



Meaning and context of participation in five European countries

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to summarise the findings of a qualitative cross-cultural study of participation in managerial decision making.

Design/methodology/approach – In this paper theme-focused interviews were conducted with middle managers in five European countries and the transcripts were analysed using elements of the grounded theory method. In the context of the current study, grounded theory served as a suitable method for detecting both general patterns and country-specific particularities.

Findings – The findings of the present study suggest that country-specific models of participation exist which is embedded in broader country- and culture-specific concepts. In addition, decision type, time-related issues and conflict emerge from the study as the main general context factors influencing managerial choices on the use of participation. The comparison of the current qualitative findings with earlier quantitative research suggests a good match with two of the studies (that investigated participatory behaviour in context) but not the third (that investigated participatory values).

Research limitations/implications – The exploratory character of the study imposes certain limitations on its findings which could be addressed in future research by studying other countries and cohorts and possibly by employing additional or different types of methodology.

Practical implications – The qualitative study findings are of interest to organisations engaging in business relations abroad as well as to individual expatriates in each of the five European countries included in the study.

Originality/value – In contrast to earlier quantitative studies with a similar focus, this research initiative explores the meaning and enactment of participation from a holistic perspective, taking context factors into account and integrating the findings into earlier research.

Keywords Decision making, Employee participation, Cross-cultural management, Middle managers, Europe

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Rational models of decision-making characteristically include problem definition, generating and evaluating alternatives, selecting one alternative and implementing it. In reality, decisions are rarely made in such a rational manner for a variety of reasons such as incomplete information, complexity of the problem, time constraints or conflicting preferences among the decision makers. March and Simon (1958) termed

The research described in this article was made possible by a “Habilitation Stipendium” of the Austrian “Fonds zur Förderung wissenschaftlicher Forschung”. The author thanks Gerhard Reber, Iris Fischlmayr and Sonja Holm for their valuable suggestions in the writing of the article. The author also wishes to express gratitude to two anonymous reviewers for their critical comments on an earlier draft of the article.



this phenomenon “bounded rationality”. Giving subordinates a “voice” (Hirschman, 1970), or more specifically, enabling subordinates to participate in decision making is one way to alleviate some of the problems that exist due to bounded rationality. When subordinates are allowed to participate in the decision-making process, they are frequently able to provide valuable information, which would otherwise be lacking. Also, group discussions can lead to consensus decisions if the participants have the opportunity to gain understanding and appreciation for the other parties’ views.

Cross-cultural management research suggests that participation of subordinates varies among countries. This difference is shown in general studies of cultural variation, such as in Hofstede’s (1980) work, e.g. power distance (i.e. the degree to which members of a society expect power to be unequally shared among its members) serves as a predictive factor for the degree of subordinate involvement. Cross-cultural variation in participative managerial behaviour has also been studied directly, e.g. Tannenbaum *et al.* (1974); Jago *et al.* (1993); Dorfman *et al.* (1997) and Gill and Krieger (2000). With regard to methodology, most research initiatives follow the quantitative paradigm and use standardised questionnaires and statistical analysis methods as tools for comparison. In the majority of these studies, the quantitative results form the basis for *ex-post* explanations by the researchers with regard to similarities or differences among countries.

In contrast to *ex-post* explanations, qualitative methodology aims at finding explanations directly in the field, by employing such methods as interviews or observations. Qualitative research is well suited for the exploration of participation from a holistic perspective because it places an “emphasis on people’s lived experience” (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 10), masters complexity (Usunier, 1998) and leads to new theoretical insights (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). For these reasons, qualitative methodology constitutes an addition to the body of cross-cultural knowledge on participation built through quantitative inquiry.

However, qualitative methodology has traditionally been criticised for not being well suited for cross-cultural research, one of the main reasons being the difficulty of comparing findings across cultural settings (Berry, 1969). However, qualitative approaches differ significantly with regard to this criterion. One qualitative method found to be well suited for cross-cultural research is grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). This article demonstrates how a qualitative study using elements of the grounded theory approach can generate country-specific models of participation, allow comparison between countries, as well as enrich and clarify the results of quantitative inquiry.

