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# Institutions of Scandinavian Expatriatism in Hong Kong: A Dynamic Perspective on Interaction and Adjustment

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# Institutions of Scandinavian Expatriatism in Hong Kong: A Dynamic Perspective on Interaction and Adjustment[1]

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## Abstract

Scandinavian countries, firms, organisations, and expatriates have a widespread presence in Hong Kong across corporate and non-corporate sectors. Expatriates tend to be an organisation's most expensive employee, hence crucial to achieve successful outcomes of their international assignments. In the disciplines of International Business, International Human Resource Management, and Cross-Cultural Management, research on culture and expatriates tend to be conducted within a positivist rooted quantitative research paradigm. This study investigates Scandinavian expatriatism as a holistic phenomenon by employing a social constructionist, interpretivist, ethnographic approach. This paper is part of a larger MPhil research project and presents elements of the total universe of data in particular relating to how Scandinavians experience adjusting to Hong Kong society and culture, and how they perceive their intercultural encounters. The purpose of this article is to present a preliminary analysis and findings from a five-month ethnographic field study utilising in-depth interviews, participant observations, informal conversations, collection of written material, and cross-tabulating of descriptive statistics as the research techniques. 51 in-depth interviews were conducted with Scandinavian expatriates, and 11 interviews with local Hong Kong Chinese. The study draws upon social theory and social anthropology, and incorporates in particular how people construct social reality, meaning, perceptions, practices, and institutions. The 'cyclic' research process commences the research endeavour with the research (i.e. field study) and proceeds

with an ongoing inductive, iterative-hermeneutical analysis process where data is juxtaposed with existing theories. Preliminary analysis and findings show how space, meaning, identity, culture, and adjustment should be derived from actual interaction between Scandinavians and local Hong Kong Chinese people. Further social analysis suggests the importance of understanding such interaction and adjustment experiences within its context-specific environment and pre-existing cultural structures in society. It is argued that an ideographic, meaning-based approach is the most relevant way of studying culture, and that an ethnographic research strategy has the potential to challenge the dominant positivist research paradigm in business-schools. The research justifies a broad approach to what constitutes an 'expatriate'. Further, the study contributes to the 'western' biased research agenda by relying on Scandinavian expatriates and organisations, in addition to predominantly small and medium-sized enterprises. This article argues strongly that we should make more use of ideographic and ethnographic research, which use real lives the starting point for academic inquiry and for building theory in a bottom-up fashion.

**Key words:** Expatriates, Scandinavia, Hong Kong, interaction, adjustment, space, cultural research, ethnography, social constructionism

> **- How do they do things out there?**
> *Earley and Singh (1995, p. 327)*

> **- For just as correlation does not imply causation, so too**
> **a lack of correlation cannot establish lack of causation**
> *Ryan and Haslam (2009, p. 14)*

### Introduction: A researcher sets out to study his own

The moment my train glided away from the railway station in my English university town, I was no longer merely a research student in International Business (IB). I had become equivalent to the 'unit of analysis' of my research project (i.e. Scandinavian in Hong Kong) – one of the few which have been conducted in IB and International Human Resource Management (IHRM) research (see Cooke 2009; Yang, Wang & Su 2006)[5]. In the five months ahead, I was to investigate Scandinavian expatriates in Hong Kong in regard to their perceptions of intercultural interaction and adjustment experiences. By immersing myself within their contextual environment, I was able to produce a 'thick description'[6] of how they experience being a Scandinavian in Hong Kong. Moreover, I was able to learn how they construct social meanings and become au fait with local culture, and how they handle challenges in everyday life during human interaction, both at work and other areas of life. Entering the field and becoming an 'instrument of analysis' allowed me to investigate the applicability of various theories in IHRM, IB, and Cross-Cultural Management (CCM), with actual interaction in real lives as the starting point of my academic inquiry. As an ethnographic researcher, it is my aim to impart the texture of Scandinavian expatriatism to readers by conveying the dynamic of this holistic phenomenon as perceived by the expatriates who are constructing, and being constructed by, their social realities.

The purpose of this article is to present primarily analysis and findings from a five-month, ethnographic field study. I address two main research questions. Firstly, how can a research approach based on ethnography, interpretivism, and

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[5] See Gamble (2003), Lauring (2008; 2009), Moore (2006), and Moore & Rees (2008) for some noticeable, but rare, examples in IHRM. Investigating expatriates as an ethnography seems more common in more classical social science disciplines beyond business-academia (including psychology), for example Cohen (1977), Fechter (2007), *Sussex Centre for Migration Studies* (2009), Walsh (2006).

[6] Here, 'thick' relates to achieving triangulated and rich and deep knowledge of a social phenomenon by incorporating various elements of the total universe of data. Thus, I am not implying that I pursue the ethnographic methodological base of naïve realism (i.e. the notion, originating with Malinowski and upheld by Geertz) of the ability to be a mere conduit of uncontaminated and non-biased data, non-theoretical, non-reflexive, and detached from the text and research process (Brewer 2000, pp. 37-55)).

constructionism contribute to a richer understanding of Scandinavian expatriatism as a holistic phenomenon? Secondly, how can Scandinavian expatriates' experiences in regard to interaction and adjustment be understood. I argue that an ideographic, meaning-based approach is the most relevant way of studying culture, as opposed to the notion of 'differences', which permeates predominant cultural research in business-academia where culture is reduced to something measurable but still claiming the same level of complexity (Geertz 1973).

**The scientific rigour of ethnography**

This section provides justifications and transparency of the ethnographic research approach, which ideographic research is often criticised to lack (Zalan & Lewis 2004). There are several advantages with employing an ethnographic research approach when investigating the social phenomenon of Scandinavian expatriatism in Hong Kong. Conventionally, the research strategy is not discussed until the methodology section – normally subsequent to the literature review. However, research associated with the qualitative research paradigm does not always follow a standard research and presentation format. The latter is often taking form as a linear endeavour, which reflects a taxonomically way of conducting research. The "non-standard" approach (non-standard to major parts of IB and management academia that is, but in fact 'standard' in the wider social sciences disciplines), applies particularly to ethnography. Ethnography does not assume that the various research stages are not diffusing (see Ghauri & Grønhaug 2005).

Ethnographic research, however, embarks on its academic inquiry in the field rather than an established body of literature with pre-decided categorisations of those being investigated; the aspects of their lives related to being "Scandinavian", in addition to their experiences and perceptions. Data collection and data analysis occur simultaneously during all stages of the research project, and this 'cyclic' research process has no pre-specified methodological route (Thomas 2004). This has distinguished social anthropology, as a methodology, also from other classical social science disciplines. Thus, it makes sense to commence this article with depicting the research approach and how the research study has been conducted. This has a potential of enhancing the reflexivity between the researcher and reader.

The above research approach is a great advantage when investigating a largely unknown social phenomenon. As field-researchers, ethnographers obtain an access to

describing relevant aspects of peoples' lives, which can be argued to be interesting in its own right when the research problem has sufficient level of "interestingness", and deemed "worthwhile" (Thomas 2004; Davis 1971). Engaging with research subjects in the field improves the understanding of the processes whereby humans make sense of their world (Andersen & Skaates 2004). Investigating such 'native categories' allows a deeper understanding of how those being studied are constructing their 'social realities', and being constructed by it. Ethnography has a strong potential in questioning basic assumptions, and to unlock complex and integral information through approaching the phenomenon holistically.

Being in the field is of paramount importance in order to experience the surroundings which lived lives are played out, and where meaning, perceptions, and identities are constructed in various dialectical, dynamic relationships (see Ardener 1989a; Ardener 1989b; Crotty 2003; Forsythe 1989; Lauring & Guttormsen *forthcoming* 2010). This is what ethnographers do. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) depict the main roles of ethnographers: to study everyday contexts, to locate emerging themes based on collected data from the field rather than being prescribed by the researcher, to pursue in-depth research by conducting research of limited scope, and to interpret data revolving around meanings, functions, and consequences of human actions and institutional practices and their wider implications.

'Meaning' is an inherent quality in cultural and social anthropology (Chapman 1997; Keesing & Strathern 1998; Klotz & Lynch 2008). Ethnography has thus the advantage of providing a meaning- and context-based study associated with an epistemological and ontological approach of academic inquiry rather than the predominant positivist rooted quantitative research paradigm in business-academia. Such theoretical perspectives, as a methodology, have largely remained unused in IB research as opposed to in sociology and anthropology (see Brewer 2000; Denzin 1997; Sharpe 2004). It has the potential to provide more deep and rich knowledge by approaching culture from an ideational perspective. Thus, the ethnographic research approach provide new avenues for data collection and 'thick descriptions" (Brewer 2000; Geertz 1973).

The inherent multimethod nature in ethnographic research is an additional advantage. The use of different research techniques contributes to improvement of internal validity through both data and methodological triangulation (Mehmetoglu 2004). The inductive, iterative hermeneutical analysis process provides further

advantages, which makes ethnographic research so much more than mere "common sense". During the research endeavour, the researcher is inductively juxtaposing findings with relevant academic literature to support, modify, or introduce new theories by verifying and validating findings (Brewer 2000; Bryman & Bell 2007; Hammersley & Atkinson 2007).

