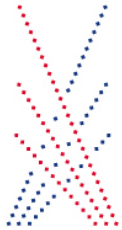

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The Influence of Power Distance on Top and Middle Managers' Strategy Communication: An Insight from the Kuwaiti Context

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Abstract

We examine the role of power distance in regulating the strategy communication practice among top and middle managers from a social practice perspective. We argue that power distance cannot be treated as a material factor that can be controlled and easily measured beyond an organization's boundary; rather, it is the accumulation of social interactions between organizational members that need to be internally understood. Based on a single case study that included 27 interviews drawn from public sector organizations, we found that strengthening the communication practice among organizational members and aligning both individual- and group-level cognition are key drivers in the successful communication of strategy in public sector organizations. Furthermore, we found that in a high power distance culture the most powerful individuals make decisions in a dictatorial manner. Equally, organisations with high power distance cultures are prone to deliberate mismanagement and high cultural tension. Our exploration therefore pushes the field forward by enriching the under-researched area of power distance and the cognitive understanding of social practice.

Keywords: power distance, strategy process, social practice, top and middle managers, strategy communication

Introduction

In today's dynamic environment, the various managerial levels need to experience less cultural tension while communicating organizational strategies, objectives, and day-to-day operational issues. This also requires them to be flexible and to maintain an open mind-set in order to respond to surrounding environmental changes in an appropriate manner (Huy, 2001). Although flexibility and being open-minded sound as though they should already be key qualities in those holding managerial positions, it is unrealistic not to expect cultural tension between various managers as a part of normal social practice. In real social practice, cultural tension does not occur incidentally; rather, it is the continuous outcome of the social interaction of a given organization's social actors. Therefore, providing a unique solution that can reduce such tension in a straightforward manner sounds somewhat unrealistic, especially within a dynamic strategy process.

In practice, strategy processes are highly dependent on clear communication and shared or similar understandings between the relevant internal actors (Boyer and McDermott, 1999; Kellermanns et al., 2005). It also relies on minimal cultural tension between and within managerial groups (Yan, 2008; Das and Kumar, 2010) and consequently on minimal conflict between social actors (Currie *et al.*, 2017). As a general definition, culture is viewed as a set of values and beliefs that can be considered a constitutive component of an interactive social work practice in a multicultural context (Lum, 1999; Yan, 2008). One of the well-established dimensions through which to interpret the culture and the cultural complexity of individuals within the workplace is Hofstede's power distance dimension (Hofstede, 1980, 2001). The power distance dimension is a vital lens that helps us to develop our understanding of people's interactions within the strategy process. As defined by Hofstede (2001), power distance represents the extent to which certain members within a specific context expect and accept that power will to some extent by unequally distributed among certain individuals.

Although studies in the field have acknowledged the complexity of the cultural dimension and indeed power distance in particular (i.e., Rinne et al., 2012; Koc, 2013; Schuder, 2016), many others have treated the concept of culture as a tangible factor that can be easily controlled (i.e., Jones, 2005; Bushardt et al., 2011; Ahmadi et al, 2012). The foundations of these studies, amongst many others, were built around this argument and were further extended to measure the effect of culture and the power distance dimension on other business perspectives; for instance, the effects of culture and power distance on the strategy

implementation process (Bushardt et al., 2011), on knowledge management (Zheng et al., 2010), on strategy formulation (Struwig and Smith, 2002), on communication styles (Gudykunst et el., 1996), on quality management (Gambi et al., 2015), and on organizational innovation performance (Laforet, 2016) have all been considered in the literature.

These research efforts have been guided by various theories and have therefore produced mixed results with respect to the cultures examined therein. More specifically, most of the research in this area is related to the examination of the effect of power distance on national culture (Earley and Gibson, 1998; Khatri, 2009); on macro- and micro-cultures (Madlock, 2012); inequalities in societies (Han et al., 2017), international project teams (Paulus et al, 2005), public relations (Sriramesh, 2013), and capital market participants (Krause, 2016). The main focus of this research was on the external culture, that is, beyond the specific internal culture of the firms. However, the effect of this examination does not clearly reflect how the power distance dimension actually affects the dominant internal social actors in the first place. Such effects are vital to both the strategy communication and the strategy implementation processes. Therefore, we will attempt to bridge this gap in knowledge by understanding how power distance is internally practiced between decision makers within public sector organisations.

Based on this brief background, in this paper we argue that whilst the extant literature treats power distance as a material factor that can be controlled and easily measured beyond the organisation itself, there is a paucity of understanding as to how power distance is actually practiced and agreed between two managerial teams in the first place. Since we believe that individuals' interactions with each other reflects their social practice, our primary goal is to empirically examine the materiality of power distance and how it is practiced between top and middle management teams from a social practice perspective. It is of the utmost priority to understand how such practice helps to foster the communication and the implementation of an organization's various strategies. Therefore, in order to facilitate this purpose, we put forward two important questions: 'How is power distance socially practiced between top and middle managers?' and 'How does power distance internally enable the strategy communication and the strategy implementation processes?'.

