South. Someone that one knows, even better the same person who originally set up the contact. Afterwards one advises, whenever people from the South come to Europe, to invest in the necessary care at the reception, just like Europeans are 'pampered' in the South. That means: picking them up personally from the airport, coming to look for them in the hotel, going out to eat together ... People from the South are often astonished that they are left on their own – while Europeans often prefer to be left in peace.

Following the functionalistic sociology, particularism is often looked down upon as 'old fashioned'. But it is a reality in many non-European countries. There are also advantages in getting things done in a context where institutions often function laboriously. Above all particularism is 'of the people' and in this sense something universal: Europeans will also fall back onto their own families, their acquaintances, colleagues or compatriots in times of crises and in uncertain or strange situations.

NEGOTIATIONS AND CONSENSUS

In the list 'harmful characteristics of Europeans' (10 statements that one can quote as 'very harmful', 'to some extent harmful', 'occurs but is not harmful' and 'does not occur') this is what it was most often declared as harmful: 'they want us to accept their point of view'. No less than 62.3% of the respondents found this 'very or to some extent harmful'.

Anthropologists know that in many southern countries intense, potentially or effectively conflicting matters are solved through long discussions. Factors, crucial next to the input of time, are: not to make one lose face, the group is more important than the individual (loyalty) and everyone has a say. This last thing is attributed to a simple psychic pattern: through the mere expression (a physical action) of an idea, which one originally did not support, one is inclined to adjust one's own attitude. At the end one reaches an understanding which everybody can live with.

Europeans have certainly broken away from obtaining a solution in that manner. One does not put time into undertaking long-drawn negotiations. Also the loyalty to the group is not taken for granted. In addition losing face is not a point for the Europeans: because of the strict separation between business and personal, Europeans are able to let their negotiating partners fail miserably in public and still pat him or her amicably on the shoulder after the meeting. People from the South, for whom the negotiating process is something personal, do not understand something like this. They often smile politely and meanwhile in silence they conclude that the European in question is not a trustworthy partner, not someone that they can gladly work with.

This came out in our survey, yet the differences are relative – and in this sense they can be bridged over.

Table 4 Readiness to compromise: perception of Southern professionals

	% who agree
Europeans try to persuade us rather than to look for a compromise	56.6 %
People from my country try to persuade their European partners rather than to look for a compromise.	39.6 %
Europeans tend to be dominant during meetings	54.7 %

There are big differences on the point of 'People from my country try to persuade' between Africans (24.1% agree), Asians (47.8% agree) and Latin Americans (62.5% agree). This may indicate that Latin Americans do not interpret the dominant attitude of the Europeans as 'taken for granted' as much as the Africans do. They want to stand up at specific moments for when they think 'they are right'. As for the 'European dominance', this was perceived as such most clearly by the Africans in our sample (64.8% agreeing).

DIFFERENCES IN LEADERSHIP

Whoever, as European, wants to do business in Africa with an African partner, may think: I must make sure that I deal with the boss and only with the boss. And he must think – even if it is not so in reality – that I am also the boss.

We found that it was worth looking into a number of stereotypes around leadership, because they are perhaps crucial for the success of intercultural undertakings. These stereotypes, which are very popular in Europe, sound like:

- in the South the boss takes all decisions himself, in the North one delegates more;
- in the South the boss is a male, in the North can equally be a female;
- in the South the boss must exercise direct supervision over his subordinates, in the North this is not necessary;
- in the South the boss will not tolerate any objections, in the North he will.

