

A Stairway to Holland

Cultural Identity of Turkish Dutch Remigrant Workers in Istanbul

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Masters dissertation Organization Studies
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Tilburg, August 2007

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Executive summary

In the past, many assumed that cultural differences were barriers that impeded communication and interaction. Today, effective global leaders believe that cultural differences, if well managed, are resources, not handicaps. Research on cross cultural management is often concerned with the examination on how different cultures in an organization interact with each other. Researchers seem to avoid to consider the process of how an employee manages cultural differences which lies within a person itself. If the existence of different, multiple cultures are of importance to the organization, why are the multiple cultures that can exist in an employee itself and the possible consequences this has for the organization not been addressed? Organization literature today has only partially answered this question.

This research tried to give insight in the multiple cultural identities that are present in remigrated Turkish Dutch employees. The objective of this research was to discover if this plurality of identities has implications for cross-cultural management; do we have to consider Turkish Dutch employees as western, or do we have to consider them as non-western employees? In order to examine this subject, two research questions have been used. The first research question has been formulated as follows:

How do remigrant workers experience their western and non-western self in daily working life, and what difficulties do they face when blending two cultures in their work?

With the help of a second research question I tried to give more insight on how return migrants in general value their cultural backgrounds in their private lives:

Do the returned migrants identify more with Turkish culture or with Dutch culture and how can this be explained?

Theory on individual cultural identity, acculturation, multiple identities, organization identity, and identification, which can be found in the fields of organization theory, organizational psychology, and social psychology (Foremann and Whetten 2002,

Arends-Tóth and Van der Vijver 2004, Hogg, Terry and White, 1995), were used in an effort guide this research and to answer the research questions.

The Turkish Dutch remigrated workers have been studied in their “real life” setting, during their daily activities in a large Dutch call centre situated in the Asian part of Istanbul. This call centre manages inbound and outbound projects for different Dutch client organizations. All the employees spoke Dutch and had to communicate with Dutch clients in The Netherlands.

The duration of the research on site was three weeks in which the data was collected. In order to capture the experiences of the employees, a total of 28 interviews were conducted with Turkish Dutch call centre agents. A small questionnaire was used to capture the respondents demographics such as age, religion, and time spent in Turkey since their return and religious practices. Together with the interviews and the questionnaire, the observations in the call centre in Istanbul had completed the data collection.

Results from the interviews with the call centre agents indicated that returned migrant employees valued their double cultural identities in different manners. In the private lives of the employees, outside their working environment, they perceived themselves in most cases as Turkish people, because they were in daily interaction with the Turkish society, with family and with friends. They also felt they had more understanding of Turkish people and felt a certain sense of belongingness to the Turkish culture. Remigrants who were born and raised in The Netherlands more often claimed to feel Dutch compared to the remigrants who were born in Turkey. The results also indicated that returnees who were forced to return to Turkey claimed to feel more Dutch. They indicated that they were forced to leave because of expired residence permits or because their parents made the decision to return. Religion did not seem to be an important dominator in order to establish ones cultural identity in the case of the remigrated Turkish Dutch. Being Islamic did not necessarily mean they automatically felt Turkish.

In the setting of the call centre however, the respondents’ answers indicated that most of the employees perceived themselves as typical Dutch workers, valuing their Dutch cultural identity. They perceived themselves as such because they were in contact

with Dutch clients, were speaking Dutch 9 hours a day, and because of the Dutch way the call centre was managed.

No reports between identity and distress in the organization setting could be found, suggesting that multiple cultural identity involvement in daily working life does not necessarily result in role conflict in terms of negative behaviour for the organization. The returned migrant employees were capable of separating the two identities and preventing them to interfere with each other. Their Dutch cultural identity seemed to match the perceived cultural identity of the organization. In fact, most of the respondent perceived it as a great benefit to work in this Dutch environment, stressing almost the opposite of perceived difficulties.

The absence of reported difficulties caused by multiple cultural identities in working life was in sharp contrast when the reported difficulties in the private domain were considered. Their cultural identities did seem to interfere with each other because, although they perceived themselves as Turkish, both their Turkish as their Dutch identity seem to be of equal importance. Many returned migrants in this thesis reported acculturation difficulties since their return in Turkey, stressing that Turkish society was tougher with more rules, traditions and less freedom. They also missed friends and family members whom they had left behind. As a result of this, claims of stress, confusion and even depression were reported by the respondents.

The fact that the organization was Dutch and they could express their western self seemed to fill the gap between their Dutch and Turkish identity and helped them to overcome their problems they experienced in their private lives because of difficulties acculturating to Turkish society. When they entered the call centre on the second floor of the tall building, respondents often claimed they “felt as if they were in Holland” and that this helped them to overcome their troubles in their private lives.

Preface

I would like to thank...