Background and Theory

Understanding power distance

Power distance is one of the core dimensions of national culture introduced by Hofstede (1980a, 1980b), and, as such, comparative strategy scholars frequently use it to predict cultural differences and the consequent effects on organizational strategy (i.e., Hennart and Larimo, 1998; Fang and Jue-Fan, 2006; De Mooij and Hofstede, 2010). As a general concept, power distance refers to the variation in status between social actors within their organization (Hofstede, 1980a). However, as a conceptual model, as proposed by Hofstede (1980b), power distance can be described as 'the extent to which a certain society accepts the fact that power in organizations are unequally distributed'. From another perspective, power distance can be viewed as the acceptance of less powerful social actors of an unequal distribution of power in certain social contexts (Franke et al., 1991). Organizations with high power distance cultures, and social actors with no or little power show noticeable differences with those with greater power (Yang et al., 2007).

Societies with relatively low power distances in the West, for instance, Great Britain, the USA, Australia, and Denmark, have contributed to the increasing body of literature on social process which is based on pure cultural norms and values that do not accept power inequality (Yuan and Zhou, 2015). However, this might not be the case in high power distance cultures including, for instance, Mexico, Hong Kong, Malaysia, and India, which may accept power inequality as an integral part of social values (Hofstede, 2001). In real practice within organizations, a clear social gap is noticeable among social actors at different managerial levels (Javidan et al., 2006). Such practice means that supervisors within a high power distance culture deal formally and autocratically with their subordinates. Social actors with a high power culture offer minimal cooperation with their subordinates (Kopelman, 2009). Therefore, the power distance directly influences the way in which social actors interact with each other (Hofstede, 2001) and such practice constitutes the embedded social interaction of such individuals (Giddens, 1984; Bourdieu, 1990).

One of the arguments that provides an explanation of why power distance strategy research is vital, basically because power stresses the importance of individuals' social status and job characteristics (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005). Furthermore, the level of power distance might negatively influence knowledge sharing and therefore the communication of organizational strategy among social actors at various employment levels (Ardichvili et al.,

2006). Equally, the power distance dimension may contribute to unsuccessful implementation of organizational strategies due to inequality in communication practice among organisational members (Greiner et al., 2007). Most recent research with respect to power distance has mainly focussed on the concept at an international level, that is, beyond the organisation, despite there being a clear dearth of knowledge of the dynamics of power distance within the organization itself (i.e., Aycan et al., 2000; Lok and Crawford, 2004; Farh et al., 2007; Beugelsdijk et al., 2017).

Although research about the international level enriches both theory and practice, it is of utmost priority to shed the light on the internal dynamics of social actors in the first place. We therefore suggest that such a focus actually represents an obstacle to a comprehensive analysis of how power distance is actually practiced between two local heterogeneous groups of internal stakeholders (for instance, top and middle managers). Since the strategy process is based on inclusive efforts that involve the cooperation of various social actors from different hierarchal levels, it becomes vital to empirically investigate how power distance is socially practiced between top and middle managers with different positional powers, and consequently how it effects the strategy communication process.

The role of social practice in the strategy process

The social practice lens offers an alternative perspective to traditional theories including, for instance, resource-based theory, upper echelon theory, and organizational theory in terms of explaining how humans interact given a specific set of contexts (Giddens, 1984; Bourdieu, 1990). As argued by Feldman and Orlikowski (2011), the main focus of the social practice lens is on the dynamic activities of social actors with respect to the strategy practices within their organizations. Social practice theories rely on three core principles including social interaction, mutual constitution of relations, and duality of relations (Giddens, 1984; Bourdieu, 1990).

With regards to the first principle, social interaction was viewed by Giddens (1984) as a dynamic construct that links the production and reproduction of the social norms that affect social actors' actions. In a similar vein, the principle was viewed by Bourdieu (1990) as an implicit element which is responsible for reactivating the sense objectified in institutions (habitus) among social actors. With regards to the second principle, the principle of mutual constitution was viewed by Giddens to emphasize the relationship between agency and a certain set of structures; similarly, Bourdieu acknowledged that the assumptions underlying

social actors' practices, habitus, and field all interact with one another to create a set of shared practices and norms. With regards to the third principle, according to Giddens the duality of relations emphasizes agency and structure, while Bourdieu noted the inseparability of the subjective and objective dimensions within a given set of structures.

Just like many other applications of social practice theory, power distance and strategy studies have received considerable attention (Johnson et al., 2003; Greiner et al., 2007; Jarzabkowski, 2008; Gollnhofer and Turkina, 2015; Wang and Larimo, 2017), though perspectives on the application of the social practice lens in the strategy field are somewhat disparate (Nicolini, 2012). In a closer look at strategy-related research, scholars such as Whittington (2006), and equally Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009), have offered a descriptive perspective that focusses on the analysis of its practitioners, their practices and interactions with each other, and the praxis of the context in which they act. On the other hand, Gomez (2010) provided an explanation for the personal behaviour and motivation of social actors at both the personal and the collective levels. The engagement of different groups of social actors in the strategy process creates an opportunity for 'shared strategic understanding and commitment' (Wooldridge and Floyd, 1990). Thus, to understand the relationship between power distance and strategy, communication we need to understand the theory of social practice from a cognitive perspective, that is, the complicated relationships of social actors.

