

# **ROLE OF NATIONAL CONTEXT IN THE TRANSFER OF PRACTICES IN ORGANIZATIONS: LEARNING FROM ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDIES**

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## **Key words:**

Project management; National context; The Netherlands; France; Analytical framework;

## **Abstract**

This ethnographic research investigates the impact of national context in the transfer of managerial practices from one country to another. It explores the matches and mismatches between the logic inherent to a managerial practice and the logics that govern the functioning of organizations at a national level.

The communication is both result and methodologically oriented. It restitutes the case of a contrasted appropriation of project management in a Dutch/French R&D team. It proposes an analytical framework that guides ethnographic investigations of managerial practices and their contexts of implementation.

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## **Introduction**

In a paper awarded as best article of the year 2004 in Management Accounting Research, Bourguignon et al. compare two equivalent accounting devices, the American balance scorecard and the French “tableau de bord”. French “tableau de bord” can be dated back to 1932 whereas the balanced scorecard has been introduced during the 90. Interestingly, French “tableau de bord” is ignored in USA and, similarly, the balance scorecard has not been adopted in France. The authors interpret the absence of transferrability of the practices in association with the specificities of American and French ideologies. Taking advantage of previous ethnographic studies in these two countries (d’Iribarne 1989), the research put into light the rooting of the balance scorecard in the American contract and that of the “tableau de bord” in the French “honneur du métier”. This example is interesting because it illustrates the lack of transfer of both practices from one to the other land. It challenges the global character of managerial practices and managerial contexts altogether.

Despite a common assumption that managerial tools and processes can be exported worldwide, a different reality is often experienced at the workplace. Implementation of a new management process coming from abroad is frequently subjected to avoidance, delays or rejection. In which case, a manager is subjected to the dilemma of forcing the use of practice or trying to reconcile the practice and the context of implementation. In order to elaborate a convenient solution, s/he first needs to understand what is the origin of the discrepancy. S/he will certainly get the benefit of ethnographic studies that disentangle the various logics at stake and their interplay.

A portrayal of managerial tools as objective, rational and universal is mainly the matter of a dominant discourse. Yet, it is difficult to think of a practice detached from any corresponding contexts and actors. Managerial practices are both designed and implemented within defined political, institutional and social contexts. They interact with cooperation and coordination processes. Whereas the logic inherent to a practice is, per se, coherent with the context in which it has been elaborated, it may be at odds with the local contexts to which it is exported (d’Iribarne et al, 1998; Henry, 2003).

The transferability of managerial practices has to be considered in the perspective of increasing internationalization and globalization processes. In this regard, the nature of what is currently addressed as “global” and “local” deserves more investigation. For example, the nations display a certain diversity in the ways to reward and to sanction, to decide and coordinate actions. There are different ways to encourage cooperation and to provide individual autonomy. What is the impact of a diversity in cooperation and coordination processes on the implementation of management processes ?

This communication explores the influence of national context in the implementation of project management. It takes advantage of a case study, a Dutch/French cooperation project in the field of research and development. The two partners adopt contrasting

positions towards managerial aspects of the project and, more specifically, monitoring and evaluation. The research disentangle the matches and mismatches between the logic inherent to project management and the logics that govern the Dutch and French contexts of implementation. An analytical framework is proposed to retrieve these logics and their interplay.

The paper begins with the theoretical background for this research (section 1) and the background for this case study (section 2). Then, the text proceeds with the description of the case. It analyzes the procedures and unfolding of the project and further interprets the perception of Dutch and French partners about the project, its evaluation and monitoring (section 3). The last section discusses two contextual aspects involved in this case study. It underlines the role played by Dutch consensus and French logic of “*métier*” in the integration of project management (section 4).

## **1- Theoretical background**

### **1-1 National context and management**

In this research, national context is taken in a very broad sense. It includes all that is shared within a nation such as a common language, common political, legal and educational systems. I retain the term national context rather than that of national culture because, as we will see below, existing studies on national cultures either tend to evacuate the context or to minimize a part of the context which is important for management studies. The nation appears as a pertinent area and is retain for this study. However there are also other relevant areas such as the institutional context which is also discussed in this paper and organizational context. Although this work focuses on the national context, it must be underlined that all contextual aspects are involved and reinforce one another.

The literature investigating the relations between national culture and management can be summarized according to three main positions and the corresponding underlying assumptions. For the sake of clarity, I shall restrict to the work of three representative scholars among them.

A first stream of research considers that management has nothing to do with national culture (Peter and Waterman, 1982). According to this stream, management is governed by objective practices and autonomous actors. This “universalistic” current is criticized because it cannot make allowance for a dominant management and a universal management.