It is also of some importance to introduce and situate myself, the researcher, within the framework and issues of the current study. I was born and raised in Austria, yet I have extensive experience with working and living in other cultures and languages. In terms of epistemological position, I adhere to the interpretive paradigm.

Overview and purpose of the study

A review of earlier cross-cultural studies into participation provided the springboard for the current research initiative. In a first step, 18 studies were reviewed and categorised according to the main aspects of participation they examine, such as level of participation, enactment/form of participation, prerequisites and mediating factors. The review

suggested that the results of the various studies do not lend themselves easily to direct comparison. For example, a number of studies focus on the level of participation, yet they measure different intra-personal constructs such as attitudes (e.g. Haire *et al.*, 1966), reflections of one's own participative behaviour (e.g. Dorfman *et al.*, 1997), behavioural intentions (e.g. Jago *et al.*, 1993) or perceptions of the ideal level of participation (e.g. House *et al.*, 2004). Furthermore, participation is treated as a broad behavioural pattern by some researchers, while other studies explore specific behaviours. The review also showed that some aspects of participation that have repeatedly been discussed in the theoretical participation literature (Heller *et al.*, 1998), such as meaning underlying participative behaviour, range of participants, context factors and possible outcomes of participation have not yet been covered by cross-cultural studies.

Using the review as a base, the current study aims at answering two research questions:

- (1) The meaning and enactment of participation from a cross-cultural perspective.
- (2) General context factors.

Additional goals of the study concern the enhancement of theoretical and practical knowledge on participation and the integration of the findings with earlier research, in particular, with three large-scale quantitative research programmes:

- (1) Empirical research based on the Vroom and Yetton (1973) decision-making model, which studies participation on a continuum ranging from autocratic to consultative, group decision making and which takes context factors into account (e.g. Jago *et al.*, 1993; Szabo *et al.*, 1997; Reber *et al.*, 2000).
- (2) Studies based on the Event Management model (Smith and Peterson, 1988) which focuses on the factors (e.g. formal rules, subordinates) a manager uses as guidance sources whenever faced with "typical" managerial events, such as hiring a new employee (e.g. Smith *et al.*, 2002).
- (3) The GLOBE project (House *et al.*, 2004), which studies, among other areas, universal and culture-specific leadership ideals (e.g. Brodbeck *et al.*, 2000; Weibler *et al.*, 2000; Szabo *et al.*, 2001) and provides country scales related to aspects such as participative leadership.

The following five countries, the Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Poland and Sweden, were selected for the current study based on:

- Representation of different cultural clusters (Ronen and Shenkar, 1985) as well as geographical areas with differing historical and economic backgrounds.
- The possibility of integration because all three quantitative studies report findings on these countries.

Method

Given its aims, the current study takes a methodological approach with a qualitative core, yet it aims at integrating the qualitative findings with the results of quantitative research. First, participation was explored in each of the five countries separately, and subsequently, the country-specific findings were compared with each other and related back to the quantitative studies.

Sampling strategy

Within each country, data were collected from middle managers. However, the country samples were not only defined with regard to national boundaries; the respondents in each country sample were born and raised in that country and were native speakers of the “main language group”. Defining the sample in these terms goes beyond a pure equation of country and culture, which is frequently criticised in the cross-cultural literature (Schaffer and Riordan, 2003). The sample consisted of middle managers, which allows for comparison with the three quantitative studies (integration perspective). However, this focus also placed limitations on the findings (see discussion section). It was further decided to work with a small number of interviewees per country, applying the principle of maximal differentiation as a sampling strategy (Agar, 1996). Maximising differences means that within each country, the interviewees are as different as possible in as many aspects as possible, e.g. in age, gender and functional area. Miles and Huberman (1994) argue that the data from a small number of respondents sampled according to this strategy reveals patterns of common understanding shared by the majority of the members of the wider population.

