



LUND UNIVERSITY

# Striking a Balance

*A Cultural Analytical Study of a Cross-Cultural  
Consultancy*

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## Abstract

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This thesis aims to aid the consultancy Living Institute in evaluating the perceived effects of the cross-cultural training courses it provides to a wide variety of clients. To do this we study the company in relationship to its clients, mapping out its theoretical foundation as well as its strategies for teaching culture. In order to gain a deeper understanding of what the company teaches and how the clients put lessons to use, we focus on how the concept of culture is packaged, sold and taught and what happens to it in the process. By using an ethnographic approach, performing observations and in-depth interviews, we create empirical material with depth as well as breadth; describing both the perspective of the company and the experiences of its clients. By doing this we also want to reach beyond taking the informants' accounts at face value to identify patterns of logics and assumptions. To perform this analysis we employ a number of theoretical concepts from intercultural communication and cultural analysis as well as discourse and narrative analysis. The company combines perspectives from the traditions of intercultural communication and anthropology in order to deliver an accessible but complex understanding of culture. We show Living Institute has to handle a number of balancing acts like this one in order to make it relevant in the business world while simultaneously retaining theoretical depth. These balancing acts are not specific to Living Institute, but apply to anyone wanting to employ culture analytical concepts outside academia. This commodification process reduces and simplifies the meanings of culture. Living Institute, however, manages to put culture on the agenda, demonstrating to its clients how, why and in what ways culture matters to them.

Keywords: cultural awareness; intercultural communication; diversity management; cross-cultural communication; cultural economy; discourse analysis; cultural analysis; expatriates; narrative; anthropology.

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## Introduction

In an increasingly globalized work market, where transnational connections are commonplace, cultural conflicts are bound to arise. More than language issues may cloud communication between people, and in a business context the breakdown of communication spells financial trouble. These issues may manifest themselves in a number of ways, ranging from the feeling of isolation and frustration that an expatriate<sup>1</sup> may experience working at a location far from home, to teams that must cooperate across national and cultural borders. This has in turn given birth to a “culture shock prevention industry”, where training in cultural sensitivity and know-how is employed to limit the effects of transnational cultural frictions (Hannerz, 1996, p. 108). Research in intercultural communication increased since the turn of the millennium, but there is still uncertainty within the scientific community on what theoretical foundation this kind of training should be built (Larsson, 2010).

The Danish consultancy Living Institute has found their own answer to this, combining theoretical perspectives from anthropology as well as from traditional intercultural communication, aiming to create a genuine curiosity and awareness of cultural issues. Living Institute provides cross-cultural workshops and training to companies: Delivering both tailored courses for incoming and outgoing expatriates, along with Cultural Awareness Workshops for entire teams in Denmark and abroad. By employing a cultural analytical perspective, Living Institute strives to provide every client with a customized solution. This makes the company interesting from the perspective of an applied cultural analyst on two levels: Firstly, because the organization uses culture as a commodity, creating the concept in a shape suitable to and for business, and secondly, with its theoretical background in anthropology, Living Institute is a prime example of applying cultural analysis in the world of business. In this thesis we will explore Living Institute, the company’s relationship to its clients, some of the challenges it faces and what it “does” with the concept of culture.

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<sup>1</sup> In this study we use the definition of expatriate from Hannerz (1996), referring to a person who has chosen to live abroad to work for a period of time and who can choose to return back home whenever she or he likes.

## **Background, aim and research question**

A client requesting Finnish cultural training for an outgoing Danish expatriate contacted the cross-cultural consultancy Living Institute. As a result, the company looked to recruit a freelance consultant with good knowledge of Finland and Finnish culture and thus contacted one of this thesis' authors, Anna-Mari Fagerström, to set up a meeting between her and the company's managing director. In order to get to know the company better, she was also invited to attend one of the company's Cultural Awareness Seminars, entitled, "Why are Danes so weird?". The training session for the Danish expatriate going to Finland never came to pass, but instead the authors were invited to assist Living Institute with another challenge.