Top and middle managers' roles in the strategy process

There is a general belief that strategy practices are a pure and core task for the top management team, who are believed to be an organization's strategy practitioners, as proposed by some scholars (i.e., Jarzabkowski, 2005; Johnson et al., 2007; Eisenhardt et al., 2007). Yet, other research, and on occasion the same researchers, have indicated the importance of exploring strategy practices beyond the top management team so as to include functional managers' practices (Johnson et al., 2003; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007). This obviously includes the participation of other employees at other hierarchal levels, more specifically the engagement of middle managers, in the strategy communication process. For instance, Wooldridge and Floyd (1990) encouraged the engagement of different managerial levels in the strategy communication process as such practice creates a shared strategy understating.

In a similar vein, several researchers have shed light on the importance of aligning both top management and middle management teams in various strategy processes, including those of

formulation and implementation (Balogun and Johnson, 2004; Currie and Procter, 2005; Wooldridge et al., 2008). Equally, a positive relationship between the involvement of middle management team in the strategy process with improved strategic change within the organization was recognised by Ukil and Akkas (2017). These researchers further found that if middle managers are engaged in the strategy communication process, top managers are left in a better position to bridge the information gap with front-line staff.

It has been further argued that the non-engagement of middle managers in the strategy communication process is mainly due to the belief held by top managers that middle managers do not require such involvement in the decision-making process (Miller et al., 2008). Such a perception will clearly create cultural tension and consequently conflict among groups of social actors. This view further results in three critical problems with respect to power distance strategy communication-related research. Firstly, research which focusses on the interaction of top management teams has gone far beyond, and has deeply analysed, the intra-top management processes in isolation from other employment groups (Carpenter et al., 2004). Secondly, research has been directed more towards strategy formulation than strategy implementation and strategy communication processes (Jarzabkowski, 2008; Sull et al., 2015). Thirdly, very little attention has been given to the interaction between top- and middle management teams, which may affect communication and execution or strategies (Raes et al., 2011).

Research further provides considerable evidence of the importance of creating strategy alignment between both top- and middle management teams. However, both parties may have different perceptions of each other, which normally leads to continuous cultural tension. For instance, Rigby et al. (2002) claimed that middle managers often do not understand what they are implementing, which suggests a lack of proper communication and disruption of the flow of information occurs at some point in the process, and therefore that support should be seen as a priority by top management, who are also responsible for executing strategy-related objectives. Equally, Adamides (2015) argued that the engagement of functional stakeholders in strategy communication processes leads to a greater alignment within the overall organisational strategy. This further strengthens the argument as to why it is important to empirically analyse how power distance affects the alignment of strategy communication between the top- and middle management levels.

Methodology

Sample and data collection

Giving the fact that this study is considered to be exploratory in nature, to focus on the cultural aspect between top and middle managers through an understanding of their social practice, a qualitative approach was adopted. Therefore, our data were collected from a single case study, in particular from one public organization in Kuwait. This is because our exploration is based on an attempt to understand a specific phenomenon, and such an understanding can be reasonably described by single case studies (Siggelkow, 2007). Furthermore, Dyer and Wilkins (1991) stated that single case studies are better than multiple cases because the former produce additional and better theory.

A total of 27 interviewees were gained through purposive and snowballing techniques to provide answers for the proposed research questions (Roulston, 2010). Our sample was based on 10 top managers and 17 middle managers as this study targets the types of internal actors who are believed to have the relevant skills, knowledge, expertise and experience to enrich the research findings (Noy, 2008). Prior engaging in the fieldwork, the interview protocol was designed to ensure effective coverage of the social phenomenon under investigation, including, for instance, the communication process, managerial conflicts, personal interactions, objectives agreement, the decision-making loop, and the strategy implementation process. Furthermore, both top and middle managers were asked the same questions to ensure a satisfactory representation of responses in relation to cultural influence practices was acquired.

The total time taken to conduct and finalize the interviews was approximately six months. Due to the fact that the public sector is wide in its nature, the organization chosen for this study was one of the most active ministries which is entitled to provide a wide range of public services. The rationale behind this choice is twofold. Firstly, it is a multicultural organization and therefore targeted participants that reflected different geographical backgrounds. Secondly, the selected ministry interacts both with other public organizations and a large number of private organizations, which consequently reflects the dynamic nature of the strategy process. These two reasons positioned the selected ministry in an ideal manner to allow the proposed research objectives and concerns under investigation to be addressed. Prior to the interview process six pilot interviews were conducted, and consequently four questions were revised and rewritten to ensure clarity in terms of the technical terms used in

the interview protocol (Saunders et al., 2016). Upon completion of the pilot phase, an additional 21 interviews were followed, giving a total of 27 interviews. Table 1 shows the profiles of the interviewees. As for ethical considerations, ethical clearance was granted prior to the interview process to comply with the appropriate ethical guidelines, and hence all interviewees, along with the ministry from which the data were collected, were assured of their anonymity.