... all persons who have played an important role during the period of my Masters Organization Science. First of all external examiner Dr. Paul van Fenema and Prof. Dr. Sjo Soeters of the Netherlands Defence Academy for their encouragement, keen vision and help during the process of writing my thesis, not forgetting of course all the other teachers for their continual engagement during my masters Organization Science. Thanks to the insightful lectures, support and experiences, I have gained more knowledge about organizations and their relationship with the socio-economic environment.

I would like to give special thanks to the call centre agents at the call centre in Istanbul. Without their voluntary help and enthusiasm, it would not have been possible to provide me of such excellent insight into their working experiences in the call centre in Istanbul. I also would like to thank the call centre director of HCN Istanbul, Robert Jan Gerrits to allow me to conduct my research on side and to provide me with all necessary means I needed. Together, they gave me an unforgettable time in Istanbul.

Further more I would like to thank all of my friends and family for their patience during this study, that they did not give up on our friendship during the busy and hectic time. I also thank them for their continual interest and for giving me all the necessary support in difficult times during my study. Finally, without the flexible standing of my employers at HCN and Interpolis and it would not have been possible to finish this research within the given period of 10 months.

Teşekkürler! (Thank you)

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1. Introduction

'Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet'

This is what Rudyard Kipling wrote at the end of the 19th century. The English poet could not have been more wrong; at the beginning of the 21st century East and West meet each other on an ever larger scale because of globalization and migration.

Globalisation and developments in technology implies that more and more organizations trade internationally. There is a growing demand for organizations to move operations, people, products, services and information from one country to another (Simms, 2005). This demand for organizations to shift operations from one country to another often deals with social, political, and economic issues caused by globalization (Doh, 2005). Levy (2005) states these organizations move from a developed country to a developing country because they are forced by globalization to operate more effectively in economic terms (Levy, 2005). By comparison, organizations may also shift their *employees* from one country to another for different reasons, for example because of required specialist skills to perform the job, or to fill occupational shortages (Simms, 2005).

However, when moving operations across their home borders, organizations are facing great challenges on different elements. One of the most essential difficulties is related to cultural differences (Xiangling, 1999). In the past, many assumed that cultural differences were barriers that impeded communication and interaction. Today, effective global leaders believe that cultural differences, if well managed, are resources, not handicaps (Harris et al., 2004).

Organizations are not alone when it concerns shifting people for their purpose; people as individuals as well have their personal or professional motives themselves to leave their country and go to another country. A specific group of people are the remigrants who decided to leave their host country and go and work in the country of their (parents) origin, and therefore returned to their homeland (McCormick & Wahba, 2001; Christou & King, 2006; Rooth & Saarla, 2007). Rooth and Saarela (2007) acknowledge that theory of selection in return migration additionally has to do with

reversible migration decisions (Rooth & Saarela, 2007). Return migration, they say, may occur for two distinct reasons. It may be the optimal residential location plan over the life cycle, which allows some workers to attain higher utility than the migration decision was permanent, or it may result in mistakes in the initial migration decision. Christou (2006) acknowledges the roles of family dynamics and the conflictual spaces that such dynamics create within the realization of the process of self and home discovering in the ancestral place. This is to be seen in the realm of self-identification (Christou, 2006). Christou, in collaboration with King (2006), identifies two categories of motivation relating to different sets of feelings, plans, and expectations: professional reasons such as finding a suitable job, attending college or university, etc., and personal reasons such as the search for ancestral roots, linking with extended family, climate, and life style preferences (Christou and King, 2006).

1.1 Research objective and research question

Objective

Many researchers have discussed the implications of culture and self for immigrants or have discussed the implications of culture and self for people of a foreign country in terms of cross cultural management practices. Few researchers, however, have discussed the implications for remigrated people and cross-cultural management implications for this specific case. Can we consider them as Dutch (western) employees or do we have to see them as Turkish (non-western) people? These are important issues for (international) HR managers in order to establish, for instance, a certain degree of fit between the (remigrated) employee and the organization. This also adds more to the limitations as proposed by McGrath and Marshall (2007): "...would similar services provided by a non-western call centre throw up different dynamics and cross-cultural management difficulties?". To shed light on this aspect I am interested in how these remigrated people experience their western and non-western identity in daily working life. The objective is to see if this plurality of identities has implications for cross-cultural management; do we have to address them as western employees, or do we have to see them as non-western employees? When we have an understanding on how these remigrated workers experience their western self and non-western self in working life we also have a better understanding of cross-

cultural management implications of e.g. organizational commitment. Many researchers make a distinction between individualistic and collectivistic societies (e.g. Hofstede, 1991; Wasti, 2002) and the consequences thereof for cross cultural management. But can we assume that these remigrated workers have this collectivistic (non-western / Turkish) identity in daily working life? Can Western management practices still be applicable in this situation or do managers have to view them as Turkish with collectivist identities in their working life?