A second current of research derives from psychology. Cross Cultural Studies (CCS) undertake quantitative comparisons of countries along few dimensions such as individualism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance or masculinity (Hofstede, 1991; 2001). CCS are based on the assumption that national cultures are comparable and that dimensions are common in nature<sup>2</sup>. These dimensions are oriented on actors’ attitudes rather than the contexts of the situations. Surprisingly, CCS are highly popular in the

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<sup>2</sup> CCS have been criticized for inherent theoretical and methodological biases. See for example Berry et al, 2002; Kim & al, 1994; Chapman, 1996.

sphere of international managers despite the fact that they are hardly equipped to provide information on national contexts.

A third stream of research is often referred to as emic current (in opposition to the etic current which includes CCS). It postulates that a culture is characterized by its uniqueness. Accordingly, there are no common indicators or dimensions and quantitative comparisons between cultures are hardly possible (Chapman, 1996). Deriving from symbolic anthropology (Geertz, 1973) this stream of research mobilizes in-depth qualitative descriptive and interpretive studies also known as thick description. These inductive approaches allow to disentangle indigenous (native) categories of interpretation of the reality within a defined national context (d'Iribarne, 1989, 1998, 2003, 2006).

A difficult goal in all cultural studies consist in clarifying the very nature of what is shared in a culture. Culture is often defined as a "shared meaning" or a common interpretation of the reality within a group (Gullestrup, 2006). Yet, a shared meaning is hardly conceivable in pluralistic and complex societies. Even in a homogeneous group, individuals have their own perception of the reality. As argued by d'Iribarne (2007) a definition of culture as a "shared meaning" is a misleading issue. Culture corresponds to the categories that frames the meaning rather than the meaning itself<sup>3</sup>. D'Iribarne (2008) defines national culture as a set of categories that shape the interpretation of the reality, as a context of meaning. As we will now see, this definition of culture integrate structural and dynamic aspects.

More than ever, today, the study of culture is challenged by a world in rapid and constant evolution. The stability postulated in cultural studies is hard to reconcile with today's rapid organizational evolution. According to process theories (Weick, 1995; 2001), the sense is constantly co-constructed, negotiated and renewed in association with action. Sense making integrates the diversity and complexity of organizational situations. However, these process theories are limited by two drawbacks. They are not validated by concrete case studies (Autissier, 2006). Sense making is considered as context free. It does not integrate the political, institutional and social contexts in which the sense is built (Weber & Glynn, 2006)

Altogether, the above remarks lead to the conclusion that cultural evolution does not exclude the existence of structural components. Culture includes permanence and evolution and these two factors are to be investigated by independent (and complementary) approaches.

## **1-2 Theoretical contribution to the field**

Qualitative interpretive studies prove well adapted to investigate the impact of national culture on management. However, existing studies are still limited by two drawbacks.

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<sup>3</sup> A similar definition of culture was already proposed by Benedict (1934). In "*Patterns of Culture*", this author described how a culture partitions the reality by selecting a coherent system of categories.

First, there is a lack of a common analytical framework that allows to federate and theorize a collection of scarce studies. Second, by focusing on culture as a context of meaning, it tends to underestimate culture as a context of action (Friedberg, 2005). Culture also influences actions, an aspect which is important in the field of management.

#### 1-2-1 Integrating context of action in cultural studies

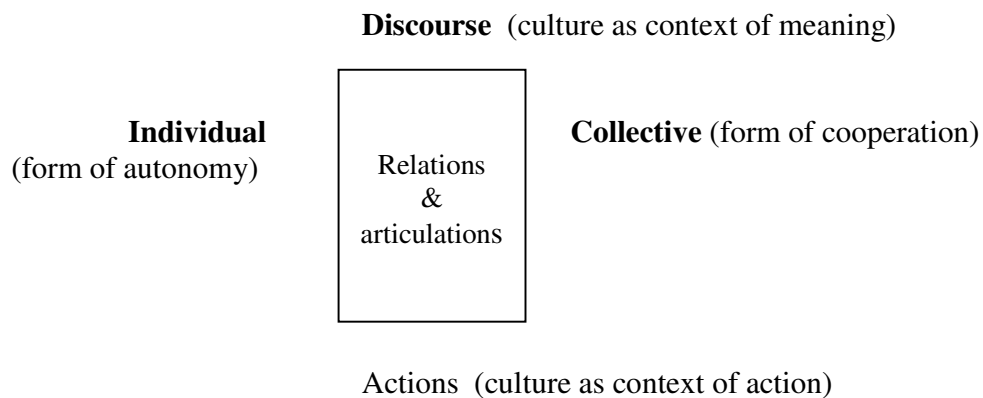
In the previous sub-section, I tried to place national context within two existing streams of research. CCS are culture free whereas inductive studies are essentially turned towards the context of interpretation. Considering that culture is not only a context of meaning but also a context of action, I propose to centre the analysis at their articulation and to conduct a dialogue between actions and interpretation of these actions. This is important for the three following reasons. First, implementation of a practice is essentially action driven. Second, as proposed by Brunsson (2002) actions and discourses about actions are not directly linked. The author uses the word “hypocrisy” to express this indirect coupling between thoughts, decisions and actions. Third, it is possible that the articulation between thoughts and actions is culturally dependent. This hypothesis is one of my research questions.