Table 1: Interviewee profile

S/N	ID	Managerial Level	Gender	Managerial Role	Job Function	Experience
1	I-1-MM	Middle Management	Male	Departmental Head	Project Supervisor	8 Years
2	I-2-MM	Middle Management	Female	Departmental Head	Supervisor in Supply Projects	8 Years
3	I-3-MM	Middle Management	Female	Departmental Head	Technical Support Team Leader	8 Years
4	I-4-TM-R	Top Management (Retired)	Male	Division Head	Manager in Control Unit and Surveillance	10 Years
5	I-5-TM	Top Management	Male	Division Head	Manager in Maintenance	10 Years
6	I-6-MM	Middle Management	Male	Departmental Head	Supervisor in Administrative Affairs	8 Years
7	I-7-TM	Top Management	Female	Unit Head	Manager in Training and Research	6 Years
8	I-8-MM	Middle Management	Male	Departmental Head	Assistant Supervisor in Media	8 Years
9	I-9-MM	Middle Management	Male	Departmental Head	Networks Team Leader	8 Years
10	I-10-MM	Middle Management	Male	Departmental Head	Consumer Affairs Consultant	8 Years
11	I-11-TM	Top Management	Male	Division Head	Manager in Projects and Networks	10 Years
12	I-12-MM	Middle Management	Female	Departmental Head	Assistant Supervisor in Maintenance	8 years
13	I-13-MM	Middle Management	Male	Departmental Head	Quality Assurance Team Leader	8 years
14	I-14-MM	Middle Management	Male	Departmental Head	Consultant in Administrative Affairs	8 years
15	I-15-MM	Middle Management	Male	Departmental Head	Assistant Team leader in Legal Affairs	8 years
16	I-16-MM	Middle Management	Male	Departmental Head	Supervisor in Operation and Maintenance	8 years
17	I-17-MM	Middle Management	Male	Departmental Head	Supervisor in Technical Services	8 years
18	I-18-TM	Top Management	Male	Division Head	Manager in Networks Maintenance	10 years
19	I-19-MM	Middle Management	Male	Departmental Head	Supervisor in Technical Control	8 years
20	I-20-MM	Middle Management	Male	Departmental Head	Production Supervisor	8 years
21	I-21-TM	Top Management	Male	Division Head	Manager in Bids and Internal Affairs	10 years
22	I-22-MM	Middle Management	Male	Departmental Head	Employment Team Leader	8 years
23	I-23-TM	Top Management	Male	Division Head	Manager in Project Design	10 years
24	I-24-TM	Top Management	Male	Division Head	Manager in Financial Affairs	10 years
25	I-25-TM	Top Management	Male	Division Head	Manager in Planning and Follow-Up	10 years
26	I-26-MM	Middle Management	Male	Departmental Head	Assistant Team Leader in Internal Quality Assurance	8 years
27	I-27-TM-R	Top Management (Retired)	Male	Division Head	Manager in Training and Development	10 years

Keys: I-TM: Interviewee from top management; I-MM: Interviewee from middle management; I-TM-R:Interviewee from top management (Retired)

Additional note: due to ethical considerations and at the request of the organizations involved, the job functions of the interviewees have been anonymised

Data analysis and coding

After finalizing the interviews, the collected data from interviews were analysed manually. Although various software suites including, for instance, NVivo, MAXQDA, Atlas, and QDA Miner are available for qualitative data analysis, they are all considered to be supportive tools; that is, there is no absolute substitution for manual analysis. The analysis and coding process was initiated by assigning open codes to the interview questions which were thereafter broken down to form the sub-themes in order to create a sense of meaning. In terms of the open codes, we coded all instances in which both top and middle managers identified their own interactions as constituting normal practices of the power distance between them. This procedure was followed by classifying the interactions' dispositions into two main stages, namely social networks and cultural tension, for both top and middle managers. Thus, a number or phrases and key words acknowledged by top managers were coded to include, for instance, statements about agreement, positional power, strategy ownership, unlimited authority, and tenure and experience. Equally, phrases and key words for middle managers were analysed and coded to include, for instance, statements about openness, ethical behaviour, cooperation, conflict avoidance, priorities of objectives, and freedom of opinion. Table 2 reveals the code commonalties found across the interviewees.

Table 2: Code commonalities across the interviews

Serial	Code	Respondents	Similar Words	Interviews
1	Social networks	22	Lack of consensus, nepotism, different views, denying promises, strategic joining, strategy changes, cultural aspects, needs enforcement, open door policy, protection	2-5, 7-11, 13, 15, 17-27
2	Cultural tension	20	Personal decisions, one-man show, line of command, different mind-sets, positional power, social connections, tribes, professional practice, code of conduct	1-3, 7-9, 11-15, 17, 19, 21-27

Upon finalizing the interviews, the data gathered were manually analysed as guided by the six stages to the thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This approach is widely accepted to make qualitative research results available to a wider audience (Braun et al., 2019). It also aids researchers by giving them the opportunity to simultaneously compare theory and practice (Hudson et al., 2001). While analysing the interview transcripts, a massive number of codes were reported; it was of utmost priority to consider all possible codes to ensure consistency as well as rigorous analysis. The total number of interview transcripts analysed was 27, which accounted for one hundred and sixty-seven pages, generating more than 55 potential sub-themes. Therefore, this practice is not only a part of the data analysis process, but is also considered to be a part of the data reduction process. Within the process of data reduction, commonalities were linked and irrelevant codes were consequently excluded. However, the excluded codes are not wasted; rather, they can be utilized for further research in the field. The data reduction process results in only two main themes being reported narratively. Figures 1 and 2, respectively, represent a sample map of the associated data coding and the final two main themes associated with their respective sub-themes.