**Calling cultural research in business-academia into account**

When reviewing the scope of cultural research in business-academia it becomes apparent that most advancements in intellectual discourses have transpired in the wider social sciences rather than within business schools (Adler 1983a; Adler 1983b; Bate 1997; Boyacigiller & Adler 1991; Chapman 1997; Kirkman, Lowe & Gibson 2006; Leung et al. 2005; Lowe 2002; Negandhi 1983; Negandhi 1975; Patel 2007; Redding 1994; Roberts 1970; Schollhammer 1969; Søndergaard 1994). A prominent example is social anthropology, which rejected positivistic oriented quantitative research as the most effective way of understanding culture already during the 1970s. In cross-cultural management research, psychologist Hofstede has been the prominent figure of a quarter of a century (Carraher 2003; Kirkman et al. 2006). He introduced his Culture's Consequences in 1980, which represented a path breaking framework for understanding behaviour based on underlying values (Deresky 2002). Four dimensions were identified, namely power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism, and masculinity (eds. Chapman & Cross 2006; Francesco & Gold 2004; Hofstede 1980). A fifth dimension, long-term orientation, was added by Hofstede and Bond (1988) when discovering the western bias and an inherent 'oriental' attribute not apparent in western thinking[7].

The 'Cultural Distance' (CD) construct was introduced by Kogut and Singh (1988). The index is based on aggregated measurements from Hofstede's cultural dimension indexes. The CD construct has probably been the most applied cultural theory in IB studies, for example relating to foreign investment expansion, entry mode choice, and performance of foreign invested affiliates (Shenkar 2001). It promotes a static view of culture indicating that the distance between cultures can be numerically gauged and that is can explain firm behaviour in this regard. The construct has been meticulously criticized for being detached from logic and empirical observations

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[7] See Fang (2003) for a critique

(Harzing 2003; Shenkar 2001, Shenkar, Luo & Yeheskel 2008). Main criticism has emphasised failing to incorporate managers who actually make the decisions (Harzing 2004) and the neglect of perceptions and context-specific factors (Chapman, Gajewska-De Mattos, Clegg & Buckley 2008; Chapman, Gajewska-De Mattos & Clegg 2004).

Nielsen and Gannon (2006) presented four ways of describing culture. The first approach focused on 'differences' (see Hofstede 1980; House et al. 2004; Javidan et al. 2006; Minkov 2007; Ronen & Shenkar 1985; Schein 1992; Schwartz 1994; Triandis 2006; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner 1997). These theories approach culture from the outside (epic) (Bauer 1999). Other approaches include cultural metaphors, cross-cultural paradoxes, and combined synergistically approaches. The frameworks are practical for comparing cultures (epic), but lack ability in comprehending complexities within them (emic) (Bird & Osland 2006).

Business and management studies, in particular cultural research, are typically acontextual, ahistorical and non-meaning-based (Bate 1997). Thus, the discipline can successfully draw upon social anthropology. The main argument is that management is embedded in a socio-economic environment which is played out external to the organisation (Linstead 1997). This complexity can be assumed to be increasing for expatriates during international assignments due to unfamiliarity with the external environment. Various calls reiterate this point, for example encouragements to produce more dynamic, and context- and meaning-based studies as an alternative approach to large-scale value-based approaches and assumptions concerning "national culture" (Adler 1983b; Buckley & Chapman 1996a; Buckley et al. 2008; Earley 2006; Gajewska-De Mattos, Chapman & Clegg 2004; Hofstede 1994; Jacob 2005; Jones & Khanna 2006; McSweeney 2002; Negandhi 1983 Smith 2002; Tung 2008; Yaganhe & Su 2006), and to bridge International business research with other social science disciplines (Kirkman, Lowe & Gibson 2006; Leung et al. 2005; Volberda 2006).

The strong inclination of quantitative research approaches in cross-cultural management can be seen as a reflexivity of scientific developments in the post-war economy after the Second World War. Then, business-schools appeared in the educational landscape after the WWII along side enhanced economic development at the time (Peng 2004). During the first two post-war decades, business-schools were considered a "wasteland of vocationalism that needed to be transformed into science-based professionalism, as medicine and engineering" (Simon 1991, cited in Lynn

2006, p. 40). As a result, emerging positivistic, essentialist, reductionist, and hypothetico-deductive theories attempted to emulate the physical sciences which are underpinned by an objectivistic ontology and the use of statistical methods (Zalan & Lewis 2004). These epic approaches were integral with social psychology, and became consequently a driving force in systematic and scientific approach in cross-cultural management (Chapman 1997).

Drawing on different social science disciplines, research approaches in cultural research across business-academia vary accordingly. Hofstede (1980) defined culture as:

> "… the collective programming of the human mind that distinguishes the members of one human group from those of another. Culture in this sense is a system of collectively held values".

Clifford Geertz, a prominent American social anthropologist, drew upon findings and thoughts of influential figures such as French sociologist Durkheim and British anthropologist, Evans-Pritchard (see Edgar & Sedgwick 2002). Geertz' definition of culture coincides with Bourdieu's widely accepted notion of 'habitus' (consciousness) (Bauer 1999, pp. 15-17):

> "… a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which people communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life" (Negandhi 1983, p. 30).

Meaning and symbolic dimensions of social action as well as learned experiences accumulated over time are central elements in this definition (see Geertz 1973). This learning process is the basis for culture as a system of shared meaning that transcends the realisation within one individual's mind - not "only" being an outcome of cognitive processes within one person's construct of social reality (Durkheim 1912; Keesing & Strathern 1998). The latter reflects a constructivist philosophical tradition, which is inherent in most areas of social psychology. The ideational system, however, consists of systems of shared ideas and a part of public and social processes, which underlie and expressed by the conduct of human live (Keesing & Strathern 1998). The foci "culture is what you do" differs with quantitative approaches - culture arguably cannot be understood by separate values and behaviour, or biological, psychological

processes and social existence – all integral components in development of Man (Geertz 1973).

**Scandinavians in Hong Kong**

The Scandinavian countries of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden share a history of more than 1,000 years (Selmer 1997; Vorm 1997). The terms Scandinavia and the Nordic area are often used interchangeably by people external to these sub-regions. However, the former area normally excludes Finland and Iceland, which are linguistically (and to some extent culturally) distinguishable from the three other countries (Bjerke 1999; Grenness 2003; Schramm-Nielsen, Lawrence & Sivesind 2004). From a constructionist perspective, the sense of belongingness, shared identity, and experiences are the normative foundation for delineation of a region - 'regionalization' (Katzenstein 2000; Terada 2003). The aviation airline, Scandinavian Airline System, is an example of how such "sameness" is symbolised. The above is confirmed by the Scandinavian research subjects in my ongoing work (Guttormsen 2009). There is a unanimous consensus amongst respondents, including those of Finish decent, that Scandinavian and Nordic countries as both a concept and geographical areas are different. Some even refused to answer questions about cultures relating to each separate country in Scandinavia due to the perceived "sameness". Furthermore, the majority of the Scandinavians interact frequently with other Scandinavians and organisations.

There are approximately 1,900[8] Scandinavian expatriates registered in Hong Kong. There are more than 250 Scandinavian firms, including approximately 100 regional offices and headquarters in Hong Kong (*Invest Hong Kong* 2008). Table 1 depicts the ratio of Scandinavian population at home and in Hong Kong. Denmark and Sweden have official representation through their Consulate Generals (and Trade Council for the latter country) whereas Norway recently opened an Honorary Consulate General. All countries are affiliated with various social clubs, schools, Chambers of Commerce, as well as stationed priests in their Seaman's Churches, except Norway where an ambulating Priest operates across the Southeast-Asia region. A high activity level is sustained – for example, the Swedish Chamber of Commerce

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[8] There are no comparable numbers across the three countries. For Denmark and Sweden, I have used the number of people who have registered themselves at the Consulate General (voluntary basis), and number of memberships at the Club Norway Hong Kong. The numbers are constantly changing.

held more than 80 events during 2008 (Field notes 2008-2009). Some events are co-organised by several Scandinavian countries (for example, the annual Christmas Bazaar in Tsim Sha Tsui), some of national significance (such as the Norwegian Constitutional Day in Repulse Bay, and the Danes' celebration of the Danish Queen on a local café at the outlying islands), and some inter-nationally (Field notes 2008-2009; 061).

**Table 1**

|  | **Home pop.** | **Scan pop. in HK** | **% of Scan pop. in HK** | **% of pop in Scan** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Denmark | 5,484,723 | 800 | 42.10526316 | 28.60415272 |
| Norway | 4,644,457 | 200 | 10.52631579 | 24.22196296 |
| Sweden | 9,045,389 | 900 | 47.36842105 | 47.17388433 |
| **Total** | **19,174,569** | **1900** | **100** | **100** |
| *Hong Kong* | *7,018,636* | *N/A* | *N/A* | *36.60387881* |

**Planning not to plan – Establishing the research framework**

It is of great importance to allow the 'cyclic' nature of ideographic research to take place (ethnographies in particular). This is because when entering the field we do not know what constitutes data. However, it is necessary to simultaneously plan how to succeed with the field-work and the research endeavour overall. This is especially imperative when encountering an unknown research environment (Stening & Zhang 2007; Vallaster 2000). Thus, the literature should be revisited and new bodies of literature need to be included in analysis sections (see Thomas 2004). This study is rooted in a constructionist epistemology with an interpretivist theoretical underpinning and subjectivist ontology, and employs ethnography as the research strategy. This research approach is particular appropriate when studying human behaviour where process, fluidity, and complexity are being investigated (Hammersley 1990).

