Sucking stones: Absurdity, paradox and quantifying the unquantifiable in cross cultural management studies

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abstract

This short paper attempts to highlight ontological paradoxes and examples of the absurd in cross cultural management (CCM) studies. The philosophical perspectives of absurdism and logical paradox are adopted as a novel approach through which CCM's Hofstede paradigm can be viewed. Examples are taken from literature and philosophy in an attempt to highlight the juxtaposition between the complexity of the predominant method and enormity of the data set in CCM studies on the one hand, and the simplistic and relatively meaningless nature of the resulting outputs on the other.

Introduction

There is a scene in *Molloy*, the first novel of Samuel Beckett's absurdist trilogy, in which Molloy, an elderly homeless drunk, wanders a pebbled beach collecting 'sucking stones'. The problem for Molloy, to which Beckett dedicates one paragraph over five pages, is how to distribute his sucking stones amongst his four pockets such that he sucks each stone in turn while rotating them round his four pockets thus avoiding the 'diabolical hazard' of 'only sucking four, always the same, turn and turn about' (Beckett, 1955: 70).

In the end, and after great deliberations, Molloy comes to the realisation that 'it was all the same to me whether I sucked a different stone each time or always the same stone, until the end of time. For they all tasted exactly the same' (*ibid*: 74). And the solution to which Molloy finally rallies in the end 'was to throw away all the stones but one, which I kept now in one pocket, now in another, and which of course I soon lost, or threw away, or gave away, or swallowed...' (*ibid*).

Molloy's quasi-mathematical sucking-stone conundrum provides a novel and unorthodox metaphor for a critical perspective on the field of cross cultural management (CCM). CCM studies have embarked over the past four decades on a mission to quantify cultural difference in a workplace context underpinned by a Western-centric, postcolonial and expansionist discourse focussing on new 'markets' and 'opportunities' (Ailon, 2008: 885). Examined from an absurdist perspective, a disconnect can be observed between the search for meaning practitioners, researchers and educators apply to the masses of data collected in CCM studies and the apparent meaninglessness of its subsequent analysis and application. It could be said, in other words, that the cultural differences observed by cross-culturalists are the Business/Management equivalent of Molloy's sucking stones. Great effort is taken in the positivistic collection, manipulation and analysis of the data before their inherent meaninglessness results in them being, to paraphrase Beckett, simply lost, thrown away, given away, or swallowed.

This short article explores philosophical absurdism and related epistemological paradoxes in positivist Hofstedian CCM studies. Over the past four decades, Geert Hofstede's work on national management cultures has become a staple of international management studies. Originally based on an international survey of IBM employees, the Hofstede database now consists of data from 76 countries from which Hofstede has produced his 'dimensions of culture' (originally 4, now 6). This dimensionalisation 'groups together a number of phenomena in a society that were empirically found to occur in combination, regardless of whether there seems to be a logical necessity for their going together' (Hofstede et al., 2010: 31). In other words, the Hofstede paradigm is based on 'analyzing survey-based values data at the national level and quantifying differences between national

cultures by positions on cultural dimensions' (Hofstede, 2011: 16). The popularity of Hofstede's approach is such that it has become the main reference point for cross-cultural studies in international management studies as well as being hugely influential amongst practitioners (Kolman et al., 2002). The paradigm has not been without its critics however and, in recent years, critiquing Hofstede has become the academic equivalent of dead horse flogging. This paper however is unique in its use of philosophical absurdism and logical paradox as critical perspectives.

The first section of the paper ponders the merit of philosophical absurdism as a critical perspective for the paradigm. The related notion of self-referential logical paradox is subsequently introduced in order to undermine the foundations of the positivistic CCM method. Rather than attempting to 'prove' anything, the paper merely and humbly casts a novel perspective on what has become 'the dominant culture paradigm in business studies' (Nakata, 2009: 3) since its origins in 1980. The aim is to encourage an increase in head scratching amongst scholars in a field which has too seldom come under the spotlight of critical academic rigour that one might expect (Jack and Westwood, 2009).