#### 1-2-2 Analytical framework

My second contribution to the field is to propose an analytical frame adapted to study the transfer of management practices. Any situation or practice is shaped by a defined relation between the individual and the group and between actors and their actions. Hence, one can read a situation or a practice along two main federative dimensions. The first dimension includes the individual (form of autonomy), the group (form of cooperation) and the nature of the articulation between the individual and the collective. The second dimension includes actions, corresponding discourse and articulation between the two of them. Instead of considering these factors as independent, I take them as intertwined and examine them “en masse” as illustrated by the square in figure 1. In other words, I focus on the relations between the individual, the group, thoughts and actions in order to disentangle the mechanism of their articulations.

Such a broad and flexible analytical frame provides a common guideline to analyze a practice or a social situation or even, a national context. It allows the unravelling of indigenous categories without damaging their singularities. It intends to federate emic results despite their inherent singularities. It provides a support to develop ethnographic studies of management practices. This analytical framework also intends to test or confirm my research hypothesis about the role of national culture on these articulations between individual and collective and between thoughts and action.

**Figure 1 : National context : theoretical framework**



## **2-Background of this case study**

### **2-1 Project management: origin, features and reception in Europe**

Project management was first developed in the United States during the fifties. Originally, it was meant to improve the structure of the work but, progressively, it has evolved as a concept. Today, a project can be considered as a current managerial practice, a way to work or a way to perceive the work. One even talks about a “projectified society” (Lundin & Soderholm, 1998).

A project is a unique situation. It responds to a specific question and unfolds during a limited time period. It is characterized by a clear definition of the objectives to be reached, mediums to be used and results to be expected (Garel & al, 2004). It assembles a diversity of specialists in a team exclusively for the duration of the project. This team is placed directly under the authority of the direction that is in charge of monitoring and evaluation (Segrestin, 2004).

Project management relies on a work organisation that transcends traditional professional segmentations (Messeghem & Schmitt, 2004). Specialists issued from various divisions and hierarchical levels are considered equally competent to implement the project. Another peculiarity of the project is its contractual character. However, instead of a share between employer and employee, this contract is centred on a realization (Bloch & al, 2001). Finally, a project proceeds in a matrix of financiers (government and private) and stakeholders (consumer, citizen, industry, local government). It is often linked with other projects or included in programs.

The dominant literature on project management describes how project management “should be” rather than what it really “is” at the workplace. It proposes a process assumed as rational with a prescriptive discourse (Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999). This combination of assumed objectivity and prescription contributes to universalizing the project.

A number of studies on international R&D point out the difficulty of managing heterogeneity in project teams. These researches underline confrontations between the different national models of project management (Campagnac & Winch, 1998; Chevrier, 2003), challenges imposed by political and cultural factors (Shore & Cross, 2003), contrasting collaborative working relationships (Kendra & Taplin, 2004), country of origin effects (Noorderhaven & Harzing, 2003), different approaches towards disputes and conflicts (Chan & Tse, 2003), different decision making processes (d'Iribarne, 1998), information flow barriers (Rosswurm and Bayerlein, 2005) or difficulties to integrate knowledge (Subramaniam, 2006). There is an increasing awareness of the role of embeddedness as an important dimension in analyzing projects (Blomquist and Packendorff, 1998). At stake is the capacity of local resources to integrate, adjust, or reconcile the logic of project management and local professional logics.

The transfer of project management varies from one country to another and the contrast between the Dutch and the French is particularly outstanding. In the Netherlands, the project is perceived as a common way of working. Dutch literature about project management is positive and enthusiastic to the point of ignoring its limitations (Bakker & Louweret, 2001; Bos & Harting<sup>4</sup>, 1999; Wijnen & al, 1989). Significant for a successful integration, the project has even penetrated the educational sector as a learning approach. When entering active life, a young Dutch person is well acquainted with the project and its logic.

In France, the project has been more difficult to implement at the workplace. The specific work organisation that governs the project contradicts French professional logics (Bloch & al, 2001). Main stumbling blocks include the perception of time, perception of work and perception of hierarchy (Garel & al, 2004; Brechet & Desreumaux, 2005). French scholars question the projectified society (Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999) or the price to pay in order to adapt to the project (Segrestin, 2004). They refer to an opposition between a logic of project and a logic of "métier" (Boussard, 2005; Maugeri, 2006) and a mismatch between managerial and professional logics which extends far beyond project management (Le Goff, 2000; Brunel, 2004; de Gaulejac, 2005; Berrebi-Hoffman & Boussard, 2005).

The appropriation of evaluation follows in line with that of the project. In the Netherlands, the practice is widely and extensively used (Perret, 2001). The French still experience difficulties in implementing evaluation in various sectors (Salmon, 2005). It appears to them as a "catch all" notion that aggregates judgment, information and group cohesion (Perret, 2001). It encapsulates the individuals, their realizations and several "in-betweens" (competences, profile). Such an hybridization of concepts and registers hardly makes sense to them (Bureau & Marchal, 2005; Bouquet & al, 2007). The French also question the conception of work that is supported by this practice. Does working correspond to applying defined prescriptions or to fill the gap between reality and procedures? In this last situation, what is the substance to be evaluated (Dejours, 2003)?