The 'unit of analysis' is Scandinavian expatriates. As a group, the expatriates are incorporated on the individual level in IB research, which traditionally has revolved around the firm level[9] (Buckley 2002; Buckley & Lessard 2005; Peng 2004). Table 2 depicts organisational affiliations and variety of expatriates in the

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[9] See Buckley & Ghauri 1999; Clegg 1987; Dunning & Lundan 2008; Kafouros & Cornelissen 2008; Rugman & Collinson 2008)

Scandinavian expatriate community in Hong Kong, which constitutes the respondents in my 'total universe of data' (see Miles & Huberman 1994).

**Table 2**

|   | Industry | Male | Female |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Financial services | 8 | 0 |
| 2 | Diplomacy/Not-for-profit interest organisations | 3 | 3 |
| 3 | Aviation/Tourism/Corporate education | 1 | 1 |
| 4 | Public Education/Academic research | 3 | 1 |
| 5 | Home (Spouse/Family member) | 0 | 5 |
| 6 | Retail/Clothing/Footwear/Sports/Leisure | 2 | 3 |
| 7 | Manufacturing | 2 | 0 |
| 8 | Technology/ICT/Electronics | 3 | 2 |
| 9 | Logistic/Maritime/Shipping | 3 | 0 |
| 10 | NGO/Charity/Religious organisations | 1 | 1 |
| 11 | Media/Publishing | 3 | 1 |
| 12 | Private investors/Entrepreneurs | 1 | 0 |
| 13 | Non-corporate health and medical services | 0 | 1 |
| 14 | Consulting | 1 | 1 |
| 15 | Design | 0 | 1 |
|   | *Gender (male and female)* | *31* | *20* |
|   | **Total (gender)** | **51** | *N/A* |
|   | *Corporate expatriates (by gender)* | 24 | 9 |
|   | **Total (corporate)** | **33** | *N/A* |
|   | *Non-corporate expatriates (by gender)* | 7 | 11 |
|   | **Total (non-corporate)** | **18** | *N/A* |

Table 3 presents the distribution of Scandinavian interviewees across gender and nationality.

**Table 3**

|   | Nationality | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Gender** | *Denmark* | *Norway* | *Sweden* | **Total** |
| *Male* | 6 | 11 | 14 | 31 |
| *Female* | 2 | 5 | 13 | 20 |
| **Total** | 8 | 16 | 27 | **51** |

Table 4 provides an overview of numbers of included organisations, and table 5 shows the frequency of multiple interviews within an organisation. It can be argued that these two tables reflect enhanced rigour of the undertaken research study due to incorporating different types of organisations as well as interviewing more than one person within an organisation: It better reflects the vastness of the phenomenon being investigated as well as decreases the risk for political bias when having more than one

oral account to draw upon from each organisation. This is particular helpful when seeking to understand respondents' experiences, construction of meaning, and perceptions within their 'social reality', which inevitably also entails an organisational affiliation (if working).

**Table 4**

| Total organisations | 38 |
|---|---|
| Corporate | 26 |
| Educational | 5 |
| Other | 7 |

**Table 5**

| Total organisations | 11 |
|---|---|
| Corporate | 5 |
| Educational | 2 |
| Other | 4 |

Business-academia tends to define expatriates as "employees who are transferred out of their home base into some other area of the firm's international operations" (Dowling, Festing & Engle 2008, p. 4). A general definition, however, stipulates "a person who lives outside their native country" (*Compact Oxford English: Dictionary for Students* 2006, p. 348). Hence, expatriatism is not necessarily constrained to the corporate sector and those who work (see Cohen 1977, p. 6). Based on the expatriates' own perceptions and construction of social reality in this study, I argue that an expatriate can be defined in the following way:

> "An expatriate is a person (and his/her "trailing family") who temporarily resides abroad primarily for work purposes in any type of organisation and in any entry-mode, in addition to sharing a social identity with a group of people within physical and/or conceptual boundaries known as an 'expatriate community', which has evolved from the notion of "strangeness" (Field notes 2008-2009)

The above definition emerged from drawing upon various elements in the total universe of data as part of a more rigorous social analysis concerning adjustment experiences (ongoing work, see Guttormsen 2009). Unpacking the definition above assists in achieving deeper and richer knowledge about underlying assumptions and findings relating to the dynamics in the Scandinavian expatriate community in Hong Kong. A salient aspect is that Scandinavians defined themselves as an 'expatriate'

across corporate and non-corporate sectors, and those associated with the former never disputed this notion. This was prompted by the contradictory statements that several Scandinavian expatriates find themselves more at ease adjusting to and feeling more readily accepted in the Hong Kong society opposed to London and Sydney (Field notes 2008-2009; 014; 024; 030; 038; 058). This facilitates for investigating if it is possible to identify unique, context-specific factors which influence adjustment processes in the Scandinavia-Hong Kong context.

In-depth interview was the predominant research technique. 51 interviews were conducted with Scandinavian expatriates lasting approximately 75 minutes in average. All interviews, except two, were digitally audio recorded. Additional 10 interviews were made with local Hong Kong Chinese people with the aim to enhance my contextual understanding of Hong Kong in addition to learn about their views on Scandinavians and their experiences. Due to lack of time and incompatible diaries, there were approximately 20 people whom I unfortunately was not able to make an interview with. The interviews adhered to the constructionist, symbolic interactionist model as far as epistemology of interview questions is concerned. This is particularly relevant when the aim is not to statistically generalise but to obtain rich and deep knowledge about a little understood social phenomenon where meaning is the foci (see Thomas 2004). Thus, thematic questions with improvised follow-up questions in an unstructured fashion were used. Answers are interpreted within the parameters of the respondent's experiences.

In the interviews, I used my native Norwegian language and I implicitly and subtly encouraged the interviewees to converse in their native Danish/Swedish mother tongue if they could not speak Norwegian. Due to the paramount focus on construction of meaning and social reality, nuances in how people talk is central to the analysis. The interconnectedness of language and culture may result in altered oral accounts. The ability to converse with each other across the three Scandinavian languages is due to belonging to the same language group – in fact making up a separate branch within the Germanic languages. Further, having a Norwegian/Swedish family and being a native Norwegian speaker enables me to capture nuanced meanings between the languages more effectively. The latter can be plausible explained by pointing out that Norwegian is linguistically placed between Swedish (high orthographical similarity) and Danish (high similarity in written Danish). I used several Swedish and Danish words where, in my personal experience,

the counterparts often would fail to understand my Norwegian (Field notes 2008-2009). The interview language with locals was English. Additional research techniques included open participant observation, collection of written material, cross-tabulation of descriptive statistics, and informal conversations.

I employed 'purposeful sampling' in order to reflect the diversity amongst research subjects (Ghauri 2004), and the "snowball-sampling" technique where interviewee subjects are located through other respondents (Welch & Piekkari 2006; Wilkinson & Young 2004). Most interviews, however, were secured by face-to-face contact at various events and/or personal emailing. I coin the term "reflexive sample", or "network sampling", relating to this particular way to secure interview appointments as Ghauri's (2004) definition relates specifically to case-study research and imply a plan for whom to sample prior to entering the field. This can only partly be achieved in ethnographic research because relevant target groups may not be known at the initial stages in the research process. Attending events and living in Hong Kong for a substantial amount of time provided invaluable opportunities to learn about the contexts in which Scandinavian expatriates construct social meaning, reality, practices, and institutions in addition to pre-existing cultural structures in the Hong Kong society which influence these processes.

In terms of self-reflexivity, I constantly revisited my way of dealing with the relationship with the research subjects as a means to avoid distortion of internal validity of the research (see Bryman & Bell 2003; Cunliffe 2002; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson 2008). Bourdieu was a major figure in developing reflexivity in social theory, in particular including the focus on potential bias of the researcher due to the intellectual position in the academic field, hence a danger to fail to investigate "the differentia specifica of the logic of practice" and subsequently failing to offer systematic critique of "presuppositions inscribed in the fact of thinking of the world" (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992). As far as research ethics is concerned, obtained information beyond in-depth interviews and attendance at public events will not be used in terms of references to contents or quotations. However, it is important to consider how experiences and knowledge gained outside this boundary may influence my interpretations.

In order to be true towards 'native categories' and the richness of the data, I have not removed any sub-groups of expatriates or elements from the 'total data universe'. The inherent multi-method nature provides an opportunity for data

triangulation, which increases the rigour and internal validity of research findings (Silverman 2004). The analysis is carried out in a hermeneutical iterative approach where findings will be juxtaposed with relevant literatures to support or build new theories based on empirical findings. Due to not having abilities in writing Danish or Swedish in addition to wanting to keep meanings and nuances intact in the oral accounts given in interviewee's native languages, the interviews have not been transcribed, translated, or analysed with any computer-assisted software programme such as Nvivo 8. Instead, all interviews were listened to at least twice, and a set of approximately 15 key interviews which was listened to at least 4 times. Making notes from the interviews ("mind-mapping" style) was deemed adequate and sufficiently rigorous in this context.