An absurdist critique

In the most general terms, philosophical absurdism is based on the existentialist position that life is devoid of any objective meaning and that any attempts to find meaning within it are doomed to failure and, as such, absurd. Standing under this expansive umbrella however are various strands which find expression not only in philosophical texts, but in literature, theatre, art and dance. These stances are not contradictory, but rather can be understood as differing manifestations of the realisation of the lack of inherent meaning in differing aspects of our lives. Kierkegaard focussed on the absurdity of religious faith and Camus on the absurdity of the human quest for meaning in a world devoid of any. This paper, however, focusses on the human compulsion to structure and code our understanding of the world despite the impossibility of the task and the lack of inherent meaning or value that results from these efforts. The working definition of the absurd

adopted in this paper is therefore one that considers absurdism as 'a philosophical stance embracing a wide range of relativist perspectives, which implies that the efforts of humanity to find or absolutely define, limit, express or exclude the inherent meanings of anything, including metaphysical and theological claims, but especially claims concerning the human existence, are absurd because the qualities of communicable information available to the human mind, and relationships within reality makes any certainty about such impossible' (New World Encyclopaedia, 2018). It is not, therefore, the counting and ordering of stones in our earlier example that is absurd, nor is it our homeless, drunken anti-hero Molloy himself. It is the ends to which he carries out this exercise and, crucially, his later reflective realisation that the act serves no purpose and has no meaning. Mooney describes Beckett's character as a 'suffering Cartesian', 'paralysed by the inability of Cartesian rationalism to order his life' (1978: 39). It is, in other words, Descartes' meticulously followed method which produces the absurd for Molloy.

Descartes' *Meditations*

The link between Beckett and Descartes is far from a tenuous one. 'Beckett absorbed a number of philosophical ideas but was particularly fascinated by Cartesianism, by the consequences of Descartes' revolution in philosophy' (Campbell, 1980). Descartes's epistemology formalises, in the *Meditations on first philosophy*, (Descartes, 1996) the conception of knowledge and importantly, the notion of clear and distinct perception. This lays the groundwork for building knowledge on the foundations of prior knowledge. Descartes was trying to find a case for believing that science could give us reliable and useful knowledge about the world. The model he chose for this was Euclid's *Elements* which derived theorems by deduction from definitions and axioms. So, in order for this to work for knowledge about the world rather than knowledge about straight lines and circles, Descartes needed a foundational axiom from which everything else could be deduced. And it had to be an axiom which no one could argue with. This may have set the standard a little too high because it meant that rather than looking for something which was beyond all reasonable doubt, Descartes was looking for

something beyond all possible doubt. And he found it in the most famous line in philosophy *cogito ergo sum*. For, if I am doubting everything that it is possible to doubt (remember, that's the standard which has been set), then the one thing I cannot doubt is that I am doing the doubting. (As the apocryphal lecturer is supposed to have said to the student who wondered, after listening to a lecture on Descartes' method of doubt, whether she actually existed, 'Who wants to know?').

There are major problems with this. The most significant is a real doubt that very much at all can be built on (deduced from) this foundation. Descartes did it by building a conception of God into the self and thence a guarantee (because God is benevolent) that clear and distinct perceptions won't be unreasonably misleading. But you don't have to be an atheist to think that this is a dodgy move.

The upshot of this is that Descartes' method only really works for self-contained, deductive systems – given a foundation we can all agree on, then you can deduce with certainty the implications of those foundations. It won't, however, provide you with new knowledge. That is why, despite the Cartesian method being one of the bases for the mathematical and natural sciences (e.g. physics, chemistry, geology, biology), conventional claims that Descartes was the founder of modern science are misleading at best (see e.g. Sorell, 2000).

A second limitation of Cartesian deductive systems was pointed out by the logician, Kurt Gödel in his incompleteness theorem. This showed that for any deductive system, there will be truths in that system which cannot be shown to be true by the system itself. All logical systems are incomplete. So however powerful Descartes' logico-deductive method is, there will always be truths which elude it.

The Hofstede paradigm adopts (whether practitioners are aware of it or not) a similar Cartesian approach. This is one example of the movement within the social sciences in the second half of the 20th century to attempt to replicate the methods of the natural sciences (Winch, 2008). Whilst it may not adhere to the methodological rigour of Cartesian doubt, the Hofstede

paradigm (as well as similar methodological frameworks) provides a clear example of epistemological Cartesianism, building what is claimed to be objective fact upon objective fact. Descartes argued that any system of knowledge must be built rigorously on these foundations and, through this process, knowledge can be built and expanded upon. This positivistic approach to knowledge must assume, however, that at every stage the prior knowledge is sound and incontrovertible. Hofstede, with his attempts to quantify culture, can be described, like Beckett's Molloy, as a victim of Cartesian rationalism. Hofstede's paradigm has become obsessed with the method and has, as a result, lost sight of the reason. While Molloy becomes aware of the futility of his endeavour before ridding himself of his sucking stones however, Hofstede lacks such awareness and, as such, fails to acknowledge the absurd juxtaposition between the means and the ends of his project. Like Beckett's Molloy, the Hofstede paradigm goes to great lengths (analysis of 116,000 surveys from employees in 72 countries at last count) to achieve its questionable ends.