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<sup>4</sup> These two books last have been used as reference manuals during the evolution of Doel towards project management.

## **2-2 Origin of the project**

The story of this bilateral cooperation begins at the end of 1997. In the economic sector of concern<sup>5</sup>, the European Community subsidizes a large number of activities but has not yet initiated the funding of research. The Dutch research centre that we refer to as “Doel” (doel translates as objective) and the corresponding French research centre “Met” (for métier) have both a prominent position in research and development. They decide to pool their efforts and assets in organizing a cooperation in the form of research projects as stepping stones to potential future European projects. A first project, described in this work, was undertaken between 2000 and 2004. Since then, two other projects were completed (2003-2006) and one<sup>6</sup> is in process.

The objective of this project is to develop an innovative product which satisfies the consumer, the citizen and ecological requirements as a whole. Dutch and French headquarters stress the importance of multidisciplinary approaches. They agree on the employment of 3-4 full time researchers per country for a period of 4 years. The project is placed under the responsibility of a project coordinator (NL), assisted by a partner coordinator (F). Furthermore, the project is affiliated to the international department of both institutes that is accountable for its financing, monitoring and evaluation.

The cooperation is structured around two bilateral annual workshops, of a day and a half taking place alternatively in each country. These meetings are conceived as a platform where researchers (around 6 per country) can communicate, exchange and discuss the progress of their results. And, finally, since the main goal of this cooperation is to develop a future European research project, the meetings also provide the opportunity to strengthen cooperation and organize co-publications.

## **2-3 Contextual aspects at Doel and Met during the last decades**

Until 1990, Doel and Met were both traditional public organisations which benefited from a government funding and a stability of employment. During the nineties, both institutes witnessed the pressure of the market, an increasing concern about quality and sustainability of products and the new evolution of research funding at a European level. Yet, this evolution was not similarly reflected in the functioning of Doel and Met. In the following, I summarize the main facts and events that contributed to shape the development of Doel and Met in distinctive ways since this is an important contextual aspect of this research.

At the beginning of the nineties, the Dutch supervisory ministry made the decision to phase out the traditional funding of Doel. In the near future, it would only provide the funding of project and consequently, Doel had to become financially autonomous. The need to adapt to economic, social and political evolution was also a concern for this institute. The headquarters decided to anticipate the future and initiated an internal reorganisation that integrated economical, ecological and social demands together with

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<sup>5</sup> The names of the sector, product and institutes are not given to preserve anonymity.

<sup>6</sup> These projects are not related with the first one. Each theme is chosen for its relevance and potentiality to initiate a future European projects.



financial independence. This resulted in a document<sup>7</sup> proposing an integrated approach to research questions and a management of research by project. Project management procedures were designed, the staff attended managerial training and the management of research by project was progressively implemented until completion at the end of the nineties.

Today, the supervisory ministry still remains the main financier of Doel. Acting as an intermediary between society and the research community, its knowledge department<sup>8</sup> addresses the questions emerging from the market and the society in the form of projects. Research at Doel is reorganized in such a way that the funding unit is the project. A project covers expenses including research, salaries<sup>9</sup> and office expenditures. Such an organisation is equipped for an equal treatment of private and public backers.

During the nineties, the evolution of Met has followed a radically different direction. In 1982, the so-called “regalian” law on research<sup>10</sup> provided an institutional framework for public funding and a scientific autonomy to research centres (Audoux-Lemoine, 2005). The status of researchers evolved from a long term contract to that of civil servants. Public pre competitive research was promoted in order to stimulate the market without depending on it. Consequently, the pressure of the market, social demand and financial<sup>11</sup> concerns was not strongly manifest until the end of the nineties. Then, the French government initiated a retrenchment phase, proposed to enhance cooperation between private and public research and started a reform of research organizations<sup>12</sup>.

After several years of turmoil and attempts to reach agreements between ministries and research instances, a new law has been promulgated in April 2006. In the absence of concerted agreements, the conflicting issues of research funding and evaluation have been solved by creating government agencies in order to take over the lead. today, 6% of research public funding is allocated by the national research agency and this rate will progressively increase in the coming years. As far as Met is concerned, contractual research ranges only between 10 and 20% of the budget. Met researchers still benefit from a large degree of autonomy and staff turnover is particularly low.

#### **2-4 Two radically different national contexts**

The cooperation at stake in this study takes place in the context of two contrasting political traditions. In a certain way, Dutch pluralistic and French republican democracies

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<sup>7</sup> Corresponding document cannot be reported in the bibliography for anonymity reasons

<sup>8</sup> The knowledge department of the ministry decides on the questions to be addressed and funds corresponding projects

<sup>9</sup> At Doel, a researcher has to work 165 days per year on paid projects in order to cover a full time salary and expenses (telephone etc...) and he is offered 45 extra days for acquiring new projects, academic work, study, training etc... Researchers report the working hours corresponding to each project on a weekly basis according to a standardized procedure.