**Emerging conceptual framework: 'Institutions of expatriatism'**

The proposed conceptual framework (see figure 1) has emerged from the ongoing analysis of the 'total universe of data' (see Miles & Huberman 1994). A framework provides a directional process of how to organise, analyse, and present the findings. In this study, I am defining 'expatriatism' as "processes involved related to being an expatriate on the individual level during an international assignment". Hence, 'expatriatism' constitutes the social phenomenon under investigation; Scandinavian expatriates in Hong Kong. An 'institution' relates to "social order of established practices and social patterns governed by particular mechanisms" (see Berger & Luckman 1966; Weber 1969). The three main themes derived from the ongoing analysis, are presented as three corresponding 'institutions'. This is relevant because a main theme and an 'institution' exhibit similar nature and aim (from a social theory perspective); to understand human societies and social phenomena as well as explaining it by locating "patterns in a chaos". This depiction can be argued to be particularly relevant due to an institution's 'governing mechanism' coincide with the focal roles of 'meaning' and 'context' in a social anthropological and social constructionist informed ethnographic study.

**Figure 1**
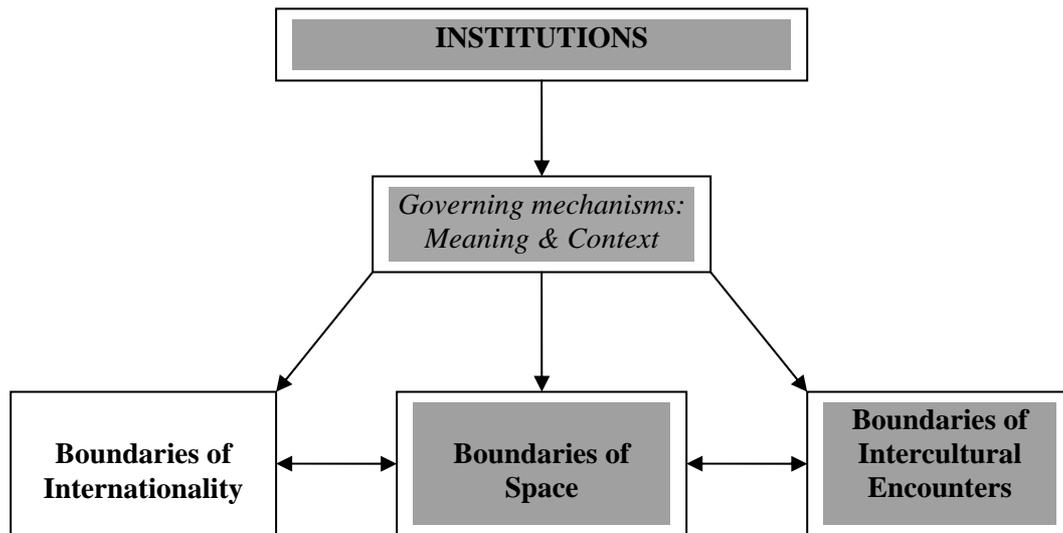


Each of the three 'institutions' (i.e. main themes) are placed in separate boxes, which reflect that they will be addressed as separate themes in my MPhil thesis. In this article, however, the institutions of boundaries of space and boundaries of intercultural encounters will be explored in two separate sections below. The established institutions are interrelated, which reflects the holistic approach. This facilitates for a more deep and rich understanding of aspects of the research subjects' lives relating to being 'Scandinavian' in addition to their experiences and perceptions. Not only as separate phenomena, but indeed in relations to each other, and why and how this has been constructed and potentially implicated other areas of life. Thus, the concert of the intuitions reflects what is important to the research subjects in their own constructed 'social reality'. The underlying argument is that real lives cannot be demarcated – implicitly, that experiences and perceptions are assumed to "exist" taxonomically. Such processes are integral part of fluid and dynamic processes, which take place across any pre-decided categorised area of study. In this article, the first institution addresses spatialized dimensions of culture and how conceptual boundaries impact our understanding of culture. The second institution relates to perceptions of intercultural encounters with local culture and society[10].

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[10] The 'institution' not included in this article relates to adjustment experiences, role of spouses and family, and a social constructionist perspective on the widely applied, and debated, 'expatriate failure' construct in the IHRM literature,

'Conceptual tools' are ideas, which can be used to analyse the elements in the conceptual framework more closely. Firstly, an ideational way of understanding culture and symbolic interactionism are employed when analysing human behaviour and culture (see Geertz 1973; Keesing & Strathern 1998). Secondly, I am drawing upon 'binary oppositions' (table 6) during social analysis in both a structuralist and poststructuralist sense (see Guttormsen 2009). This concept was brought from linguistic theory into social anthropology by one of Europe's greatest thinkers in the mid-20th century, the French anthropologist Claude-Levi Strauss (see Levi-Strauss 1983). It addresses how meanings and ideas were created, shaped, and reinforced in texts. The understanding of the meaning of a word was not derived from the word itself, but the difference in meanings when juxtaposed with the opposing idea (see Edgar & Sedgwick 2002). It is argued that cultural forms are based on common underlying properties of the human mind, which is needed to be classified as a means to establish "order" by using binary oppositions. Attention is also focusing on social practices and historical conditions of the constructed binary dualism (Zinkhan & Hirschheim 1992, cited in Marsden 2001).

**Table 6**

| '**Binary oppositions**' | | |
|---|---|---|
| *Gender* | Male | Female |
| *Nationality* | Danish/Norwegian/Swedish | Hong Kong Chinese |
| *Skin colour* | White, fair | Dark(er) |
| *Body size* | Tall | Shorter |
| *Ethnicity* | North-Germanic (Europe) | East-Asian |
| *"Race"* | "Caucasian" (Europe) | "Asian" |
| *Orientations* | Individualism | Collectivism |
| *Language* | Cantonese capability | Non-Cantonese capability |
| *Expatriation* | Success | Failure |
| *Belongingness* | Resident | Visitor |
| *Social identity* | Inclusion | Exclusion |
| *Familiarity* | Stranger | Known |

Thus, 'binary oppositions' can also reflect how human societies are structured by showing which meaning and ideas are preferred. Having collected a wide range of data from the ethnographic field study, I can make use of various elements of data. In summary, this analysis provides evidence of the importance of context-specific dualism such as belongingness, identity, familiarity, and to some extent language and race (the latter more so for locals). The data was organised in a way which facilitated to engage with a mixture of perceptions as reflexive processes, such as how do Scandinavians perceive themselves, how do they perceive the "other", how Scandinavians perceive how the "others" perceive them, and how Scandinavians perceive being perceived by the "others'" in that particular way. In my ongoing research (Guttormsen 2009), such 'multi-dimensional' perceptions is planned to permeate the ongoing analyse and writing-up approach.

## Institution of 'Boundaries of Space'

This section elaborates on conceptual and material boundaries of space, which deals with interpretations of the environment around us. Engagement with 'space' is a rarity in IB and IHRM litterateurs, but has attracted some attention in organisation studies (Taylor & Spicer 2007). Various intellectual developments concerning how to locate culture have advanced over six decades, however this has largely transpired outside business-academia (Low & Lawrence-Zuniga 2003). As a physical spatie, 'space' can be defined as the distance between two or more points (Taylor & Spicer 2007, p. 327). However, space is also influenced by the environment, thus being non-static and dynamic due to the boundary relates to the action taking place within them (Hall 1966). The role of space has emerged as one of three main themes in my ongoing work (Guttormsen 2009), and can provide plausibility in explaining how to understand culture and interaction between Scandinavians and locals in Hong Kong.

Scandinavian expatriates' initial knowledge about Hong Kong and their first encounters with its society frequently relate to various forms of 'space'. This often revolves around the skyline on the Hong Kong Island, the density of people, and an annoying humidity. Norwegians and Swedes appreciate that mountains are towering up in the landscape rather than tall buildings. Scandinavians are spoiled with space (see table 7) hence the heavily crowded areas such as Mong Kok and Causeway Bay causes amazement. Often, the first thing expatriates' eyes capture when arriving by air is the throng of lit up high raised buildings in every imaginable shapes. They dwarf

human activity – creating a first impression of, and underscoring, the salience of the financial sector. The breathtaking mass of skyscrapers has caused expatriates initially reluctant about moving to Hong Kong to take on a sizzling curiosity about what can be unveiled in the society. Scandinavians are positively surprised when discovering Hong Kong's varied nature scene, such as hiking, beaches, nature reserves, urban green areas, public country parks, and remote islands. Indeed, inhabited areas cover less than 40% of Hong Kong territory (see *Lonely Planet 6ixDegrees: Hong Kong* 2005).

Scandinavians extreme gratitude for nature and spaciousness are evident:

> "I sense my Norwegian heritage in that I prefer calm and silence….if you go to one of the major country parks you might meet only 4-5 (Chinese) people during a 4 hours walk!"