Sample size

Sample size was determined after a pilot test in the Czech Republic. Data resulting from interviews with no more than five managers turned out to be rich enough to detect stable patterns and build a country-specific model of participation. As a conservative estimate for the main study, it was decided to sample data from at least six managers per country. The final sample exceeded this number and totalled 35 middle managers, counting seven Czechs, eight Finns, eight Germans, six Poles and six Swedes. The different numbers in the various countries resulted from a larger number of managers initially approached, assuming that some might withdraw from participating in the study, which only a few did.

Procedures

Data were collected from interviews, following the collection of some quantitative data required for reflection purposes during the last part of the interviews (see below). As the research represents an initial exploratory project, other qualitative methods such as observations, or alternative samples such as subordinates, were excluded to reduce complexity. Access was facilitated by contact persons, in most cases colleagues of mine at academic institutions situated in the five countries. Most interviews took place at the interviewees’ workplace, with no additional people present in the room. In some cases, it was agreed to meet in a different location following the interviewees’ suggestions. The interviews were between one and two hours in duration and were recorded on audiotape with the permission of the interviewees.

Language and cultural meanings

The interviews were conducted in either German or English, depending on the mother tongue and language skills of the interviewee. Language issues make up a serious challenge to cross-cultural research in general (Usunier, 1998; Tayeb, 2001) and to this study in particular because most of the interviews were conducted in a second language. Additionally, language and culture are strongly related (Agar, 1994) and

possibly, this results in meaning differences across languages. Furthermore, researchers “are perfectly human and as culturally biased as other mortals” (Hofstede, 1994, p. 8) and it is necessary to minimise the “ethnocentric bias” (Usunier, 1998). Therefore, before data collection took place, I thoroughly reflected upon my own understanding of participation, for example by defining participation to myself and examining the definition for theoretical and cultural influences. The interviews were characterised by posing probing questions, mirroring back statements to the interviewees, requests for elaboration and attempts to clarify the cultural meaning of words and concepts.

Interview styles

I took the role of a sympathetic and interested outsider and foreigner and refrained from expressing my own opinion on the study topic. The interviews were theme-focused in order to structure the data to ensure comparability across respondents and countries. Interviewees were asked to bring in their own experience in order to obtain rich personal descriptions. Detailed attention was paid to the “courtesy bias” (Usunier, 1998, p. 121), the risk of shaping answers to please the interviewer. Due to my professional background and the exclusive use of interview-based data, this was a potential concern. To address this issue, each part of the interview looked at participation from a different angle thus allowing me to evaluate each interviewee’s data for internal consistency. Furthermore, asking for personal experiences rather than abstract statements also helped minimise the bias.

Interview topics

The interviews consisted of four parts:

- (1) A brief introduction to myself, and the project (overt research role). To minimise researcher effects on the respondents (Miles and Huberman, 1994), the interviewees were informed in a corresponding fashion about the interview and study purposes. Since it was the first face-to-face encounter with the interviewee, this phase also served the purpose of establishing rapport (Agar, 1996; Schaffer and Riordan, 2003).
- (2) Personal definition of participation: respondents were asked to define in their own words what participation meant to them and relate this definition to their own managerial practice.
- (3) Description by interviewee of areas and problems that qualify particularly well or particularly poorly for participation, giving examples from own experience.
- (4) Reflection about quantitative research results: in preparation for the interviews, the managers had completed the instruments of the three quantitative studies and had received detailed written feedback. During the interviews, the managers were asked to comment on the quantitative results, provide examples from their own experience and elaborate on emerging country-specific themes. There was little risk that the initial quantitative data collection ‘contaminated’ the qualitative data because neither questionnaires nor written feedback stressed the concept of participation. Rather, the documents related to leadership styles, leader attributes and guidance sources. Thus, while setting

the stage for the interviews, no preconditioning of the interviewees with regard to participation had taken place.

Grounded theory adopted

The current study poses questions with regard to analysis method that do not usually surface in quantitatively oriented cross-cultural studies or in studies of single settings. These questions concern the attention to country-specific particularities while simultaneously ensuring cross-cultural comparison. Grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1998) was found to be an appropriate analysis method, although some elements of the original method required adaptation to suit the study’s specific needs.