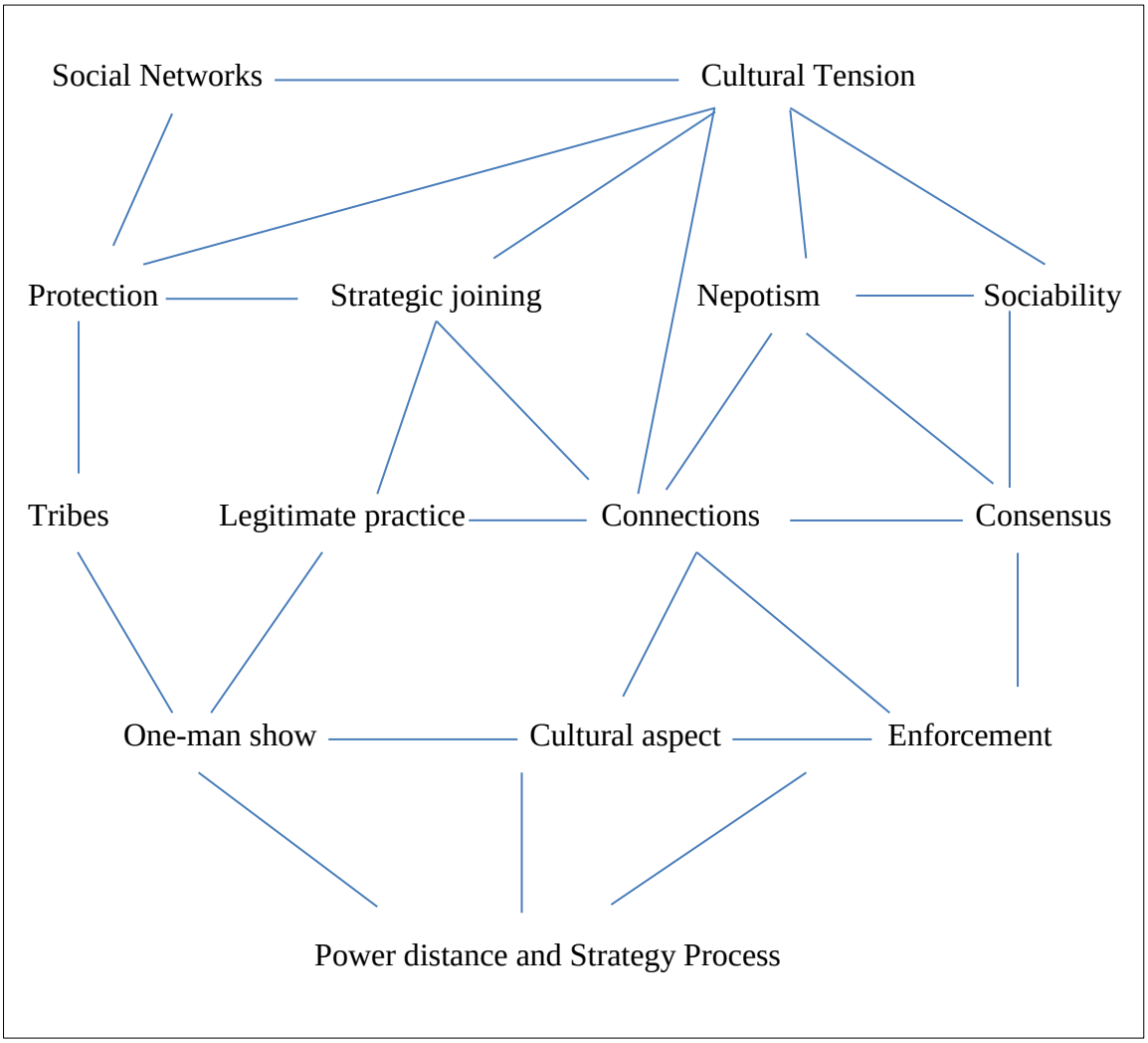

Figure 1: Sample map for the data coding

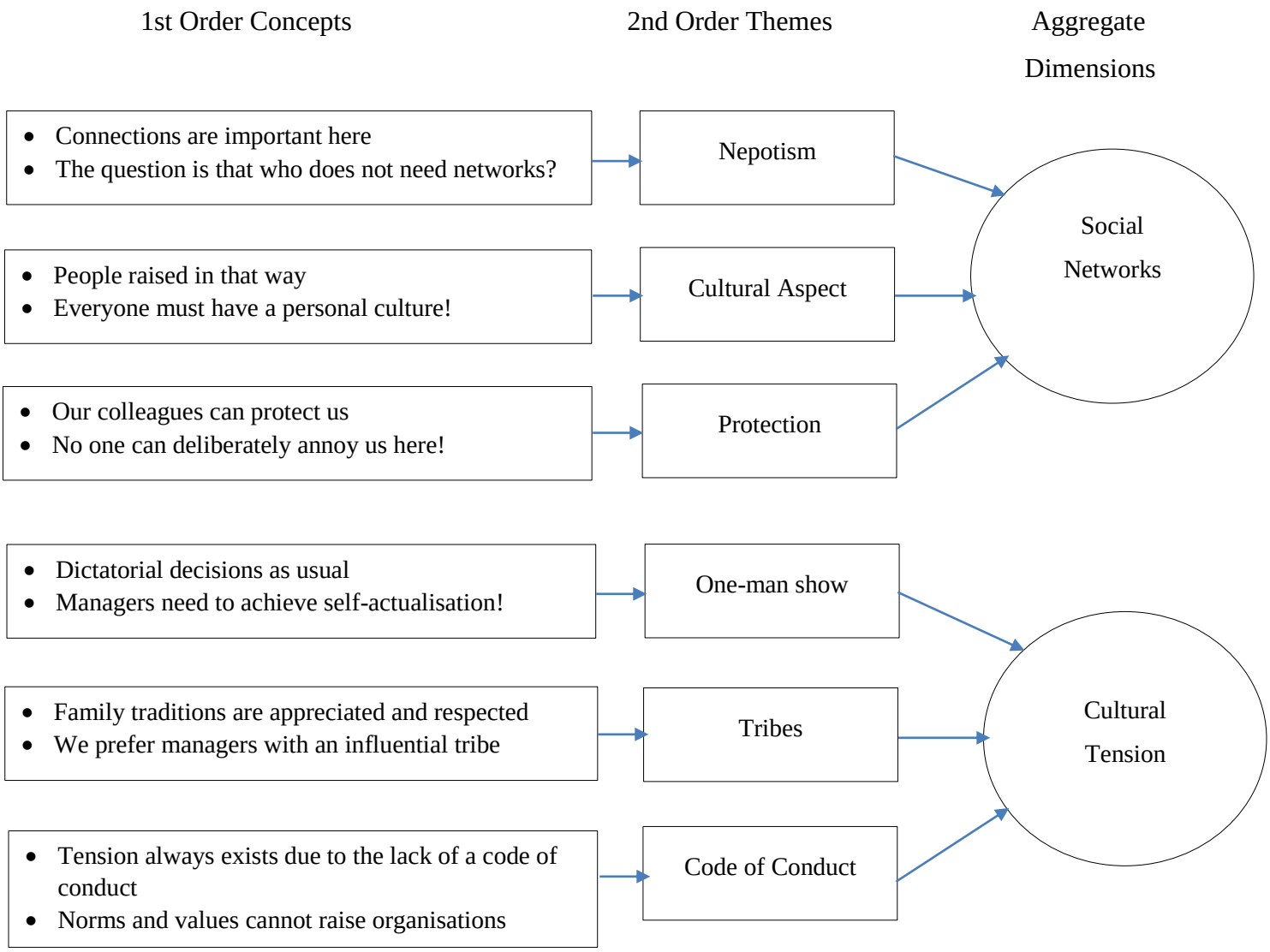

Figure 2: Final thematic map of themes and sub-themes (data structure)
(Source: Adapted from Corley and Gioia, 2004)

Empirical data and findings

The findings show that the level of social networks amongst both top- and middle management teams does indeed influence the way in which strategies are communicated as well as implemented. These complicated social networks were found to be vital as they regulate the social interaction of both top and middle managers in terms of forming a shared understanding by which to communicate organizational strategy. What was interesting to note in this research was not the fact of the social networks themselves, but rather the complexity of these networks. Due to this complexity, it was hard to create a shared understanding and,

equally, a strategic consensus among internal social actors. This was also one of the reasons why some managers manage their subordinates in a dictatorial manner. Most participants indeed showed their positional power and explained why they thought they should be considered to be powerful and influential within their context.

This finding was common across representative quotes taken from 22 interviewees out of the 27. Below are some samples of direct quotes from interviewees that illustrate the direct effects of these social networks on both the top and middle management teams in terms of regulating strategy communication practice. These quotes represent the free-narrative responses of the selected interviewees.

> *"Well.... my role is to receive orders from top management and transfer these orders to my subordinates… my staff should not be engaged in discussing these orders with me… I think they are better at implementing such orders!".* (I-3-MM)