**Table 7**

| | Home pop. | Square kilometres land | People per square kilometres |
|---|---|---|---|
| Denmark | 5,484,723 | 42,394 | 129.3749823 |
| Norway | 4,644,457 | 307,442 | 15.10677461 |
| Sweden | 9,045,389 | 410,934 | 22.01178048 |
| **Total** | **19,174,569** | **760,770** | **166.4935374** |
| *Hong Kong* | *7,018,636* | *1,042* | *6735.735125* |

It reflects a binary opposition showing the importance of access to peace and quietness for Scandinavians, which are not attainable in the hectic city. Hiking is a favourite activity in various Scandinavian social clubs. It reflects a part of a Scandinavian identity, and serves as an example of how space can explain culture where behaviour is intricately linked with emotions and mind (see Bourdieu 1977). In Scandinavia, no eyebrows are raised if you set out alone and embark on a long walk or a cross-country ski trip far away in the forest. In Hong Kong, though, which exhibits a strong in-group mentality (Chatterjee & Nankervis 2007, 2007; Hofstede 1980), this behaviour would most likely come across as "anti-social" (005; 006; 031; 055; 056; 061). Corporate expatriate at large have the financial means to reside in upmarket areas in a society where many locals struggle with very high accommodation prices and who often have to take care of older family members on scarce living areas. Contemplating on Gidden's structuration theory, in some ways,

not deliberately, these groups of expatriates are contributing towards upholding this elitist/post-colonial tint in local society in the way Cohen (1977) described them. Now, however, the power has moved somewhat from colonial/political elitism to corporate power. Nevertheless, it contributes to uphold the perception amongst many locals - "white people equal wealth and success" (046), and that the "white man" or "gweilo" immediate resumes a senior management role, which local staff might not feel any ownership towards (Field notes 2008-2009; 023; 025; 028; 031; 049).

The leading anthropologist Edward Hall (1966) presented his path breaking studies on cultural influence on spatial perception and behaviour, labelled as proxemics (how people use, structure, and experience space differently, in particular when these tacit boundaries and their sensory worlds intersect). As with animals, Hall (1966, p. 107) argued that Man also have territorialities maintained to handle distances to others, which is the basis of space. Proxemics consists of intimate, personal, social, and public distances (Hall 1966). Man's perception of space is dynamic, something we often fail to comprehend due to the belief that for "every effect there is a signal and identifiable cause and that it begins and ends with the skin" (p. 109). This has evolved as a precultural given in western culture due to believing the 'self' is placed within the body (Scheper-Hughes & Lock 1987). It is now acknowledged that space constitutes an essential component in sociocultural theory (Hall 1977; 1966; Low & Lawrence-Zuniga 2003). The foci is not to understand space as a measurable distance, but how people from different cultures draw up these boundaries differently, what action takes place within them, what the markers are, and meanings associated with the boundaries.

In order to understand our own culture, it becomes necessary to understand the 'othernesses'. This is a result of the 'self' alters according to the context which constitutes the interrelations between the 'self' and the changing elements (Shusterman 1998). Thus, investigating this during actual interaction proves to be indispensable due to 'meaning' must be interpreted within its context (Crotty 2003; Easterby-Smith et al. 2008). The above shows the stark limitation in investigating culture based on 'differences', which is at the core of mainstream cultural research in business-academia. Reductionist cultural theories are not based on actual interaction, and do not incorporate fluid aspects such as meaning, history, and context. Thus, it is imperative to avoid essentialising culture and intersubjective understandings (Klotz &

Lynch 2008). Therefore, this section has a potential to illuminate cultural aspects during Scandinavian-Hong Kong encounters (Hall 1966, 1968).

For many Scandinavians, a common image in Hong Kong is locals jammed together involuntarily on the MTR (short for, quite symptomatically, Mass Transport Railways) and the frequent bumping into each other on streets. This should, however, not be mistaken with an acceptance for physical contact in the public sphere or a very wide 'intimate distance'. The body has a defence mechanism which takes "intimacy" out of the equation, such as avoiding all eye contact (Hall 1966). The context of space conditions these situations – if you want to progress from one point to another on public transport, busy streets and shopping malls in Hong Kong, you need to inhabit the mentality of "survival of the fittest". British traditional politeness where you make an excuse every time you run into somebody or hold the door for others would most likely prevent you advancing farther then a 2 meter radius circle. Scandinavians often find it crowded just by having a person sitting next to you on the bus. Some Scandinavians take advantage of the "germ-fear" amongst locals: "I can just cough a bit and people will move away from me"[11], as a means to create the physical space necessary to make them feel comfortable (Field notes 2008-2009; 002; 005; 014; 017). It is unusual to see either romantic or friendly physical contact between local people in public areas. Locals who have returned after extended periods living abroad in 'western' societies often felt they had to alter their behaviour as their body language might be attributed an inappropriate meaning in a Hong Kong context (052; 060).

Scandinavians, on the other hand, are in general very "liberal" with this type of body contact, also across gender and between a manager and his or her subordinate even if not being friends. It may have a completely non-sexual character. For many, it symbolises an act of appreciation for your presence. As a female expatriate firmly put it "I give hugs" (006) – reflecting over how important she found it to show care towards a person as well as her surprise from locals' distancing reactions. A Danish expatriate (005) was amazed how difficult it was to achieve "greeting-contact" with locals in public areas and consequently felt unwelcome and unacknowledged. Similarly, in the hotel where I lived for five months I would only receive apathy look when greeting the receptionists for the three first months from the lifts approximately

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[11] This point is not to make a joke about Hong Kong's unfortunate and very serious experiences relating to epidemics in any way, but rather as a depicted example of how some Scandinavians use this understandable fear to their advantage.

only 5 metres away. These types of non-reactions may be a result of the wide personal distance exercised by Scandinavians where locals are perceived inside this boundary (engagement-mode). In Hong Kong, however, locals would consider this perceived activity to take place outside both their personal and social distances. Subsequently, it would be perceived as belonging to the public distance (non-engagement). Thus, the Scandinavian intimate distance (i.e. 'hugging' example above) can be found within both the personal and social distances of locals, however, with different attributed meanings of these conceptual boundaries.

Scandinavian expatriates have their own public distance where non-engagement commences. I link this boundary to what many expatriates refer to as "living in a bubble" (001; 004; 007; 008; 010; 011;012; 021; 024; 025; 028; 033; 036; 038; 042; 046; 058). As a metaphor, a 'bubble' captures well the lives of many expatriates – albeit being a demarcated community, they are not confined to a physical area. It exists at various places similar to how a bubble floats around. It behaves like a "comfort sphere" where expatriates may choose to exercise none or little interaction with locals. Most expatriates reported that adjustments happened at ease and that their lives were mostly non-complicated. They highly commended the MTR system, efficient bureaucracy, and service minded and hard working Chinese. Most felt they were accepted as residents (002; 009; 026; 044; 045; 049; 054; 058). Those who had also resided in other metropolitan cities such as Washington, London, and Sydney had not experienced this to the same extent there (009; 014; 024; 040; 062).

The Scandinavian expatriates were negatively surprised at the perceived low level of English and judged Hong Kong to lose against Singapore in this regard. Several raised this issue in terms of Hong Kong's capability to remain a global financial capital. However, few Scandinavian expatriates possessed any knowledge of Cantonese. Those who aspired to learn a new language preferred Mandarin/ Putonghua[12]. Thus, they are dealing with language issues in a quite similar way as many locals: Albeit being an autonomous region (i.e. Special Administrative Region of China), "everything" has to go through Beijing (politically), curriculum in schools is increasingly focusing on "Putonghua" (i.e. Mandarin) on the expense of English, and as many locals in the service industry stated – "our customers are from the

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[12] Refers to standard use of Mandarin, rather than classical versions, based on the Beijing dialect

Mainland" (Field notes 2008-2009). Locals do not seem too worried about it. For them, the "expat" community is not a dominant part of the Hong Kong society – the boundaries are drawn around commercial and residential areas where the average Hong Kong Chinese would not afford to live (Field notes 2008-2009; 043). The language discussion can be argued to be part of the transforming Hong Kong multiple identities. The Transition project (2005) at Hong Kong Baptist University indicates a growing suspicion towards Beijing, but at the same time the "Chineseness" seems to gain strength after organising the Pedestrian event in the Beijing 2008 Olympics, having hosted the first Chinese astronauts on the Moon, and the fact that the Chief Executive Donald Tsang paraphrased his "Hong Kong, Asia's global city" to "Hong Kong, *China's* global city" (Field notes 2008-2009; 058, my italicisation).

In the oral accounts of the Scandinavians, they use "China" when referring to the Mainland only often in a political and economic sense, but "Chinese" implying both sides of the Territory boarder. Indeed, the "sameness" on the individual level seems to prevail over physical boundaries. It serves as an example of what Lamont and Molnar (2002) refer to as drawing symbolic boundaries on structural levels concerning macro society, whereas on the individual level symbolic boundaries are drawn across different groups of people but on the cultural level. At the same time, many Scandinavians express that they face more cultural hurdles on the mainland, as they are "more Chinese" (001; 007; 008; 018; 019; 021; 026; 035; 043). "Chinese" here seems to reflect the characteristics they find "different" in their interaction with Hong Kong Chinese but to a higher (hence challenging) extent: more 'face' aware, lower level in English, more implicit communication, more authoritarian work relationships, poorer regulations, and more dirty.