A further example of the absurd with uncanny relevance to the Hofstede paradigm can be found in Daniel Boorstin's unfortunately under-acknowledged *The sociology of the absurd, or, The application of Professor X*. The novella begins as the fictionalised, but completely believable, tale of an academic reviewing funding proposals for the fictitious *Institute for Democratic Studies* who one day receives, after three years' service, 'at least one application that had some thrust, some imagination, some élan' (1969: 11). The radical submission, from the anonymous Professor X and 'a small cadre of dedicated, concerned social scientists', proposes the sociological quantification of culture, ethnicity and social status 'to fashion gloriously simple solutions to the problems of all oppressed peoples' (ibid.: 33). The products of the group's endeavours are two sociological quantifications which provide the means to 'express quantitatively even the subtlest qualitative facts' (ibid.). Professor X's two formulae are:

The Ethnicity Quotient (EQ):

> Drawing on genealogy, skin-pigmentation tests, somatometric and physiognometric devices, and linguistic and attitudinal measurements, and

other data, the EQ provides a keyed series of numbers accurately indicative of each individual's ethnicity' (ibid: 29).

The Merit Quotient (MQ):

$$\frac{I}{TS} - \frac{TP}{I} = MQ$$

Where I = intensity coefficient, T = time, S = suffering, and P = pleasure (ibid.: 41).

Compare, for example, Boorstin's quotients with McSweeney's formalisation of the three-discrete-component assumption of the Hofstede paradigm:

> The reductive and mechanical basis of Hofstede's tri-partiate cultural component assumption can be seen from its expression below as an equation:
>
> (NC1 + OrC + OcC) - (NC2 + OrC + OcC) = NC1 - NC2
>
> in which NC = National Culture, OrC = Organizational culture, OcC = Occupational Cultures, and NC1 - NC2 = Difference (s) between two national cultures. (McSweeney, 2002: 96)

The complexity of the paradigm's analytical methods – 'a factor analysis of a matrix of sixty-one questions by twenty units; for each unit, a mean score was computed on each question across all respondents' (Hofstede, 2001: 354) – seems at odds with the simplistic generalisations that represent the paradigm's outputs. Boorstin's MQ formula focuses our attention on the absurdity of quantifying the unquantifiable with tongue firmly rooted in cheek. McSweeney's formalisation of the Hofstede paradigm makes the same point by illustrating the arbitrary nature of the quantification of cultural difference.

The following, typical example comes from the *Hofstede Insights* website:

> If we explore the British culture through the lens of the 6-D Model©, we can get a good overview of the deep drivers of British culture relative to other world cultures [...] At 35 the UK has a low score on Uncertainty Avoidance which means that as a nation they are quite happy to wake up not knowing what the day brings and they are happy to 'make it up as they go along' changing plans as new information comes to light. As a low UAI country the British are comfortable in ambiguous situations – the term 'muddling

through' is a very British way of expressing this. There are generally not too many rules in British society, but those that are there are adhered to. (https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison/the-uk/)

Just as Boorstin relishes in emphasising the complete absurdity of Professor X's sociological quantifications, McSweeney takes a similar pleasure in mocking Hofstede's own claim to have 'uncover[ed] the secrets of entire national cultures' (Hofstede, in McSweeney, 2002: 89). McSweeney concludes that 'Hofstede's claims are excessive and unbalanced; excessive because they claim far more in terms of identifiable characteristics and consequences than is justified; unbalanced, because there is too great a desire to "prove" his a priori convictions rather than evaluate the adequacy of his "findings"' (McSweeney, 2002: 115). Hofstede's *overview of the deep drivers of British culture* above is just one example of this excess and imbalance.