<sup>10</sup> Loi d'orientation et de programmation de la recherche, 18/07/1982. Designed to stimulate French economy by promoting research and technology, it endowed research organisation with a so-called “regalian” function.

<sup>11</sup> Financial concern was limited by governmental engagement to raise research funding up 3% of PNB on 2010 in agreement with Lisbon declaration.

<sup>12</sup> French laws and reforms described in this section include Met as one of concerned research institutes.

stand in opposition. French electoral system favours direct election and simple majority vote. In a Dutch perception, the concept of a majority simply outvoting a minority seems too selective. Voting divides and reinforces antagonistic positions instead of federating and unifying around a common issue (van Lente, 1997). Accordingly, the Dutch political system is based on relative majorities and coalitions.

The construction of agreements follows in line with the political preferences in each country. In this regard, one should draw attention to Dutch decision processes because of its relevance to our research object. Dutch decision is not a selection among potential solutions but a convergent process that constructs a federative solution (van Vree, 1999). The Dutch use the word “besluitvorming<sup>13</sup>” and in other countries, Dutch decision process is usually referred to as consensus or construction of consensus. At a symbolic level, the construction of consensus relies on equality between individuals together with a primacy of collective interests (van Lente, 1997). At an operational level, Dutch decision making is a time process framed around formal procedures and meetings. This process conciliates strong individual and collective characters. Each individual is entitled to give his/her personal position over the matter at stake before drawing back in order to find a solution which is suitable for the group (Benders & al, 2000).

Dutch decision corresponds to agreements over actions detached from their underlying principles (Lijphart, 1968; Huisman 2000; 2001). This requires the assistance of a series of social devices that are deeply embedded in Dutch culture (de Bony, 2007). The right to disagree, egalitarianism, objectivity, emotional control, pragmatism act in synergy in decoupling the expression of opinions from the decision, limiting the common ground between individual and collective expression and/or neutralizing the interaction between the individual and the group and between thoughts and actions. These devices are proposed to children at Dutch elementary school (de Bony, 2008). Hence, a Dutch individual is well equipped to take a distance from himself/herself as well as his/her activity.

In comparison with Dutch consensus, the nature of what is at stake in a French decision has more to do with the ideological than the practical (d’Iribarne, 2007). French decision is better described as a selection of principles or a selection of possible issues. Such a move from a pragmatic to an ideological interpretation of the decision also induces a switch from a federation process to a differentiation process. In front of the same situation, this Dutch inclination to federate and French inclination to differentiate is a key factor of discrepancy between these two nations.

### **3-Description of the project**

The work has been undertaken at the request of the Dutch institute after completion of the cooperation. In term of scientific achievements, the project has been successfully implemented. However, cultural factors have been frequently evoked as limiting the

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<sup>13</sup> “Besluitvorming” aggregates the word vorming (forming) and the word besluit which translates in decision and/or closing (finalization of the decision). In comparison with the English word “decision making” or the French word “décision”, the Dutch word “besluitvorming” clearly refers to decision on actions.

extent of the cooperation. Embarrassed by the hesitations of Met towards monitoring and evaluating the project, Doel decided to look into cultural and managerial discrepancies and requested a study. It was agreed to analyze the entanglement of the project in Dutch and French contexts. In other words, this case study does not target the content of the project but its implementation and appropriation by Dutch and French actors.

The research is based on a detailed analysis of all provided documents and a search in literature about project management. It is complemented by a series of 16 open interviews (10 researchers, 6 at headquarters) of Dutch and French actors of the project and open ended discussions with several interviewees. It also benefits from the author's participation in four bilateral meetings of subsequent bilateral projects.

The interpretive work is realized on available documents and transcriptions of open interviews. It follows an inductive pathway which mobilizes the previously described framework to disentangle pertinent symbolic categories and their arbitrations. Validation of the results is achieved by controlling internal consistency of results at various levels (micro and macro) in complementary fields (political, societal). It takes the benefits from previous research on the construction of Dutch consensus and its transmission at elementary school (de Bony, 2007; 2008). This research is also facilitated by the author's situation as a French national integrated into Dutch society for more than a decade.

### **3-1 The project, its procedures and unfolding**

Two singular characters of this cooperation have to be underlined. First, it is a common initiative of Doel and Met headquarters to undertake common pre competitive research. The project is equally co-financed by the two boards<sup>14</sup> in absence of a third party imposing its rules of cooperation. Another singularity of this project is that it has no antecedents. A first cooperation project is a unique situation in which indigenous attitudes spontaneously pop out. The absence of acquired knowledge from previous experiences boosts contextual discrepancies.