When the Scandinavian expatriates discussed their local language abilities, "taxi lingo" was often used as the term for their lack of conversational abilities in Cantonese (048; 058). It signals a marker between "us" and "otherness" and shows how many experience this meeting place with locals as on of their few (Field notes 2008-2009; 010; 012; 016; 028; 042; 045; 049). The post-colonial heritage assisted them well in this challenge, for example all signs and street names are in English, as are information in public offices. Those who had a command of Cantonese tended to live quite different lives in terms of both more frequent interactions with locals and often associated with non-corporate sectors. Locals driving taxis above 40 years of age would speak very good English, which reflect the major transformation Hong

Kong has undertaken from being a British colony and currently seeking a role and identity within a China very different from what is used to be prior to "market socialism" was instigated. At this point, it should be noted that language, rather than 'cultural differences', signal the "distance" between the conceptual boundaries of the "bubble". Contemplating 'bubbles' as a metaphor – they tend to burst at some stage – hence, what is inclusive and exclusive when we draw our boundaries? Language capability and the opportunity to "live our lives" seem to be the main markers in this dichotomy. Taxi drivers or market places reflect both the markers but also the low degree of interaction, which some Scandinavian expatriates exercise with locals.

The above shows the dynamics and asymmetry of space. Different perceptions, moulded by culture, influence how individuals construct meaning of physical and conceptual boundaries, and the "other's" behaviour during Scandinavian-Hong Kong interaction. However, such perceptions do not adhere categorically to particular distances. Rather, empirical data suggests it is more appropriate to consider Hall's proxemics as overlapping "interaction spheres". For example, a type of behaviour is not necessarily considered to belong to the same proxemics distances for both Scandinavians and Hong Kong people. People draw boundaries differently due to culture. Because of this, the conceptual boundaries are not merely interfacing with the "others'" boundaries. Instead, some type of behaviour will intersect and diffuse with other distances in relation to that particular behaviour. Using the example of giving hugs, such behaviour might be deemed as intimate by locals within their personal, social, and public distances. But such intimate actions such as hugging do not necessarily constitute a "sign of friendship" for Scandinavians. In other words, a term such as 'distance' does not reflect, in connotation or meaning, which perceived behaviours are to take place at various distances. In fact, behaviour belonging to different proxemics distances occurs sometimes conjunctionally.

The following expands on the proxemics discourse and exemplifies the above. Focusing on the interface between various 'interaction spheres' directs the attention towards the nature of interaction and the construction of meaning. What type of behaviour is deemed acceptable in different cultures at particular distances becomes less salient. A Swedish business expatriate expressed in despair how engaged Scandinavian colleagues back home became in colleagues' personal problems in the work place (036). In stark contrast, many Scandinavians experienced that locals exercised a very rigid separation between personal and work life in Hong Kong. The

latter might be a result of locals exercising stronger in-group relations with family compared to what most Scandinavians are accustomed to. Hence, Scandinavians' understanding of the meaning of how locals draw their boundaries between work and personal lives might not always have the most explanation power due to the perceived markers of the boundaries seem to be different (for example 'family' rather than a 'work' and 'personal' sphere) (015; 022; 025; 034; 042; 048).

A classical example relates to the Hong Kong colleague perceived to be a friend by the Scandinavian expatriate. The Scandinavian found it very awkward when noticing that the local co-worker had placed a wedding photo featuring himself and his new wife on his desk – all totally new for the Scandinavian (Field notes 2008-2009; 035). Further, the Scandinavian expatriate felt offended when his or her local work colleagues always brought them to restaurants for socialising, but never to their own homes. Scandinavians are often very eager to see how other "exotic" people live, and often consider an invitation home as an acknowledgement of a social and strong work relationship, sometimes as a "friendship invitation" beyond that. Ending up in a restaurant made several Scandinavians think that the locals were not interested in a wholehearted friendship – restaurants are for formal occasions. This makes sense in a Scandinavian context. The high price level in Scandinavian countries makes frequent dining at restaurants too costly. And further, the casual "after work drink" on a weekday is not as 'institutionalised' like in, let say, Australia or England. For locals in Hong Kong, the story is often quite a different one – to manage paying for the bill for the entire entourage is a way to show his or her great appreciations and gain 'face' (Field notes 2008-2009; 001; 033; 043; 060). Furthermore, considering the very high housing costs, people's flats are often very small and sometimes inhabited by other family members outside what Scandinavians consider 'core family' (i.e. parent(s) and their children). It might be physically impossible to fit in several tall "Scandinavian Vikings" with gesticulations and loud voices demanding a big radius of vacant physical space.

One example was Hong Kong office workers who were afraid of some Swedish (female) corporate expatriates working in their building for a Swedish company. The Swedes used body language and gestures in normal conversation. Scandinavians seldom seem to consider this, but locals having experienced this might as a consequence find the Scandinavians' direct communication style harsher and less comforting than it really is, hence amalgamating the sense of shame when loosing

'face' if being subjected to this, for example, during a meeting in front of a co-worker. Ostensibly, personal and social spheres are in play conjunctionally, and diffusing, in the Scandinavian culture, but kept apart in Hong Kong, the former expand this boundary to colleagues who are in close proximity.

The above signals a theoretical divergence with prevailing essentialist cultural theories in business-academia, such as Hofstede's individualism/collectivism dimension (see Hofstede 1980), as well as the specificity/diffusion dimension identified by Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997). It should be noted that albeit this article presents a non-standard research approach in business-academia, it is not a competition of providing the "correct" answer. Different disciplines may provide useful contributions covering different perspectives of a multifaceted issue or social phenomenon. Furthermore, even if the "answer" might be the same does not necessary imply that the nature of the findings is. This should not be considered a "problem" – but rather as an intriguing opportunity for academic discourse and advancements. Further research may result in deeper understanding of the issue. Two plausible explanations for the divergence may relate to difference in the use of "samples". Secondly, ethnography aims to impart to readers what Scandinavian expatriates experience and perceive. Indeed, this might not coincide with theory, which is interesting in its own right. For example, why do they "read" situation in the way they do? This can provide knowledge about, for example, potential *mis*perceptions or lack of intercultural learning.

Other possible explanations relate to the epistemological and ontological assumptions in positivist and social constructionist research (see Crotty 2003, Chapman, Gajewska-De Mattos & Antoniou 2004). The aforementioned theories are based on approximately two and three decades old responses. Culture is not constant, and not always coinciding with national territorial borders. The theories are not based on actual interaction but the wider social science disciplines are rather unanimous in voicing that meaning, perceptions, and identity are constructed in constant transforming and dynamic dialectical relationships. The taxonomical categorisation inherent in positivist theories do not take into account that particular context-specific may result in an inapplicability of dimensional dichotomisation. This is the rational for proposing integration zones rather than proxemical distances. It may be the case that a theory does not apply in every combination of interacting cultures. This also reflects the issue of categorising cultures along dichotomies. Each extreme end of the

dichotomy is assumed to consist of a fixed set of combined traits embodying the culture. For example, people from specific cultures are categorised to interact with people in a highly purposeful and well-defined way, and that their public sphere is wider than the private sphere. When a specific culture encounter different counterpart cultures, the assumed traits may influence the situation in different ways as well as be in play to various degrees during actual interaction.

**Institution of 'Boundaries of Intercultural Encounters'**

An intercultural encounter implies when individuals (also as part of groups, firms/organisations, and societies) embedded with different ideational cultural systems interface. As an institution, such encounters reflect the existence of identifiable patterns and practices in the perceptions and experiences of Scandinavian expatriates when interacting with local Hong Kong Chinese people.

This holistic perspective is often lacking in mainstream IHRM literature, for example the 'framework for international adjustment' (Black, Mendenhall & Oddou 1991, p. 303), and the meta-analytical method (Hechanova, Beehr & Christansen 2003, p. 216; 225). IHRM research tends to investigate demarcated aspects of lives, for example work and personal realms separately with underlying assumptions of different human processes taking place in these different "categories of life". However, as established earlier, culture cannot be separated from values, behaviour, and conduct of daily lives. It follows that it may be a fallacy to assume that these facets ever were, or can be, separated (see Geertz 1973). An expatriate does not wake up in the morning deciding to live, accumulate experiences and knowledge, or being influenced of only one prescribed "category". Such processes normally transcend such "categories" when real lives unfold. Thus, we may not always be investigating what we claim to be doing – for example when researching relationship *between* values and management style or effect on motivation and work outcome *at work*. Pivotal questions to consider here are can values be separated from behaviour, and secondly, how do we know "how much" of the motivation emerge from work-specific factors only. It can be argued that values are integral part of behaviour and hence portrayed in the latter. Moreover, it may be logical to assume that human beings' motivation is affected by incidents across various realms, and that assuming we can "isolate" work motivation may cause measuring an illogical relationship between two factors which might not exist in the form assumed with implications on the conclusion

of the study. This ethnographic study has the potential to take a step back and question assumptions relating to samples which are not based on interaction or on categorising the lives of the research subjects prior to actually having engaged with it as a researcher.