Middle manager 1 clearly stated that top managers are responsible for providing the necessary instructions to the operational managers, and consequently that middle managers provide such instructions to employees at lower managerial levels. This indicates that strategy communication uses a top-to-bottom vertical approach. The words "receiving" and "transferring" imply that employees at various levels do not sit with each other and exchange strategy-related information. The quote also revealed that this middle manager does not support the participation of lower level subordinates in the decision-making loop or in any discussion of the instructions received. This view is also shared by top manager 11, as he argued:

> *"Mmmmm.... you always have in every organization people who are thinkers and others who are good at doing and executing things… [unrecorded]…. after such long years of experience in this organisation, I personally think that not everyone should engage in our business unless he is at our managerial level!".* (I-11-TM)

The above top manager argued that unless people are at the same managerial level, they are not welcome to discuss strategy with the top management team. Top manager 11 clearly differentiated between top management and other employment levels through the use of the terms 'thinkers' and 'doers'. The interviewee also referred to years of experience as the principal measurement or threshold at which one is capable of effectively formulating parts of organizational strategy. This may indicate that strategy awareness and effective

communication is barely obvious within this public sector organization, as stated by the following middle manager 13:

> *"Ok… let's put it in that way… how many employees here know what the organisational strategy is?.... I can almost confirm that unless he or she is interested and have an educated manager that ensures communicating the strategy, no other employees are interested to know!... this should not be the case!".* (I-13-MM)