In general, grounded theory provides rather structured strategies to arrive at theoretical, yet empirically grounded, statements about social phenomena. In other words, it supports the translation of data into abstract concepts of explanation. Following the grounded theory approach, data are systematically analysed for relevant concepts and links between concepts, such as conditions and consequences (Strauss and Corbin, 1994). With regard to the current study, data coding of the interview transcripts resulted in descriptive codes, which were aggregated to more general categories and abstract country-specific concepts, as exemplified in Figure 1.

In grounded theory, data collection, data analysis and evolving theory are closely related (Strauss and Corbin, 1994). According to the original method, data collection is based on the principle of theoretical sampling, i.e. “directed by the emerging theory” (Goulding, 2002, p. 170) and continues until theoretical saturation is achieved i.e. new data provide no new insights. For the current study, the sample was defined based on theoretical criteria (see above). A full overlap of data collection and analysis did not take place, as an extended stay in each of the five countries was not feasible due to time and financial constraints. However, themes emerging from prior interviews influenced subsequent data collection, in the form of probing questions and requests to elaborate on emerging country-specific themes. Theoretical saturation was controlled in two ways: the first criterion concerned the number of new codes per interview, whereas the second was related to open questions about concepts and their relationships. Both criteria were expected to decrease considerably as the analysis unfolded and eventually

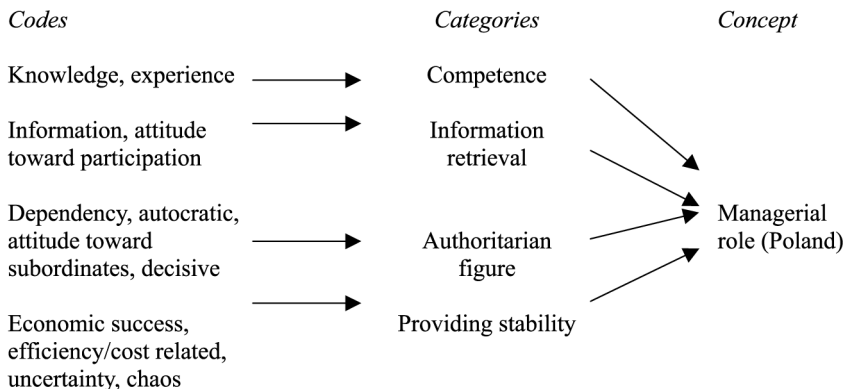


Figure 1.
From codes to concepts
in the analysis of the
Polish data

amount to zero, after all interviews of a country had been analysed. As it turned out, both criteria were met in the analysis for all five countries.

In grounded theory, asking questions and constant comparison are the two main procedures throughout the complete analysis process. Questions and comparisons increase the likelihood that “analysts will discover both variation and general patterns” (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 85) and support the generation of abstract concepts. Furthermore, these procedures ensure that validation of the findings is incorporated into every step of the analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The current study utilised the two procedures extensively. Moreover, questions and emerging concepts were stored in “memos” to facilitate the analysis process. Using memos also helped detect possible blind spots resulting from my own cultural conditioning. Further validation was sought by presenting the emerging country-specific models of participation to local research colleagues for their feedback.

Country-specific models of participation

This section and the following provide a summary and overview of some of the key findings, whereas the detailed analysis is presented elsewhere (Szabo, forthcoming). The first research question concerned the meaning and enactment of participation in five European countries. The data suggest strong variation between the Czech, Finnish, German, Polish and Swedish samples. Most notably, the meaning of participation is embedded in broader country and culture-specific concepts, and the enactment of participation is naturally determined to a great extent by this more or less implicit understanding.

The managers in the Czech sample speak about participation highly positively, yet their seemingly positive attitude toward participation is frequently contrasted by descriptions of autocratic managerial practice. This discrepancy is illustrated in the following quotes from Czech managers:

I'm convinced that participation is good for most situations.

“It's common that the boss has the final say”, I said to them. “So please, it does not matter whether you have comments or not. You have to follow this decision. Without any discussion.”

