

RESEARCH OUTLINE for the NIG ANNUAL WORK CONFERENCE 29 October 2004

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Session: 1 – Governance in the European Union

Evolving Culture in the European Commission? Commission Officials, Cultural Differences, and Networking Behavior

Individuals enter professional life as adults when the bulk of their values are already firmly in place. Most of these values and assumptions are rooted in one's **national culture**, which can be defined as those elements of culture acquired through growing up in a particular country. As any individual, European Commission officials are also products of their own culture through the lens of which they perceive the world and others. In turn, these cultural orientations influence their behavior within the Commission.

This tension between different cultural systems within the Commission is placed by some authors within a broad framework, namely the **North-South division** (Egeberg 1996; Beyers and Dierickx 1997, 1998; McDonald 2000). Although it appears a crude categorization, the North-South division has yielded significant results in the multivariate analysis conducted by Jan Beyers and Guido Dierickx (1998) on the effects of nationality on negotiations in the working groups of the EU Council of Ministers, controlling for the variables ideological disposition and organizational affiliation. Austria, Britain, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Sweden constitute the Northern group, whereas Belgium, France, Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain the Southern. It remains to be seen how the recent enlargement has modified this classification.

Northerners are culturally taken to be more well adapted to the rational, impersonal Weberian forms of bureaucracy, whereas Southerners tend to be more collectivistic and perceive themselves as members of groups transcending the boundaries of formal organizations (Egeberg 1996, p. 727; McDonald 2000, pp. 67-68). Northern cultures can thus be characterized dominantly by **universalism**, where the standards for the way a person should be treated are the same for everybody and the Southern cultures by **particularism** where the standards for how a person should be treated depend on the group to which a person belongs (Hofstede 1991, Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner

1997). The interaction between these two value systems is bound to have concrete consequences on the functioning of the Commission.

The flow of information, for example, is an area where the cultural differences surface: The Northern officials complain of the lack of readily shared information, whereas those from the South find it simple to obtain information by making friends (McDonald 2000, p. 67). In such a system, key personal contacts are vital for building support and alliances within the fixed deadlines (Stevens and Stevens 2001, p. 178).

Liesbet Hooghe refers to some nationalities in the Commission having a strong reputation of *clubness*, which she defines as “a set of formal and informal networks within which members tend to act in concert” (Hooghe 1999b, p. 405). Expanded along the Directorate Generals of the Commission, these national networks provide instrumental functions such as exchange of information and contacts with more influential compatriots in and outside the Commission, and political opinionating (Hooghe 1999b, p. 415). Hooghe argues further that officials with weak national networks are at a disadvantage, as successful policy-making in the EU often depends on the quality of intelligence.

III. Research Question:

The key question of this project is whether national cultural differences affect policy-making processes in the European Commission through the networking behavior of Commission officials.

In particular, this study shall test whether one crucial characteristic of national cultures, the dimension universalism-particularism, affects the behavior of Commission officials. In their general theory of action, Talcott Parsons and Edward Shils identified ***universalism vs. particularism*** as one of the “pattern variables” (Parsons and Shils 1967, pp. 78-79) which shape individuals’ behavior and constitute a main cultural clashing point.

This theory will be utilized to derive the networking behavior/communication patterns of Commission officials. Based on the proposition that universalists do not differentiate between the members of their in-group and out-group and that particularists treat their in-group members preferentially, the following tentative hypothesis is obtained:

Universalist officials will rely more on supranational networks and maintain more intensive contacts with colleagues from all member-states than particularist officials, who will rely more on

their national networks and maintain more intensive contacts with colleagues from their national group.

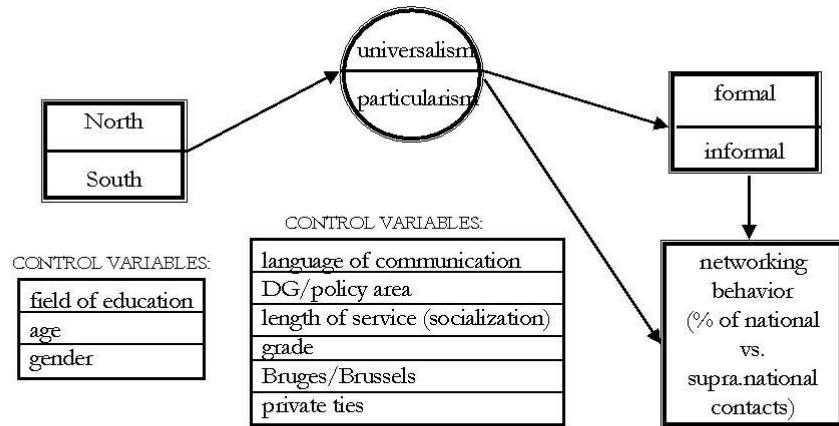
The shape of officials' networks is in turn expected to influence the policy-making processes within the Commission.