The above interviewee raised an important point as he showed confidence while arguing that the majority of employees are unaware of organizational strategy. He further extended this to state that knowing the strategy solely depends on an employee's direct manager in terms of communicating the respective objectives as well as the employee themselves taking sufficient interest in them. This middle manager implied that he supports an open-door policy and encourages communication, as he was clearly critical of the current communication culture. However, this does not mean that all middle managers have the same mentality, as the interviewee clearly emphasized the educational level of direct managers in communicating strategy professionally. This may imply that other managers might have different mindsets and counter-opinions; in fact, the latter is obvious in the following quote by top manager 25:

> *"Mmmmmm…. we are the top managers, we are the most important people here, we know almost everyone in this organization… no-one can deny our role and also no-one can teach us what to do…[unrecorded]…. we should communicate in the way we see appropriate!".* (I-25-TM)

Top manager 25 argued that top management itself represents the most important social actors within the organization. Their positional role seems to 'grant' them the authority to practice strategy communication in any way they deem appropriate, even if this is not the most suitable way for of the other social actors involved. It can be also inferred from the above passage that the more employees you know, the more protection you may gain in the instance that critical problems occur. This was obvious when the interviewee passively mentioned the importance of having strong social networks within the organization. This view was also reflected in the experiences of middle managers 8 and 10, respectively:

> *"No one should be blamed in this organisation apart from top management teams! The reason is simply because they rely on their connections to do what they want… and so we do the same!…..[unrecorded]!".* (I-8-MM)

> *"Every employee here is protected by others… no-one is working alone… most of our problems are solved through our connections and not through the formal code of practice... this is the reality!".* (I-10-MM)

The above quotes revealed that the extent of one's connections obviously play a vital role in regulating individuals' practices. The interviewee further extended the above to note that connections provide individuals with social protection. Middle manager 8 also stated that the practices they follow are in fact inherited from the practices followed by top managers. Equally, middle manager 10 argued that organization issues are in most cases resolved by social interaction through the mediating role of individuals' social networks. The interviewees seemed to take a somewhat a positive attitude towards replacing the formal code of practice with traditional social networks, norms, and social values. It seems that such an approach is preferable to senior managers in the organization. However, the extent of networks might create strong cultural tensions, as stated by 20 interviewees. This attitude is exemplified by the following quote:

> *"I don't care at all for those top managers… some of them are there because of their connections as you might already know… what I need in my department I take it immediately whether top management agree or not… [unrecorded]…. If they think they are powerful, we think we are powerful too!".* (I-9-MM)

The language of middle manager 9 seemed to represent a personal challenge to the top management team. The interviewee demonstrated that power is mostly dependent on individuals themselves, along with their social networks. The quote implies that the daily work was smoothly processed, regardless of approval or otherwise from top managers. It can also be inferred that the top management team might resist middle managers' ideas; however, such resistance is of no value if middle managers and other employees share positional power equally. Such practice is also seen as part of proven self-confidence and as deserving of a chance to lead, as claimed by top manager 27 in the following excerpt:

> *"Middle managers sometimes act inappropriately, especially with us… [unrecorded]…. in many cases their argument has no strong evidence… may be they need to show us their capability to be future leaders or so!".* (I-27-TM)

The defensive practice employed middle managers and their continuous objections to top management might be one of the main reasons for cultural tension between the two

managerial levels. However, this practice not only reflects these middle managers' self-confidence and their willingness to lead, but also their career authority in terms of regulating the strategy communication process. This is clear in the response offered by middle manager 6 when he stated:

> *"Let me clarify it… top managers need to understand that we are in the same organisation and we complete with each other… [unrecorded]… they want us just to follow orders without discussing it with them… they have their own authority… but also we have it as we are the ones who link top management to front-line staff… any middle manager is part of the backbone of his organisation!"*. (I-6-MM)

The above interviewee showed that strategy process should be based on a spirit of teamwork; he further extended the above to say that the resistance of the top management team is in fact a case of cultural tension as both top and middle managers need to prove they can enforce their authority on one other. Middle manager 6 viewed his role, along with those of his colleagues, as critical in comparing their roles to that of the backbone which links the entire organization together. In a similar vein, top manager 18 shared his experiences in the following passage:

> *"Mmmmmm… middle managers shouldn't take it personally… in the end they are our colleagues and our subordinates… it is by law they should report to us!... [unrecorded]… everyone has his own zone and we should work together for the public benefit".* (I-18-TM)

Top manager 18 demonstrated that the top management team has considerable responsibility in terms of the execution of organizational strategies. Equally, they have the responsibility to share their strategy with the entire organisation. However, such willingness will never be realised unless a spirit of teamwork exists in addition to the alignment of similar mind-sets in the top- and middle management teams. It can be also inferred from this quote that top managers acknowledge the critical role played by middle management.

A noteworthy remark is that the interviewee emphasized the necessity of working towards the public benefit, which again requires the cooperation of the two managerial levels. Raising the public service ethos is required practice, and indeed is the desire of top management teams. Top manager 8 also mentioned the importance of accountability, as he suggested that middle managers should report to top managers and that this should be the culture adopted without

allowing for the room whereby personal reactions might replace or interfere with the approved rules and regulations. It seems that in this context, leaving each management level to act in the way they want will lead to complicated cultural tension and management conflict. Consequently, such a negative form of practice will result in poor strategy communication and strategic objectives not being implemented.