Doel proposes to manage this project according to its procedures with a slight modification due to the bilateral character of the cooperation. The project is placed under the authority of the two international headquarters that are in charge of evaluation and monitoring. It unfolds during a period of four years maximum. The first year is punctuated by a severe go/no go evaluation. Monitoring and evaluation proceeds as follows: in a first step, the annual progress report is independently evaluated by two scientific experts in each institute. Then, the evaluations are combined in one evaluation report agreed by two boards. It is forwarded to the project coordinators within one to two months so that the recommendations can be quickly implemented.

What happens in reality? Annual reports are always written by Doel coordinator. Met coordinator adds few lines at the bottom of the report together with his signature. Despite one exception (go/no go evaluation that was officially signed), Met headquarters do not implement the evaluation procedure proposed by the Doel. They experiences difficulties

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<sup>14</sup> In this regard, Doel disposes of a small budget (about 5%) for undertaking research which is not externally ordered and funded.

in finding experts and evaluations do not develop until the end. After several reminder from Doel, Met headquarters give their agreement in a much freer way than was initially proposed.

### 3-2 Perception of the project

#### 3-2-1 Dutch perception

At Doel headquarters, the project is considered as a contract: *“A project is temporary. It has a financier (giving input and asking) and a performer (giving output)”*<sup>15</sup>. The object of the contract is the work plan which should be literally respected: *“If you do more than the contract, you get financial problems and if you do something else, you get problems with the financier”*. The project is perceived as an exchange of deliverables for money. A good researcher implements the research as described and delivers the products in due time. He/she satisfies the financier by being accountable for the work plan.

Talking about the project, Doel researchers frequently use words as *“cooperation, working together, common work”*. Individuals cooperate even when they do not get along together: *“We keep this (personal quarrels) under the table”*. This cooperation is mobilized for the sake of the project. As an interviewee says: *“The project counts: the individual is not so important”*. During the project, the individual put his or her position into perspective, distances himself or herself and contributes to the success of a common realization. The project corresponds to a collective action that fulfils at a collective interest. At a symbolic level, the project is in keeping with the register of the things.

The work plan cannot anticipate the results nor foresee the contingencies of research. This issue is not spontaneously addressed by Dutch interviewees. When asked about it, such unpredictability is said to be compensated by cooperation: *“During the course of the project, a good contact between project leader and financier is important because research is never 100% predictable”*. It appears therefore that close cooperation is not only mobilized for the success of the project but also makes up for the contingency inherent in any research.

#### 3-2-2 French perception

When they talk about the project, Met researchers immediately refer to its managerial aspects in harsh terms such as *“idiot, ridiculous, caricature, irrational, counterproductive”*. Time limitation is the first problem evoked. An interviewee comments : *“ Our Dutch colleagues work only and totally on the basis of projects and they are limited in time. Consequently they count their time to the point that it becomes a caricature”*. They are stunned by Dutch submission to such harsh deadlines: *“And then, they (Dutch researchers) are not working anymore and they say: “Sorry, time is over” “It’s a killing blade, it’s an idiot and nasty killing blade”*<sup>16</sup>. Such a temporal limitation is beyond the scope of a French perception of research: *“It is not culturally conceivable for us to stop a project under the pretext that time has expired. It’s unconceivable, unconceivable”*. In their opinion, the project stops when the production begins: *“We stop*

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<sup>15</sup> Sentences in italic are extracted from interviews and translated from Dutch and French languages by the author of this article

<sup>16</sup> *“Le couperet bête et méchant, c’est un couperet bête et méchant ”*

*when we have made 90% efforts and obtained 10% results, this is a completely absurd situation”.*

Met researchers do not see the point of such a managerial infatuation : *“I had the feeling, that the Dutch coordinator had just followed a formation in management which he applied the following week to our project”.* Several interviewees refer to a recurrent activity that consists in listing the goals, output and stakeholders of the project and this does not make any sense to them: *“The project has been running for two years: where are we going if we don’t know these things already?”*

On the other hand, Met researchers are frustrated by the scientific aspects. They feel that the results could have been more extensively discussed and criticized: *“In fact results were required, but then, we did not really discuss, we could not use the scientific competences of our partners specialized in similar domains”.* One interviewee put into perspective a Dutch descriptive approach and a French analytic approach: *“They are much more ready to produce numbers without asking much theoretical questions whereas we are trying to ask relevant questions in order to predict possible answers”.*

At Met headquarters, management of research by project is not taken at face value. As an interviewee says: *“French researchers have not appropriated the project”.* Another talks about the cost and time of *“unwieldy procedures that still deserve to prove themselves”.* These procedures are so heavy that Met has created an agency specialized on project administration in order to relieve researchers from the burden of bureaucracy. A director emphasizes the fact that *“Writing a project is neither research nor result”.* Another interviewee talks about a tradition *“that protects young researchers from administrative tasks in order to give them a best opportunity to develop their field of research”.* Yet another pinpoints a higher turnover usually associated with project organization and the consequences of this turnover on the continuation of professional relations.