Mainly, the Czech managers' attitudes toward subordinates defines whether they take participation into account or not: managers portraying their subordinates as “trustworthy experts” involve them in decision making. In contrast, subordinates described as “irresponsible children” are excluded from decision making. In both cases, the manager is responsible for making the final decision. Outside specialists are frequently included in decision making, with a tendency of some managers to delegate responsibility and blindly follow the specialists' recommendations. This pattern may be a legacy of the communist regime. In contrast, the “trustworthy expert” view of subordinates by some of the managers suggests potential changes in the Czech way of thinking about management and participation, seemingly influenced by increasing experiences with Western executive education and business practice after the Velvet Revolution.

The Finnish sample is characterised by values of autonomy and concern for quality. Independent work of empowered employees defines work life. Consequently,

participation is viewed as a tool for the integration of independent work and opinions. The manager's role is that of a facilitator who prepares the ground for the empowered subordinates to contribute effectively to decision making. The manager is also the one officially responsible for a decision and for its outcomes. The following quotes by Finnish managers emphasise the integration aspect:

Participation for me means [...] taking into account different opinions and things like that.

I think good leaders are good at synthesising different opinions

The data of the German managers suggest a pattern of thinking in terms of effectiveness and an overall aim to optimise work and management. Participation is an integral part of managerial decision making, used as a highly effective tool to achieve sound decisions and ensure employee motivation:

I try to let decisions emerge from among the group of subordinates. And there are teambuilding processes going on, for sure. It's not satisfactory that everyone just defends his own opinion, you have to take a few steps to reach the others.

German subordinates are considered "valuable human capital", who can contribute effectively to decision making. External specialists are frequently used for consultation but the final decisions stays within the organisation. Some of the interviewed managers were in favour of sharing responsibility between manager and subordinates. Participation often takes place in structured forms, such as weekly unit meetings, which ties in with the German preference for structural rather than improvised arrangements (i.e. high uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede (1980))).

The Polish data are characterised by economic efficiency, with organisational survival and prosperity predominantly on the managers' minds. Participation is limited to providing information to the manager rather than consultation, as is illustrated by the following quote:

If we have to implement a new plan, step by step, it is always good to get some information from the subordinates.

The subordinates primarily deliver the required information, but external specialists may also be used for input. It is the manager's task to collect and integrate all the information and then make the decision. Additionally, managers are a highly valued group within Polish society and it is considered a valuable contribution to societal "stability" when their decision making boosts the success of the organisation. Providing stability was described as a particularly crucial issue during the current highly instable times, characterised by high unemployment and numerous reforms in progress.

The Swedish managers value equality and fairness and act on the premise of "smooth interpersonal relations". Participation is a "natural ingredient" of managerial decision making and emerged from the data as related to Swedish consensus orientation and communication style. Managers seek consultation with "everyone who may be able to provide valid input", including subordinates, colleagues, the manager's own superior and specialists inside and outside the organisation:

Participation is to be able to affect something, to be within the decision process and to be a part of the decision [...] from the manager's standpoint it is basically to collect, to get input and to get help in the decision process.

On the one hand, the act of participating ensures smooth relations because subordinates and other parties expect to be involved. On the other hand, all participants are expected to contribute to a smooth decision-making process with as little tension and conflict as possible. Decisions often directly emerge from a group discussion.

In summary, the meaning and enactment of participation in the five countries emerged from the data as related to broader concepts such as history, economic situation, communication, uncertainty avoidance and view on managers and subordinates.

General context factors

The second research question dealt with the main common context factors that constitute the meaning and enactment of participation. As the above section suggests, there are many country-specific particularities. Across countries, three context factors emerged from the data, namely decision type, time-related issues and conflict.

Decision type revealed the strongest impact on whether or not managers make use of participation and to what extent. The two categories most frequently referred to relate to major (strategic/large/important) versus minor (operational/small/unimportant) decisions.