IV. Research Design and Methodology:

The variables universalism-particularism and networking behavior will be tested by means of a mail-back questionnaire:

A) Universalism-particularism will be measured by hypothetical dilemma situations, based on the Stouffer and Toby (1951) test – a test conducted repeatedly to tab intercultural differences (Zurcher *et. al.* 1965, Smith *et. al.* 1996, Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1997). The Stouffer and Toby test will be adapted and extended by items transposed to the bureaucratic environment of the Commission. The scores of officials on these questions will determine their relative position on the universalism-particularism dimension and will also verify whether the North-South distinction holds for cultures within the Commission. Significantly, the timing of the study allows the inclusion of new member-state officials. This may help to examine whether there are significant cultural differences between the officials of current and new members. It will also enable the analysis of socialization effects, as the new officials, as “under-socialized novices”, constitute a natural experiment control group situation.

B) The questions on networking behavior will explore other possible explanatory variables derived from the studies and questionnaires of Beyers and Dierickx, Hooghe, and Trondal, such as private ties, past experiences, and socialization of Commission officials. These questions are based on the literature and exploratory pilot interviews. The results of the analysis of this data will show to what extent cultural value orientations (i.e. universalism-particularism) influence the networking behavior of officials. The questionnaire will also provide preliminary information as to how officials form and maintain their networks.



This diagram summarizes the variables operationalized in the questionnaire. Respondents will be assigned to the universalist/particularist categories based on the Latent Class Analysis approach. The model will be analyzed by applying stepwise regression.

Sampling decisions will be based on the results of the pre-test of the questionnaire. The two possible options are random sampling and stratified sampling based on DGs. The target sample size is around 400.

The second stage of the research, involving in-depth qualitative interviews, will be of an exploratory nature. Namely, it will build on this information to question how Commission officials use their personal networks with regard to their work in the Commission and how this in turn affects policy-making processes within their organization. Similar questions will be asked to interviewees from each member state to enable the comparison of responses. Sampling will be based on survey results. This part of the project will thus require extensive fieldwork and participative observation within the Commission, which will be conducted during an internship there.

V. Scientific Contribution:

The literature on culture and the effects of different national cultures on multi-cultural organizations examines how cultures differ with the help of value dimensions (Hofstede 1991, Smith et. al. 1996, Schneider and Barsoux 1997, Hambrick et. al. 1998, Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1997, Soeters and Recht 2001). How it affects

individual behavior is mostly portrayed through narrative/anecdotal evidence, predominantly drawn from the corporate world. This research stream concludes that country of origin is the most influential cultural element that determines an individual's value-orientations.

The EU literature focusing on officials demonstrates that their national background shapes their attitude and behavior at work, as well as their interaction with colleagues (Abélès, Bellier, and McDonald 1993, Cini 1996, Egeberg 1996, Beyers and Dierickx 1997, Edwards and Spence 1997, Page 1997, Cini 2000, Nugent 2000, Shore 2000, Stevens and Stevens 2001). Socialization within EU institutions or exposure to the EU has a weak effect (Hooghe 1999, 2001).

Those studies on multi-national organizations which distinguish different value dimensions have not been applied to EU institutions. By contrast, studies on the Commission have adopted a holistic concept of culture without employing dimensions. Thus, the focus on the dimension universalism-particularism will offer a critical element in the discussion of culture in the Commission.

EU scholars have pointed to the role of informal networks, which are partly nationality-based (Egeberg 1996, Christiansen 2001). As a social phenomenon, networking is conceivably influenced by national/cultural affinities. The networking behavior of officials attending Council working groups has been studied by Beyers and Dierickx (1997, 1998) and Trondal (2001), but a parallel study is missing for the Commission. The examination of the influence of culture on networking behavior, as well as the composition and role of officials' networks will contribute significantly to European governance literature.

The research project as such is expected to generate rich and original empirical data and to lie at the intersection of classical sociology (Parsons and Shils), cross-cultural organizational sociology (Hofstede), as well as EU studies in political science and public administration. With its multi-disciplinary scope, the findings are especially expected to be useful for scholars of European integration, multi-national organizations, networking behavior, and culture.

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