Discussion of findings

This section discusses the findings of this research as based on the rich responses gained from research participants at both top- and middle managerial levels. Although responses varied between top and middle management according to interviewee's own subjective perspectives, the findings revealed that aligning both teams in terms of the strategy communication process within public sector organisations is a significant step in the right direction. Our findings suggest that the positional role of both top and middle managers within strategy communication process is highly complex within the context of strategy process. What was of interest was not the complexity itself, but rather the strategy practice of most powerful social actors in communicating the strategy-related objectives to the various less powerful organizational members. The positional role of the most powerful managers in communicating the required strategic objectives was in line with the suggestion made by Jarzabkowski et al. (2007) that various stakeholders at various levels of employment could make divergent choices as a result of the various circumstances that can arise. This suggests that strategy alignment between two managerial groups is important to both reducing cultural tension and realizing organizational strategies.

Our research findings also suggest that strengthening communication practices among organizational members and aligning both individual- and group-level cognition are key drivers to the successful communication of strategy in public sector organizations. This corroborates the results of Powell et al. (2011), who confirmed that such alignment and cognition allows for comparison between different groups, and to reach a satisfactory level of performance in an organization. Such agreement is considered essential to achieving the relevant strategic objectives and in minimizing cultural tension. As argued by Kellermanns et al. (2005), a cooperative social environment is vital to the strategy communication process. High cooperation in terms of smooth strategic communication is also associated with strong shared identity and extensive shared context (Hinds and Mortensen, 2005).

The findings of this research also demonstrate that organizations with high power distance cultures are prone to deliberate mismanagement and high cultural tension. This is in line with the suggestion made by Chen and Aryee (2007) who argued that social actors with high power distances may merely just accept status differences, and consequently subordinates obey supervisors' commands essentially without question. Such practice may go beyond conflict management and cultural tension to include abusive supervisory behaviour from top- and middle management teams. This is also echoed by many recent research suggestions, which offer a potential explanation as to why such practices exist. For instance, Javidan et al. (2006), and equally Kirkman et al. (2009), argued that subordinates in high power distance cultures may consider their direct managers to be elite and superior, and therefore work to meet their expectations through any means necessary.

Our research also puts forward the fact that in a high power distance culture, the most powerful individuals make decisions in a dictatorial manner. This was apparent within public sector reorganisations as social actors are often protected by their social networks as opposed to agreed codes of conduct. The complicated levels of social networks amongst both top and middle managers was found to influence their ability to reach a shared understanding with respect to communication practice. As argued by Jarzabkowski (2005), within the practice lens, the strategy is viewed as a situated and socially accomplished activity among social actors. Due to these networks and levels of connections, some managers may be disinterested in involving others in the strategy communication and information-sharing processes; rather, they venerate their line managers' connections above all else in order to secure healthy working relationships within their personal working environments. The abuse of social networks over functional networks can affect the alignment of strategy communication and consequently hinder the effective execution of strategy, as well as increasing the cultural tension between top and middle managers.

Securing social networks and connections is a complicated task within public sector organizations, as relationships have been found to secure individual positions to a greater extent than the accepted system. Furthermore, social networks empower social actors with a legitimate authority to behave in the way they see appropriate. Managers with strong relationship ties and social networks are even seen to be good leaders by their subordinates on this basis alone, and therefore have particular influence in terms of what they communicate to others. Anderson (2008) shared the same view as he found that the characteristics of social networks can affect information exchange among stakeholders, and

this effect is stronger for those managers who are willing to benefit from such networks. The main risk to social networks is that they may cause top and middle management teams to 'drift' the organizational strategy, as opposed to what was originally planned, which in turn results in a lack of strategic communication and a potential chance for cultural tension between them.

The fact that social actors rely extensively on their social networks when interacting with each other requires decision makers to align similar mind-sets to reduce any possible cultural tension and to ensure a smooth strategy commotion process. In social practice theory, Bourdieu (1990) argued that "in the interaction between two agents or groups of agents endowed with the same habitus (Say A and B), everything takes place as if the actions of each of them (Say $a1$ for A) were organized by reference to the reactions which they call forth from any agent possessing the same habitus (say $b1$ for B)" (p. 61). This explanation emphasizes the idea that personal characteristics play a significant role in regulating the strategic practices of both top and middle managers.

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to examine the effects of power distance on the positional roles of top and middle managers during the strategy communication process from the lens of social practice. Based on these findings, our research can be said to have extended the understanding of power distance research in three ways. Firstly, it has demonstrated the importance of power distance – as well as cultural tension – on the strategy communication process, taking into consideration the two managerial groups involved. More specifically, our research has shown that aligning similar individuals' mind-sets is key to fostering effective communication practice. Secondly, we have provided qualitative evidence with regards to the power distance and cultural tension social practice relationship. That is, we were able to reflect the idea that power distance cannot be treated as an object which can be easily measured; it is rather a social interaction, which requires a deeper understanding of individuals' behaviour within the various employment levels. Thirdly, our research introduces a vital contribution to the under-researched area of power distance, as well as cultural tension, at two managerial levels (top and middle management teams). Moreover, it is worth noting that, to our best of knowledge, our study has been the first to simultaneously examine the effects of power distance and cultural tension between two managerial levels as

based on qualitative data. Our research also offers new insight into how power distance is actually practiced and agreed between two managerial teams using the lens of social practice.

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