Scandinavian expatriates seldom speak of 'differences' as far as their interactions with locals are concerned. Interestingly, none of the mainstream cultural research approaches are salient in expatriates' discourses on this topic. Several expatriates have earned business-school degrees, or are currently pursuing MBAs. Hofstede's research is indeed a household name in business-academia; however, the expatriates stated that this Hofstedeian paradigm had offered them little assistance in interacting successfully with other cultures (007; 009; 027; 035). A Swedish corporate expatriate encapsulated well this type of tension when bluntly raising the following question in a seminar about cultural differences between Sweden and China: "But what does it mean", and "are there any tools to solve these intercultural issues"? An ethnographic, constructionist study can contribute substantially in taking the social analysis beyond mere 'differences' due to the focus on meaning of behaviour and the integral aspects of cultural understanding based on interaction influenced by context-specific factors. Hofstede's index of cultural dimensions can rightly be considered a tool (which anyway is perhaps too much to expect), but as shown, something which can not always provide "solutions" to the corporate world. A more helpful "tool", rather, may consist of longitudinal exposure to a vast range of experiences through interacting with the actual culture in question. Culture needs to be understood based on interaction between those actually being studied taking into account context-specific factors and pre-existing structures in society (see Crotty 2003, Giddens 1984). This is demanding, hence the fancy "management solution" might not exist in this regard.

When cross-tabulating background data of the Scandinavian expatriates, a duration of 4-5 years tended to be a threshold for when expatriates achieved a better grasp of why and how people behave in certain ways, i.e. 'context-specific' rather than 'situation-specific' knowledge (003; 006; 009; 012; 017; 025; 029; 038). "Veterans" (more than 10 years in Hong Kong) often expressed that the longer they stay in Hong Kong, the more they realise that they do not understand what is going on (Field notes 2008-2009; 001; 020; 030; 033; 037; 043). I do not consider this multivocality as a contradiction in the empirical data, but rather a reflection of the

complexity in expatriatism as a social phenomenon. As a Swedish expatriate (011) expressed it, cultural understanding is like a circle where you initially do not understand much, than obtain more insight when accumulating experience, and eventually return to the starting point facing new uncertainties again. However, at the same time, this circular way of enhancing understanding also moves forward in the shape of a spiral where learning amasses after each "completed" circle. This can be argued to be a metaphor for *how to study culture* rather than how to understand one. Conceptually, this way of reasoning shares resemblance with a social anthropological and social constructionist informed ethnographic study.

Although overall very impressed with the efficiency of local workers' attitudes a perceived lack of creativity, critical thinking, and independency as well as a rigid adherence to procedures cause tremendous frustration amongst Scandinavians (001; 007; 015; 016; 019; 020; 023; 037; 041; 052; 061). I coin the terms 'linear procedural' and 'circular flexibility' working styles for locals and Scandinavians respectively. A Norwegian business manager explained about his firm's business operations (034):

> "You got to clearly define how to get from A to B – and even where A and B are located – unless you do that they will have no clue where to start or how to proceed".

A Swedish middle-manager said they had to remove a task given priority from a local worker because she was not able to multi-task due to lack of specific procedures. As a result, having to deal with an additional task not stipulated in the job description created substantial confusion in how to solve the situation (029). A Swedish senior manager explored the issue by challenging his local staff. He laid out the steps in a work procedure, deliberately asked what would happen if he removed one step in the procedure, and finally, how it would be possible to proceed from A to C. He experienced that his local colleagues had no ability to think "outside the box" leaving the question unanswered (023). A Norwegian business manager concurred (037):

> "As long as a task is within the person's clearly defined work responsibilities attached with explicit instructions, they would do a very effective job"

Scandinavians largely appreciate a working style where people question, are inquisitive, challenge problem solutions (regardless of being put forward by a manager and co-worker), and engage in open, transparent discussion during meetings.

In one large Scandinavian firm operating in Hong Kong, this epitomises and permeates their corporate culture (Field notes 2008-2009).

It was established in the previous 'institution' that space is an essential part of sociocultural theory and that culture can be understood in spatialized ways (Low & Lawrence-Zuniga 2003). Scandinavians find it awkward that when the areas around the doors on the MTR have become completely full and the supervisor on the platform prevents more people from entering. Neither he nor passengers notice or do anything about the fact that the areas between the doors inside the car are empty, which could accommodate for 25% more people (014; 044; 048). In Scandinavia people would have immediately shouted out and physically pushed people if not getting a reaction. However, this makes sense when knowing that Scandinavians often have a very narrow proxemics 'intimacy boundary', hence willing to engage with strangers including physical contact (i.e. pushing) but with no attributed meaning other than wanting to move others so space can be more effectively used. A Swedish business manager (015) explained that locals often do not move their vehicles for emergency ambulances – something I weekly observed from my hotel room window overlooking a big road conjunction in Kowloon Tong. Is this the local variation of what Scandinavians metaphorically refer to as "tunnel-vision"?

Many Scandinavians refer to something they perceive as a so-called 45 degree in regard to locals' "awareness-span" (i.e. a triangle situated in front of them). Moreover, some expatriates refer to a 180 degree vision around the body when it comes to Scandinavians. In terms of Hall's (1977; 1966) proxemics distances, this pathway should be further investigated as it is contradicting the notion of the distances being like layers expanding and commencing where the more narrow distance "ends". And further, it is not the case here that the boundaries can be drawn as circles around the body. A thesis is put forward that the "awareness-span" influences problem-solving: what is located outside the 45 degree triangular area in front of you is also beyond the engagement-mode area. In contrast, Scandinavians with their self-proclaimed 180˚ vision are used to taking a step behind and looking at the whole picture incorporating views from all angles where the person is 'inside' this area as opposed to locals' who looks into the triangular area. Scandinavians are indeed used to gazing at space from afar but at the same time being part of it with the ability to change it. Hong Kong people, on the other hand, are more or less always inside the midst of dense areas but outside the awareness area. It has already been

established that spatial dimension is part of culture, i.e. "what we do". In that context, it no longer seems so far fetched to consider if spatial experiences influence also how people approach and solve a problem (Field notes 2008-2009; 023). As Hall (1977; 1966) has shown, the understanding of space is an outcome of human beings' sensory apparatus. Table 7 depicts the density of population, which actually coincides with statements made by interviewees: The higher density in the home country, the less of an issue was crowdedness to them whilst in Hong Kong (Field notes 2008-2009).

Another area of intercultural interaction creating stress for many Scandinavian expatriates relates to communication. Scandinavians report what they perceive as a lack of straight forward, transparent and explicit communication from their local counterparts (001; 002; 008; 010; 016; 020; 021; 025; 028; 031; 045; 062). One example was workers who did not inform the manager when a machine broke down. It resulted in loosing three weeks' worth of production. Another example is meetings where Scandinavians not only facilitate, but encourage criticism and discussion of problems openly - not as an attempt to ridicule the responsible person, but to elucidate problems in order to locate solutions. Scandinavians find it unproblematic to remove personal and social facets from the equation when discussing work-related issues with the particular person. *Not* being transparent is often considered an offensive act (Field notes 2008-2009). They often found running of meetings quite disappointing or ineffective. Locals do not raise issues and are often uncomfortable with saying "no" and use implicit communication to convey this. Scandinavians often fail to pick up such signals as it is outside their 'personal frame of reference'. Answering "no" when a superior requests something often has the opposite meaning in Scandinavian and Chinese cultures. For the former, it can be to express that he or she simply does not have the time to complete any additional tasks, but local staff perceived this as "you really stood up to the boss" (016). Sometimes, Scandinavians would use this knowledge to their advantage when really wanting to prevail during a discussion knowing that taking on a confronting attitude would meet little resistance from locals who tend to shy away from conflicts in public (028; 036).

As a result, many Scandinavians find it necessary to "micro manage", something which is often perceived as derogatory and offensive back home. The examples above represent many oral accounts and exhibit resemblance to two of Hofstede's dimensions, uncertainty avoidance and power distance. That shows the fallacy of assuming "multidimensional" differences are always in play simultaneously.

This reflects, for example, the illogical assumptions in the cultural distance construct by Kogut and Sing (1988), i.e. it assumes the dimensions always operate in concert due to the construct is based on an equation using aggregated data from Hofstede's index. Often, Scandinavians disguise being subjects to honorific titles. Equating rank with seniority or attaching certain privileges is often not only considered inappropriate, but derogatory (Field notes 2008-2009; 016; 020; 039; 048; 058). As some Scandinavian business managers vocalised, in Scandinavia any one from the cleaning staff to directors has the right to access their offices on a daily basis and have a shout at you – but that would be unheard of in their Hong Kong organisations. A Danish expatriate recalled being the specialist in roundtable discussion. He experienced being harshly silenced by the moderator when starting to give his opinions after the person sitting next to him had finished talking due to he thought they were speaking in a clockwise order around the table. However, he realised that peoples' opinions were called upon according to their formal ranks. It created a strong feeling of offense and patronisation (016).