Let us recall Sisyphus at this point – absurdism's poster child thanks to Albert Camus's *The myth of Sisyphus* (2000). As an exemplary punishment for his deceit and betrayals, the Gods condemned Sisyphus to an eternity of rolling a large block of stone up a hill, only for it to roll back down to the bottom each time he nears the completion of his task (Graves, 2011: 131). Sisyphean absurdism highlights the juxtaposition between the great effort repeatedly expended and the repeated failure to produce meaningful outcomes. Similarly, Boorstin's *Sociology of the absurd* is not so much a critique of the quantification of the unquantifiable in general as it is a harsh commentary on the utter meaninglessness of the quantification of culture contrasted with the absolute seriousness with which the team of academics treat Professor X's method and its related outputs. Boorstin utilises absurdism sublimely as a critical framework. Although the novella was published a decade before Hofstede began his research into the quantification of national cultures, the relevance could hardly be greater. Hofstede's summary of British culture above is a similarly trivial conclusion based on an extensive data set and complex statistical analyses. This collection of data and related complex analyses represent, to use a Sisyphean analogy, rolling the stone up the hill, while the related vapid generalisations this produces are the stone tumbling back down.

Self-referential paradox in CCM studies

Paradox is defined in the *Cambridge dictionary of philosophy* as:

> A seemingly sound piece of reasoning based on seemingly true assumptions, that leads to a contradiction (or other obviously false conclusion). A paradox reveals that either the principles of reasoning or the assumptions on which it is based are faulty. It is said to be solved when the mistaken principles or assumptions are clearly identified and rejected. The philosophical interest in paradoxes arises from the fact that they sometimes reveal fundamentally mistaken assumptions or reasoning techniques. (Audi, 2015: 643)

Logical paradox can be seen as falling under the umbrella of philosophical absurdism as inputs into complex systems produce outputs which are contradictory, devoid of meaning, or both. The category of paradox which is of interest in this critique of the Hofstede paradigm is that containing paradoxes of self-reference. As we will see, reflection (self-reflectiveness) and universality lead to self-reference. Self-reference, in turn, can result in logical paradox, a trap into which many (but not all) CCM studies fall. It will be argued, however, that those studies which do not fall into the paradoxical, or vicious self-reference trap are the ones open to the popular critique of ethnocentrism.

Let us begin with a simple, historic and aptly relevant example of vicious self-reference which we will return to again later: the Epimenides paradox. In the New Testament, Book of Titus, Paul writes the following account of Epimenides (a Cretan) to Titus:

> Even one of their own Prophets has said, 'All Cretans are liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons'. This testimony is true. (Titus 1:12-13)

The Epimenides paradox is an example of a paradox of self-reference, a category which includes the liar paradox: *This sentence is false.* But with regards to the Hofstede paradigm, we are most interested in the Epimenides case as it combines reflection (a Cretan describing Cretans) with universality (all Cretans are…). The paradox is further and unknowingly reinforced by the addition that the testimony is true. This case is relevant in that 'reflection and universality together necessarily lead to self-reference' (Bolander, 2002: 11). Self-reference itself, however, does not necessarily result in paradox.

Innocuous self-reference, e.g. *I am Canadian and Canadians are friendly*, may or may not produce reliable results, but the results are consistent as they do not contradict themselves. Vicious self-reference however, e.g. *I am Canadian and Canadians can't be believed*, is a statement which questions its own validity and, as such, is inconsistent. Douglas Hofstadter (1979 and 2007), not to be confused with CCM's Geert Hofstede, refers to such inconsistent self-references as an example of 'strange loops' which relate to Gödel's previously mentioned incompleteness theorems which show the inherent inconsistency of any complex logical or arithmetic system resulting from self-referencing strange loops. The same inconsistencies can be found in naïve set theory as famously discovered by Bertrand Russel, resulting in what is widely known as the barber paradox. (The 'set of all sets which are not members of themselves' both is and is not a member of itself. See e.g. Ayer [1988]). It is exactly this issue of agent introspection (self-reference) which, we propose, casts doubt on the validity of the Hofstede paradigm.

Relating this back to the problem of the Hofstede paradigm in which researchers (from a given national culture) attempt to quantify and define national cultures (their own and others), there are a number of ways in which to formalise the paradox. But first, let us consider the problem by utilising naïve set theory. Cantor's definition (1932) describes a set as any collection of mathematical objects, including sets. Therefore, a set is defined in terms of mathematical objects which can in themselves be sets. This self-referential definition leads to inconsistency as explained by Cantor's paradox, but we are getting ahead of ourselves. Think of set R as the set of all national cultures which are, in turn, sets themselves made up of all the elements the Hofstede paradigm uses to define a national culture. Not all subsets are equal of course as they differ by the Hofstede dimensions of national culture. One of the differences amongst the subsets is that there exists a set of a national culture (or cultures) which produced the Hofstede dimensions of national culture itself. We could claim this as Dutch (Hofstede is from Holland), or a set of sets which we will call W, where W = the group of Western business cultures. One of the common critiques of Hofstede after all is that his paradigm is a cultural construct (Ailon, 2008). This leaves us with two possibilities:

> Set W utilises the paradigm to study other sets/subsets (e.g. a Dutch study of Korean business culture).