### **3-3 Evaluation and monitoring of the project**

#### **3-3-1 Dutch perception**

At Doel, the financial director cannot conceive of an institute that provides financing without equipping itself with an evaluation and monitoring system. Soon, he notices that Met is not familiar with these practices . He says: *“It was difficult because they had no apparatus, they had no systems”.* He perceives the absence of evaluation by Met as a reluctance to interfere with the researchers : *“They would not dare to judge or to review the work of the scientists, they would not put their hands on those topics at the headquarter side. They tell us: is it necessary? If you like to do those monitoring OK, go ahead, and if you have something we’ll write: It’s OK”.*

The Dutch coordinator also suffers from the lack of such evaluations by Met. He needs *“a mirror image of the project”*, some feedback from the French and he does not get it: *“I have no one to ask. Because an evaluation as we have and had within the Dutch group is just to ask: “what’s happening here”? That’s not usual with the French. And when he talks about his concern with his French partner, the answer does not meet his expectations: “And my French partner says: We are doing well; we have a project of four*

*years, we have our plan, let's go, don't worry. There is no expectation from the board at the moment. That's in the end".*

### 3-3-2 French perception

At Met headquarters, project evaluation and monitoring arouses mixed feelings. It is talked about: *"cumbersome procedures, lack of relevant experts and lack of time to seriously evaluate these projects"*. An interviewee sneers while evoking a future situation in which *"half of the institute would spend its time to evaluate the other half"*. Above all, it is wondered whether these procedures promote the scientific quality. Indeed *"it is important to evaluate both pertinence and quality of the research"* says an interviewee, but the validity of the chosen procedures is questioned. As mentioned by a director: *"there are much simpler alternatives such as relying on recent performance of researchers"*.

When they talk about the project, Met researchers are not interested in the evaluation process. Asked about its monitoring, one of them says: *"Why should we be told about what we have to do, it's our work!"* As mentioned at headquarters, researchers request to be left alone during the development of the project. For them, it is the result and not the process that counts. The comment: *"There is no expectation from the board for us at the moment. That's in the end"* reflects a logic shared by researchers and headquarters. This is also the reason why Met researchers strongly criticize deadlines while saying: *"the project stops when the production begins"*.

When they talk about their own work, Met researchers emphasize the necessity of time. Time is associated with the unpredictable character of the results: *"One should know that it is extremely difficult to predict the time necessary to spend on a project"*. The interviewees refer to time as a right, as a privilege: *"Indeed, we (F) are even worse than them (NL) to predict because we don't care, we don't really care, we take our time"*. The French strongly defend the right to take their time because they consider it important to finish the work: *"In fact we stopped too early and this was very embarrassing for us because we felt that there were very interesting things to pursue"*. Or: *"Again and let me insist on this point, the work has to be finished"*.

## 4- Discussion

As observed in this case study, project management is differently perceived and implemented by the Dutch and the French partners. In this section, I first discuss the two institutional and national contexts for this specific case. Then, I come back to methodological aspects and implications for management.

### 4-1 Two differently funded institutes

In this case study, the observed discrepancy between Doel and Met can be interpreted as a consequence of two different ways of financing the institutes. During the project, Doel was an independent and market oriented research centre whereas Met was nationally funded. Indeed, someone whose salary is paid by a project acts differently than a civil servant. This aspect has certainly influenced the implementation of the practice by the

two teams. However, this interpretation does not explain the two contrasting evolutions of Doel and Met during the last decades. At Doel, project management has been internally decided as a means of becoming financially independent and market oriented. It has been voluntarily undertaken and integrated without any turmoil. In contrast, the French government has been obliged to legislate in order to impose the project in research organizations. Today, the exercise of research by project remains contested among the French scientific community.

What catalyzed a Dutch voluntary experience to shift towards a market orientated research? Why is it so difficult for the French to appropriate project management even in market orientated situations? Why is it easily implemented in the Netherlands even in organizations which are not exclusively market driven? Central in this debate is the tension between the logic inherent to project management and the logic inherent to the local professional activity in which the project is implemented.

In the following, I argue that Dutch consensus makes the integration of the project easier whereas French logic of “*métier*” stumbles over project management. I also make the case that such discrepancies traduce two different perceptions of the relation between the individual and his/her professional activity and two modes of insertion of the individual in the collective.

#### **4-2 Project management and Dutch consensus**

Let us return to the explicit and implicit requirements of project management. The project corresponds to a contract that targets a realization. Moreover, it is not an individual but a collective action. It is the project that is monitored and evaluated and not its actors<sup>17</sup>. At a symbolic level, the project is in keeping with the register of things and not that of the persons.

In this interpretation of the reality, the individual restrains himself/herself for the benefit of the collective. The individual keeps himself/herself at a distance from his/her activity and intrinsic motivation is replaced by extrinsic motivation. The articulation between the individual and his/her activity is loose and/or limited. The insertion of the individual in the collective has a dual character with a strong individual autonomy of thoughts and a high cooperation capacity for collective actions.