Research question

This research deals with some of the ways in which remigrated Turkish Dutch employees describe the existence of two cultural identities in working life. Given the exploratory nature of this study, the following research question is posed:

1. *How do remigrant workers experience their western and non-western self in daily working life, and what difficulties do they face when blending two cultures in their work?*

Although this question is leading in this research, the experiences of their cultural identities in private life will also be considered in order to discover differences in their private and professional setting, adding more to the understanding of cultural identity in their working environment. It is expected that the more a person identifies with a certain culture, the more he or she could face difficulties bridging different cultures (Arends-Tóth and Van der Vijver 2004). For instance, if a company in Turkey is following Dutch rules but it is not allowed for workers to wear a headscarf (following Turkish rules) and one identifies more with Turkish culture than Dutch culture, this discrepancy could be problematic in order to bridge or blend these cultures. With the help of a second research question I will try to give more insight on how return migrants in general value their cultural backgrounds in their private lives:

2. *Do the returned migrants identify more with Turkish culture or with Dutch culture and how can this be explained?*

By pursuing these questions, this study will address how returned migrant¹ workers experience their “western-self” and “non-western-self” in daily working life and the difficulties these Turkish Dutch workers may face when bridging two cultures in their work. This leads to an exploration of the relationship between perceived culture, perceived organization culture, the attempts in blending or fitting identities and the possible difficulties in terms of attitudes and behaviour this process can result in.

1.2 Research design

The unit of analysis is the individual remigrant worker, who decided to remigrate and work in the country of their (parent’s) origin. By using the theoretical constructs on individual identity and acculturation, organization identity and identification, and the significance of subjectivity as can be found in the fields of organization theory, organizational psychology and social psychology (Foremann and Whetten 2002, Arends-Tóth and Van der Vijver 2004, Hogg, Terry and White, 1995), I will try to find an answer to the above mentioned research questions.

This study concerns a group of Turks who are part of a population who seldom return (CBS, 2007). The participants in this study were either born to immigrant Turkish parents in The Netherlands and lived there until the decision to move to Turkey, or they moved to the Netherlands with their families when they were children and have left those families behind to live and work in Istanbul. These men and women have returned to Turkey and chose to work for a large Dutch call centre in Istanbul that conducts business process outsourcing, manages inbound and outbound telephony, conducts market research, and provides other management services for clients in the Netherlands. The call centre in Istanbul employs men and women who speak fluently Dutch and already have deep knowledge and understanding of the Dutch culture, geography, and political climate from their years of experience in the country. Most of the employees grew up in the Netherlands and many worked in the Netherlands before coming to Turkey. Some of them also worked in Turkey (somewhere else before the call centre). The research is based on a qualitative case study design

¹ *The terms “returned migrants”, “remigrants” and “returned immigrants” are used interchangeably in this study.*

(Baker, 1999).

1.3 Relevance of the research

(Organizational) culture and (organizational) identity are one of the major issues in academic research and education, in organization theory as well as in management practice (Alvesson, 2001, Albert et al, 2000). In most literature in Organization Studies, the element of how people work together in an organization has received great attention. Especially the complexity of how people from different backgrounds in teams work and organizations manage themselves is widely discussed in most literature on organizations. However, if this management of diversity of human resources is to be successful, organizations must ensure that they are able to deal with the soft aspects of HRM as well (Simms, 2005). Most studies on cross cultural management are concerned with managing different cultures *within an organization*. In this study, different cultures or identities stemming from these cultures, exist *within the person him/herself*. Understanding the mechanisms behind this is useful for different aspects of intercultural Human Resource management. Because it is argued that organizations shape the identities of their members (Parker, 2000), this research can shed light on the possible difficulties this can bring into play. Managers who seek to influence these identities have greater understanding of the different elements they have to take into account, adding more to the literature as we already know. Globalization, migration, and increasing cultural diversity within nations have resulted in a growing need for understanding and enhancing intercultural relations in plural societies (Van Oudenhoven et al., 2006). This research can contribute to research on these issues in multicultural societies.

1.4 Thesis outline

In order to grasp the complexity of the subject ab to provide an understanding of the meaning (and development) of the different elements, the aspects of identity and culture will be outlined in chapter two. Subsequently, literature regarding the background of this subject will be presented in this chapter. It will discuss the relation a person has with one's own cultural identity and with the perceived cultural identity of the organization. In chapter three, the methodology will be outlined. To put this

study into its context a general explanation of immigration and return migration in the Netherlands will be provided in chapter four, followed by chapter five, in which the results will be presented. Chapter six will discuss the findings, relating these to theory, followed by chapter seven in which the discussion, recommendations, limitations and suggestions for future research related to this thesis will be discussed.