> Set W utilises the paradigm to study sets within W (e.g. a Dutch study of French business culture, or even a Dutch study of Dutch business culture).

The first option is free of logical paradox, but produces outputs which are inherently subjective as they are the product of a Western narrative and, moreover, the paradigm reproduces this narrative. The second option, by Bolander's earlier definition, must result in self-reference as it represents a study of a given culture from within that same culture, utilising a methodology which is a construct of that culture.

The issue of the methodology being a cultural construct leads us to a related self-reference paradoxical problem resulting from its origins as a theory contained in its own subject matter. The Hofstede paradigm studies national cultures (many of which are Western cultures) yet the paradigm is itself very much a construct of Western culture. Indeed, Ailon helpfully notes that Hofstede himself admitted the Western bias in the questionnaire in the 1991 edition of his book (2008). The paradigm is, in other words, a theory that is part of its own subject matter. It attempts to define national culture whilst also being a cultural construct. As Bolander notes, 'any theory that is part of its own subject matter has reflection. Thus, if these theories make use of universal statements as well, then the paradoxes of self-reference will not be far away' (2002: 11). The outputs of the Hofstede paradigm are examples of such ungrounded self-reference in which every output refers, through the paradigm's origins, to itself. Such self-referencing theories are extremely vulnerable to inconsistent axioms which neatly brings us back to the previously discussed Cartesian problem as a theory built on inconsistent axioms will produce inconsistent (i.e. contradictory and therefore false) results.

Concluding remarks

Absurdism, especially as Camus uses the term, is an expression of the pointlessness of everything – that nothing matters. But, as Tom Nagel has pointed out (1971), if nothing matters, then that fact itself is one of those

things that doesn't matter; it doesn't matter that nothing matters. As a metaphysical perspective therefore, absurdism can be seen as self-defeating. This strange loop renders absurdism, to put it another way, absurd. There is merit however in the perspective as it highlights 'some of the difficulties which arise if we try to base our understanding of societies on the methods of natural science' (Winch, 2008: 62).

The identification and, where possible, resolution of paradox also provides a worthwhile form of critique. Such approaches have 'performed significant functions in the development of seminal ideas in physics and mathematics' (Doeker-Mach et al., 2004: 202). The Epimenides paradox ('all Cretans are liars') combines elements of both self-referential paradox and universal generalisations which are arrived at via the Hofstede paradigm and abundant in the CCM literature. The very fact that such self-referential systems can lead to paradoxes 'is the main reason why so much effort has been put into understanding, modelling and 'taming' self-reference' (Bolander, 2002: 1).

The absurdity highlighted in the Hofstede paradigm may simply be the result of modelling a study on something as complex and clearly subjective as culture on a Cartesian, natural sciences model. As Sartre summarises: 'Subjectivism means, on the one hand, that an individual chooses and makes himself; and, on the other, that it is impossible for man to transcend human subjectivity' (Sartre, 1957: 37).

We will end this brief paper with a perfectly relevant (in the cross-cultural sense) example of absurdism from Julian Barnes's fictionalised biography of the Soviet composer Shostakovich. The setting is a party at which the composer's son is entertaining the guests with his depiction of a Bulgarian policeman (an ethnocentric, cross-cultural representation) tying his bootlaces:

> He would come on, his laces hanging loose, carrying a chair which he would frowningly arrange in the middle of the room, slowly moving it to the best position. Then, putting on a pompous face, and using both hands, he would lift and lever his right foot up on to the chair. He would look around, very pleased by this simple triumph. Then, with an awkward manoeuvre which spectators might not at first understand, he would bend over, ignoring the foot on the chair, and tie the laces on the other shoe, the one flat on the floor.

> Immensely pleased with the result, he would swap legs, lifting his left foot up on to the chair before bending down to tie the laces of his right shoe...

> Over-complicated manoeuvres to achieve the simplest of ends; stupidity; self-congratulation; imperviousness to outside opinion; repetition of the same mistakes. (Barnes, 2016: 174)

Barnes's last sentence brings us full circle to the working definition of absurdism adopted for this paper as well as, we would argue, a fitting summary of the Hofstede paradigm.

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