Table 5 Leadership styles: perception of Southern professionals

	% who agree
As far as I know, in Europe, a leader of an organization takes the decisions by him(her)self, without delegating it to other staff.	17.0 %
In my country, a leader of an organization takes the decisions by him(her)self, without delegating it to other staff.	55.6 %
In Europe, I think women are considered just as suitable as men to take the leadership of an organization.	76.4 %
In my country, women are considered just as suitable as men to take the leadership of an organization.	33.0 %
In Europe, I think a boss has to keep an eye on his employees, otherwise they do not work.	21.7 %
In my country, a boss has to keep an eye on his employees, otherwise they do not work.	61.3 %
In Europe, it is all right to disagree with a superior.	55.7 %
In my country, it is all right to disagree with a superior.	17.9 %

In a certain sense the 'stereotypes' are confirmed in that way. Without tying any moral judgement, it is at least positive that one is conscious of the consequences of the (possibly relative) differences in interpretation about leadership. In the North one has to be conscious to put the emphasis on chief-to-chief talks for the most important

discussions between partner organisations. At the same time it is valid to say that whenever a southern organisation is visited by someone from the North, who is in no position of leadership in his own organisation, there is no implication that this person does not have 'full powers'. To acknowledge and accept differences in forms is a learning process from which all parties involved can benefit.

Political correctness should not prevent us from seeing that in the South the road still needs to be opened for women to be able to be accepted in leading positions. Amongst the three southern continents the Latin Americans consider themselves as the most emancipated one (42% agree that it is acceptable to them to object to their superiors; 54% think that in their country women are as capable as men for leadership).

PERCEPTIONS AND REALITY

The survey, which is discussed above, has investigated the perceptions of professional people located in the South about their European business relationships. Perceptions find themselves in the continuum between image and experience, they have been themselves collectively measured, and are not per definition a representation of reality. On the other hand, perceptions shape a reality by themselves: often one positions one's self in front of another on the ground of the image that one has of the other and hence one deals as such. That is why it is important to register perceptions.

The survey confirmed amongst other things that people from the South have a different approach to time than Europeans, that they see Europeans separating business from the personal (which is less the case in the South) and that there are serious differences in the approach to (ascribed) leadership. One sees that Europeans appreciate advance planning more than own compatriots, they come faster to the point during a meeting, they take less time to learn to know each other and often one hears nothing more from them. The latter is not greatly appreciated. It fits into the image that the South has of Europeans: 'they do their best for everything to go smoothly, they adapt their external appearances, but they are not really interested in our culture in depth. Apart from that, they dare to come out as dominant and they want us to accept their point of view instead of aiming towards a consensus'. With respect to leadership one observes that Europeans delegate easier and they have less need to exercise direct supervision. Women are more accepted in leadership roles and, that is how it is felt, it is much more acceptable to object to a superior in Europe than it is in the South.

The perceived differences between the South and Europe surface more explicitly in the opinions of the Africans. They feel more strongly than the others that Europeans come out as dominant. They themselves appear more particularistic, where personal ties are considered more important for professional cooperation. What is felt more than often as problematic in Africa is this presumed totally

different attitude of Europeans in this area. Asians have a less philanthropical image of Europeans but they are equally irritated about the sort of superiority feeling that Europeans have. The most positive judgement of the Europeans come from our Latin American sample which also places itself closer to the Europeans than the Africans and the Asians.

CONCLUSION

This survey is based on a very small sample. One must not draw universal patterns out of it. It would be worth repeating such survey, spread over a much larger sampling population and targeting a specific profession in a specific country. Only in such a way one will come closer to some sort of representation.

There are enough indications from this survey to find that the moment of the meeting, the 'intercultural momentum' is often the determining factor for further development of a partnership. The appearance of Europeans, the respect for a different approach to time and the sincerity of their interest, are determining factors for the attitude of their partners in the South as much as the contents of their project and the advantages that they offer. Each meeting is a chance for a multiplying friendship, in the length of time and over a great number of people. To paraphrase Shakespeare, we can suggest: 'the good things that men (or women) do, live after them'.

In a nutshell the survey taught us that people in the South attach more importance to the intercultural momentum than Europeans do. An intercultural momentum must according to them become deeper, in the sense that one must take more time to listen to one another. Subsequently it must be cherished and personalised, to take the form of more than a simple business relationship. It must also be stretched, in other words to be extrapolated to the future. It offers the opportunity to generate mutual acknowledgement and equality between people of different cultures.

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