An additional point which supports Shenkar's (2001) criticism of the cultural distance construct relates to "from where is the distance measured?" When applying the construct on the individual level, data depicts the heterogeneity amongst Scandinavian expatriates, which probably exceeds the average sample in IHRM literature on international adjustment and 'expatriate failure' (ongoing work). More than 50% of the Scandinavian respondents have lived in more than two countries and speak 2-4 languages. Several were expatriated from a country other than their home country. This makes it difficult to claim that the measurement commences from a, for example, "Swedish" starting point. As several Scandinavian interviewees remarked, they found the question very interesting and intriguing: "how much does your exposure to the other cultures/countries and/or your multicultural background influence your perceptions of intercultural interaction in Hong Kong" (Field notes 2008-2009; 002; 009; 011; 014; 021; 022; 028; 033; 040).

These discourses provide an opportunity to obtain more in-depth knowledge than mere characterisations of Scandinavian and Hong Kong Chinese cultures. The patterns of such interactions indicate where there is an asymmetry between the parties' personal frames of reference, causing different interpretations and attributing meanings differently due to history, context, and learning (Agar 1994). Understanding the differences when these frames of references actually are interfacing becomes

paramount as they reveal what Scandinavians find the most difficult to alter with themselves. They serve as markers of inclusive and exclusive boundaries of what constitutes their 'selves' and where they are placed. It defines how they identify themselves (i.e. "Scandinaviness") through a sense of 'sameness" (see Erikson 1972; Barth 1969). Due to perceptions of the self and its reflexivity, markers, meaning of boundaries as well as the fluidity of identity itself, constructed identities are unique for the particular interactional context.

Such reflection relates to a voluminous literature on personal and social identity theories. Intellectual advancements span across several social science disciplines such as psychology, linguistics, sociology, social anthropology, and history (see Ardener 1989; Barth 1969; Brewer 1999; Callero 2003; eds. Chapman, McDonald & Tonkin 1989; Edgar & Sedgwick 2002; Erikson 1972; Forsythe 1989; Giddens 1991; Hylland Eriksen 2001; Jenkins 2000, 1996; Low & Lawrence-Zuniga 2003; Sokefeld 1999; Stets & Burke 2000). In the context of Scandinavian expatriatism in Hong Kong, social identity can be used to explain intercultural interaction by treating a human being as an acting person with multiple identities ("who am I, and which group(s) do I belong to?). Structuralist, on the other hand, assumed singular identity and one "sameness" and unity (Gergen 1994, cited in Sokefeld 1999). This relates to the previous 'institution of space' where it was established that it is a Western bias to believe that the 'self' is always located inside the body and that space commence from the skin (Hall 1966; Scheper-Hughes & Lock 1987). Locals seem to have a 'self', but often placed within the conceptual boundary of the social unity of family. The in-group and emphasis on family is perceived as extremely strong amongst local Hong Kong Chinese (030; 033; 041; 043; 055; 056; 059; 061).

In IB and expatriate research, identity is a rather new topic on the research agenda (see Chrobot-Mason et al. 2007; Kohonen 2008; Lauring 2008). A discourse concerning identity and social identity can contribute to a richer and deeper understanding of the Scandinavian-Hong Kong interaction (see Stets & Burke 2000). The reflexive 'self' alters according to the context which constitutes the interrelations between the self and the changing elements (Shusterman 1998, p. 107-109). Thus, it is imperative to avoid essentialising culture and intersubjective understandings (Klotz & Lynch 2008), which ironically is contrary to assumptions inherent in mainstream cultural research in business-academia.

For example, using social identity theory, Scandinavian experiences can be understood on the basis of how identity is formed through self-categorisation. The sense of "belongingness" and shared experiences with other Scandinavians create a social group where those not being Danes, Norwegians, or Swedes are labelled as out-group. However, whereas Scandinavians perceive a social identity different from other Europeans or "gweilos", amongst locals Scandinavians are categorised in a more traditional binary oppositions such as 'white'. The boundaries of Scandinavian identity seem to be activated and become salient in the adjustment process more than intercultural encounters; being able to draw back from the 'Chinese' to the conceptual boundary of the Scandinavian "expat" community ('bubble') facilitates for successful adjustments as some expatriates face less cultural challenges from interacting with locals.

It can therefore assist in better understanding of interactions, beyond what has been defined as Scandinavian management style, such as employee oriented management style, equality, informality, decency, and conflict avoidance (Bjerke 1999; Grenness 2003; Schramm-Nielsen, Lawrence & Sivesind 2004). Inquisitive nature and questioning assumptions/status quo, flexible problem solving, wide personal and social space, transparency, confrontational (in low conflict modus) appear to be salient traits which can be assumed to be deeply embedded in most Scandinavians. This may have evolved from a very early age, such as internalisation and socialisation in asymmetrical dialectic relations during the upbringing by parents, and further institutionalisation throughout education and organisational life – almost like 'societal virtues'. This is what most Scandinavian expatriates conceptualise as "being Scandinavian", alternatively "Scandinaviness" (Field notes 2008-2009). The Hong Kong Chinese equivalent seems to entail modesty, competitiveness, short-term perspective, "silence is golden", acceptance for inequality and obedience for authority and status, non-confrontational, non-inquisitive, as well as narrow intimate, personal, and social proxemics distances. Some of these 'virtues' are diametrical to the Scandinavian ones. And since social identities transform depending on the specific dynamic in any relationship, it signals a substantial potential in understanding the Scandinavian-Hong Kong relationship and the nature of intercultural encounters when basing the discourse on actual interaction. Patterns and established practices, as well main issues faced by Scandinavian expatriates during interactions with locals appear

present irrespective of social and work realms, corporate and non-corporate sectors, and genders.

**Concluding remarks**

This article has elaborated on how culture and expatriatism can be advantageously investigated by employing a constructionist, ethnographic, and transdisciplinary research approach. The study further shows how basic assumptions in theory and the way we study a research problem within the dominant positivist oriented paradigm can be challenged by 'cyclic' research, which commences with field research rather than prescribed categories in a body of literature (i.e. theory) Preliminary analysis from an ethnographic field study of Scandinavian expatriates in Hong Kong in regard to their adjustment experiences and perceptions of intercultural encounters have been presented. The positivist research paradigm is scrutinised in terms of how to study culture and expatriatism. Further analysis will develop these arguments as well as including more elements of collected data from the "total universe of data". Based on the empirical findings, it seems timely to encourage for conducting more ideographic and constructionist research to allow for bottom-up theory development. Further, to incorporate meaning, space, identity, and interaction as far as investigating culture and expatriates are concerned have been shown to obtain richer and deeper knowledge about the social phenomenon of Scandinavian expatriatism in Hong Kong.

The above strongly indicates that this study should have practical implications on how business-schools teach cross-cultural management and how management consultancies provide advice in such areas. Both institutions rely heavily on positivist, quantitative research and the inherent assumptions. Some textbooks however make a great effort to display theories from other paradigms (see Francesco & Gold 2005; Harzing & Ruysseveldt 1995). Furthermore, the displayed complexity of being an expatriate should be reflected in management's training and preparation schemes. Increased focus should be made on meaning-based and context-specific understanding of culture. Discussions and theories relating to actual interaction should be made as the modus operandi in this regard. This approach has a good potential in improving adjustment processes and intercultural interaction, and thus consequently successful outcomes of international assignments hence cost reductions relating to the most expensive employee group in an MNC.

The above reflects the potential danger of using only employees on short-term contracts, referred to as international business travellers, due to losing out on the opportunity to acquire intercultural competency which can be transferred to the head-quarters or other subsidiaries (see Nankervis & Fisher *ongoing work*; Nankervis & Grainger 2001; Welch & Worm 2006). Theoretically, more ethnographic and transdisciplinary studies would assist business-academia in investigating social phenomena, as well as to build bridges with cognate disciplines in the wider social sciences. However, business-schools appear to struggle with Bourdieu's (1977) notion of intellectual bias: the positivist domination is upheld when investigating dynamic human behaviour (see Buckley & Chapman 1996b). The research also contributes with a broader understanding of what expatriatism may entail in regard to what constitutes an 'expatriate: Perspectives from non-corporate, small- and medium sized enterprises, Scandinavian culture and non-Anglo "samples" are illuminated.

Limitations of the study relate to the inability to statically generate as the aim is to investigate a social phenomenon deemed to be interesting in its own right (see Thomas 2004). Less data has been collected concerning locals' experiences interacting with Scandinavian expatriates; hence my ability to provide texture to the experiences of the former from a local point of view is lower. Data are sometimes not possible to triangulate due to it not being possible to observe informants beyond the interview session, hence relying on oral accounts. Only observing research participants during interviews and public events decreases my opportunities to obtain richer knowledge about the experiences of being Scandinavian in Hong Kong and how they interact. Although I have excellent understanding of English, Danish, and Swedish, there might be some nuances that I have not been able to pick up during interviews due to being a native language speaker of Norwegian. In terms of future research, more studies based on actual interaction between those being investigated is highly recommended to the business school academia. Furthermore, I recommend increasing the number of ethnographic studies where social phenomena are studied holistically within its natural context. This can elucidates the applicability of various theories and how components of them relate to each other in real lives.

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[13] Please note that none of the interviewees have been referenced due to agreement of confidentiality. The Scandinavian expatriate communities are quite small hence finding the identity of a respondent with very little information is rather easy

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