Participatory decision making is preferred for major decisions by the managers in Finland and Sweden, whereas minor decisions are solved with less subordinate involvement in Sweden and a preference for delegation in Finland. The main argument for the Swedish solution to minor problems is not to bother subordinates with unimportant issues, whereas major issues deserve as many opinions as possible. In Finland, empowerment and delegation are highly valued and practiced and consequently, only decisions requiring integration (i.e. major decisions) call for participation:

Of course, the more operative decision making is, the less participation you need in a way, I think. But the more vague or uncertain, the more participation you need, just in principal, and, overall (Finnish manager).

I think participation is to be involved in any decision and also to some degree in strategy, in formal strategy. I think it's really very important (Swedish manager).

The Czech and Polish data suggest a reversed pattern. Participation is "tolerated" for minor issues, whereas major decisions are solved at the managerial level:

When you need to do restructuring, or deep change, this should be done autocratically, with only a few people behind you. [...] And then you try to spread the information to the company. If you use a very open approach, you fail (Czech manager).

[Deciding about parking space] is just a simple case, it's not very serious for the company's field in general, and that's why I think they can take care of it on their own (Polish manager).

In the case of Polish managers, this pattern originates from two forces:

- (1) High individualism (Hofstede, 1980) is combined with an image of managers being strong authoritarian figures and also with the pressure to achieve economic success.

- (2) Overt autocratic managerial behaviour tends to be equated with the former communist system and is viewed somehow negatively.

Consequently, allowing subordinates to participate on minor decisions is a compromise to satisfy the two positions. In the Czech case, mental and organisational structures in the workplace seem to serve as barriers to a more extensive use of participation: many subordinates and some of the managers still seem to maintain the opinion that participation reflects managerial weakness and indecisiveness.

In Germany, both major and minor decisions qualify equally well for subordinate involvement in decision making, mainly based on the assumption that participation can improve decision quality and commitment independent of the decision's importance.

Time-related issues constitute the second main factor influencing the use of participation. These include time pressure and the efficient use of time. Managers across country samples tend to behave in a less participatory manner when facing time constraints, compared to cases with little time pressure:

Depends on how much time you've got. If it's a crisis or something like that, participation just takes too long (Czech manager).

The decision had to be made quickly (Swedish manager).

Sometimes, regardless of country origin, participation is considered a waste of time. However, the issues and time spans that are considered a "waste of time" vary across country samples. For example, for the Polish managers the tolerated time span is fairly short, resulting in quick autocratic decisions. In contrast, the German data suggest a common acknowledgement that participation takes time. However, when a decision-making process drags on beyond the tolerated time span, managers try to reach a quick decision, but not necessarily by autocratic means as is the case for the Polish managers.

Conflict is the third main factor influencing managerial use of participation. The data suggest differences between the five countries. Even the general meaning of the concept of "conflict" varies. Among the Swedes, a mere difference in opinion qualifies as "conflict". Taking the Swedish preference for smooth interpersonal relations into account, conflict might threaten intact relations and has to be avoided at all costs, even if this means less participation. In contrast to the Swedes, the German managers view conflict as natural and a learning opportunity and only worry about it when it seems to get out of hand. Consequently, participatory behaviour is hardly influenced by potential conflict:

In times when individuals are highly educated, it is only normal that people have different views and opinions. That's not necessarily negative. I even think that's useful, because you get to know other viewpoints (German manager).

The Finnish managers, with their preference for independent work within an integrative framework, similarly assume that different opinions will be voiced in decision-making processes. For the Czech Republic, the data suggest no conflict avoidance per se, but pressure on managers to prevent conflict, since dealing with conflict represents an unproductive use of time. Whenever a participatory setting

seems to breed conflict, the Czech data suggest a tendency to switch to more autocratic forms of decision making. In a similar vein, the Polish managers view conflict as an obstacle to efficient and fast decision making.

Integration

The qualitative study resulted in country-specific models of participation. How do these findings fit with the results of the three quantitative studies?