This description is in close agreement with that of consensus earlier described in this paper (paragraph 2-4). Project management and Dutch consensus are two of a kind at operational and symbolic levels. Both unfold according to a rigid time process, punctuated by formal steps and procedures. Both are based on an equality of participants and arbitrated by collective interest. They mobilize the same toolbox and partition the reality according to similar symbolic categories.

At this stage, it is useful to recall the scope of consensus in Dutch society. This decision process is systematically used in all sectors ranging from corporations to benevolent

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<sup>17</sup> The evaluation of individuals follows an independent procedure which is different at Doel (evaluation by n+1) and at Met (peer evaluation).

associations and even in the private sphere. The first activity proposed at Dutch elementary school is the so called “kringgesprek” (discussion in circle) in which children familiarize themselves with consensus (de Bony, 2008). With such a strong embeddedness of consensus, Dutch society is not only equipped but already trained for project management. Even in situations for which project management is poorly adapted, consensus is there to assist in overcoming the difficulty. Consensual social devices are mobilized and contribute to conciliating the situation and the practice.

#### **4-3 Project management and French logic of “métier”**

The logic that frame the project is at odds with the French interpretation of the reality in several ways. The symbolic categories inherent to a contract telescope the French perception of freedom (d’Iribarne 2006). In France, transactions framed around clearly defined rules and procedures are rather perceived as a constraint than as a security for the parties. The rights and duties of individuals at work are not defined in a clear-cut manner. Job descriptions and tasks are not systematically formalized on paper (d’Iribarne 1989). This interpretation of work leaves more room for individual initiative and motivation. People are an integral part of their work and responsible for their actions at an individual level. The hierarchy respects this autonomy and keeps itself at a distance from staff (Segal, 1987). Evaluation and monitoring hardly find room in this perception of work. A logic of “métier” is not reflected in working according to prescribed rules, deadlines and procedures but in producing quality. Such implication at an individual level is at odds with the requirements of the project.

The implementation of project management in a context governed by a logic of “métier” is far from neutral. It implies a shift from individual responsibility to a collective interest, an exchange from the register of the persons to that of the things and a turn from intrinsic to extrinsic motivation. One can evaluate the difficulty endured by a French team when urged to implement project management. This requires to loosen and limit these articulations between individual, collective and actions in the absence of the corresponding social devices that assist in dissociating these linkages (de Bony, 2007). Indeed, these social devices are not part of the French national context.

#### **4-4 Methodological aspects**

As evocated in the first section, there are various cultural approaches that reflect different definitions of culture. Implementation of a managerial practice is a concrete situation that involves specific actors and contexts. Consequently, a “context free” approach is not appropriated to investigate a practice and/or the context of its implementation. In this regard, the added value of interpretive approaches has to be underlined.

There is a formal contradiction in mobilizing an analytical framework to undertake inductive research since emic approaches rely on singularity and uniqueness. However, the proposed framework has essentially an heuristic value. It can be considered as a mean to characterize the singularities of cooperation and coordination processes in a defined national culture. It provides a loose grid to analyze a practice, a social situation, or even a national context by unravelling corresponding indigenous categories without damaging their specificities.



The proposed research method analyzes a situation or a practice by focusing on the relations between the individual, the collective, thoughts and actions. It is necessary to descend to such a micro level of analysis in order to reach the articulations at stake. Quantitative cross-cultural approaches are based on an opposition or independence between the individual and the collective or a randomization of these factors. Consequently, they are not well adapted to retrieve these connections between the individual, the group, thoughts and actions.

The analytical frame is centered at the articulation between actions and corresponding discourse. It is important to focus on these relations between thoughts and actions because, as proposed by Brunsson, (2002), they are not directly coupled. Indeed, this case study reveals two contrasting types of articulations between thoughts and actions in consensus and logic of “métier”. These articulations may play a crucial role in cultural variation and certainly deserve more investigation.

#### **4-5 Implication for management**

As illustrated in this case study, a practice is efficiently transferred when it is in keeping with local working traditions, otherwise it may be implemented with delays, modifications or avoided. In which case, a manager is subjected to the dilemma of forcing the use of practice or trying to reconcile the practice and the context of implementation. In order to elaborate a convenient solution, s/he first needs to understand what is the origin of the discrepancy. S/he will certainly get the benefit of ethnographic studies that disentangle the various logics at stake and their interplay.

More generally, managers will certainly reap the benefit of drawing more attention on local coordination and cooperation processes. A deep understanding of the mechanisms that associate the actors (at an individual and collective level) and their actions is useful for a manager trying to conciliate a practice and the local context. At this stage, the proposed analytical framework may be useful to adapt the practice in a form that can be adopted by a local subsidiary (Henry, 2003; Hoppe, 2005).

As observed in this case study, consensual logics provide a favourable context for project management. Such a dual mode of insertion of the individual in the collective is congruent with the logic of the project. When project management is transferred to a culture that value a more central integration of the individual in the collective, managers should be aware of potential difficulties due to a mismatch between the practice and the context.

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