The country indices originating from the Vroom/Yetton studies are in line with the qualitative data: for example, the MLP (mean level of participation) score suggests that Swedish and German managers are highly participative, whereas Czech and Polish managers are significantly less participative. Additional indices (e.g. reaction to conflict) are also reflected in the qualitative data. The findings of the current study enrich the quantitative results by providing information about the meaning underlying participatory behaviour, the range of participants and the influence of the ascribed managerial and subordinate roles on the decision-making process.

The Event Management study's index "guidance factor subordinates" tends to fit with the country-specific models of participation detected by the current study. The qualitative data add to this result by pointing out the reasons that motivate managers to consult subordinates and by demonstrating that decision making for "typical" events, as studied by the Event Management programme, need not necessarily follow the same patterns as strategic decisions.

Participative leadership ideals (GLOBE study) show little variation among the five countries and are, therefore, rather incongruent with the current study. The GLOBE results also differ from the outcome of the other two quantitative studies. A likely explanation is that leadership ideals influence behaviour only indirectly and in combination with other intra-personal factors, such as habits, and exogenous factors, such as forces of the situation (Szabo *et al.*, 2001).

In conclusion, the good match with the Vroom/Yetton and Event Management studies and the weak link with the GLOBE study point out the relevance of context factors as explored by the current study.

Discussion

This qualitative study is an exploratory first step into the meaning, enactment and context of participation across countries. The study also represents a step toward the integration of studies in the field of participative management. Following the grounded theory approach, data analysis resulted in a number of theoretical propositions (Szabo, forthcoming), such as the sample proposition included below, which may serve as basis for further exploration and testing in subsequent (quantitative and/or qualitative) research:

Sample proposition: decision type influences participatory decision making, yet is country-specific in possibly different directions: "the more important a decision, the more participation" versus "the more important a decision, the less participation".

With regard to methodology, the rich findings of the study imply that grounded theory can be a useful analysis tool for several areas in management research, in particular when the aim is to address questions about the meaning and context of social

phenomena. Furthermore, such projects need not be limited to single settings, but can also include a cross-cultural perspective, as demonstrated in the study described here. Future research may also combine self-reports with other qualitative methods, such as participant observation because replies to interview questions may not have a stable relationship to actual behaviour in naturally occurring situations (Silverman, 2001).

In terms of its practical relevance, the findings of the current study contribute to a better understanding of the causes underlying managerial behaviour, which is becoming increasingly important within Europe as a consequence of continuing integration. Frequently, managers find themselves interacting with business partners, colleagues and subordinates from other cultural backgrounds. For successful interaction to take place, it is essential to understand the dynamics that shape ones' own and the partner's behaviour. However, the comparison perspective of the current study can only be a first step to be followed up because behavioural patterns detected in intra-cultural settings may not fully overlap with those of inter-cultural settings (Adler and Graham, 1989).

This issue leads us to additional limitations of the current study, such as the small size of the sample. However, the sample is built based on theoretical considerations, maximising differences ensures generalisation across different types of middle managers, and the integration with earlier quantitative studies strengthens the validity of the findings for this very cohort. Moreover, the detected patterns likely apply to other managerial groups because the issues emerging from the current study reflect deeply ingrained ways of thinking (e.g. with regard to the managerial role or concepts such as conflict) which are likely to converge across hierarchical levels and organisational settings. Also related to the generalisation issue is the following observation: "Whereas mainstream approaches tend to generalise across frequencies, grounded theory tends to generalise in the direction of theoretical ideas" (Hunt and Ropo, 1995, p. 381). In this sense, the current study informs us about a wide range of possible variations in the meaning and enactment of participation and its context factors across countries and cultures.

The managers represented in the current study all belong to "European" countries and cultures. Findings may turn out differently if the respondents' cultural background is more diverse. Consequently, future research could concentrate on other countries or expand the current five-country sample for a more inclusive comparison process. Furthermore, the exclusive use of managerial data is an additional issue to be addressed. Managers represent a very specific cohort of society since managers worldwide face similar challenges, which may reflect upon their values, attitudes and behaviour. Future studies could, for example, explore participation from a subordinate perspective. This would add further complexity to the country-specific models of participation summarised in this paper.

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