The company consistently performs evaluation surveys on the spot after each workshop, training session and seminar, asking if the participants found the information useful and the presentation good, generally receiving good feedback. Because of the fast paced business context in which Living Institute operates, there was however little time for both the company and its clients to return to evaluate the results of the training together. Thus, there was little knowledge within the company as to how the training, theoretical concepts and cultural action plans were implemented by its client and if there was a discernible difference for the client before and after the training session. Since a survey would not be able to catch the emotive and practical aspects of the kind of training, Living Institute decided a culture analytical perspective was needed to dig deeper and explore the effects of the company's cultural courses over time. As Moeran (2005) points out, by using an ethnographic approach one can apply a "strategic exchange perspective", examining the interconnectedness of people and knowledge in a larger context, not limiting it to theoretical concepts (p. 2). In short, the authors were asked to investigate the long-term effects of the training provided by Living Institute to find out whether or not the training had led to any kind of change for the clients. Therefore, this thesis can be understood as a form of evaluation with the goal of creating new insights for Living Institute's products with the aid of clients' perspectives.

To gain a deeper understanding for the ways in which Living Institute transfers knowledge to its clients and how that knowledge is put to use, we will focus on the concept of culture. Our aim is to shed light on what meaning Living Institute infuses into culture and how the concept is put to use once taught to the company's clients. To create an analytical foundation from which to do this, we will employ the following research questions:

- What are the central assumptions and theoretical knowledge on which Living Institute is based?
- In what shape does Living Institute provide cultural knowledge to its clients?
- Was the knowledge provided perceived as useful to the clients and how was it put to use?

By employing these questions we hope to create a “thick description”, not only focusing on the goals of Living Institute but on the scene in its entirety, incorporating the context in which actions are performed (Geertz, 1973, p. 16). In this way we hope to discover some of the unreflected and unexpected consequences of the training that the company provides.

## Presentation of Living Institute

*In this chapter we will introduce this thesis' leading character, namely the cross-cultural consultancy Living Institute, giving an outline of the company's history, the people behind it and how it operates.*

Living Institute is a small company with only its managing director working on a full-time basis. She is responsible for all operations including selling, marketing, designing workshops and ensuring the quality of the training. The second most prominent person in the company is the senior consultant, an anthropologist, who is responsible for providing a theoretical and scientifically sound foundation, as well as designing and delivering most of the company's training sessions. Besides working with Living Institute, he also works as an external lecturer at the university, an actor, commentator, writer and book reviewer. In addition, Living Institute has a roster of about fifteen external consultants, who freelance on a case-to-case basis.

Living Institute is the brain child of the managing director, who is the company's founder and to a great extent dictates the company's philosophy and practices. She believes one can trace culture like a connecting thread throughout her life, from her childhood to the present-day. Growing up with a German father and Danish mother, at an early age she was able to study the differences of ambiance and atmosphere in different cultures. She always felt she was different from other children because of her German heritage. After high school she unintentionally ended up teaching Danish to expatriates in a distinguished language school in Copenhagen. Despite having no prior teaching experience, at the age of nineteen she taught her first student, the CEO of a gigantic multinational company. This was her first experience of working with culture and it functioned as an eye-opener of sorts. After a few years of work she went back to school in order to become a language teacher. Consequently, she changed jobs and began teaching Danish to immigrants and refugees. Given the quite different clientele from the international language school, this experience made her even more aware of culture's importance. During this time she and her husband also established a very successful restaurant in Copenhagen, with food and music from all over the world—an enterprise they ran for more than ten years, until her husband was asked to manage another establishment. After a few years, her husband was offered a job within a high-end technological company in another part of Denmark. The whole family relocated to a small town, where she came to experience the biggest cultural clashes she could ever have imagined. She had a great job in the same company as her husband, but she continuously struggled with the fact that she was a



city girl having to deal with small town attitudes. During this time, an expatriate came to work for the company and she saw what happened to him in the unfamiliar cultural context—how the Danes acted around him and what they did when they, for the first time, had a foreigner on their team. The cultural meeting didn't turn out that well and this gave her the idea to go back to Copenhagen and establish a company that dealt with culture shocks and the issues of retaining foreign expatriates in Denmark.

Living Institute opened for the first time in August 2001, not long before 9/11 and its following crises. People weren't traveling and companies weren't hiring new people. Thus there was little business for Living Institute. After a few years she opened the company again, following revitalized growth in the global market. Business was slow to begin with, but when the "cartoon crisis" struck in 2006, it started to pick up the pace. Suddenly she did not have to propagate for the significance of culture since the crisis had been a rude awakening to many companies lacking in cultural awareness. At the time Living Institute was only dealing with foreign expatriates in Denmark, but the demand for courses directed to outgoing Danish expatriates, short time business travelers and to employees working in multicultural teams increased quickly.

Today, Living Institute's slogan "Culture matters" sums up both the company's philosophy and everyday business practice. The company sells cross-cultural training and education to companies operating in the global market, delivering tailored courses for single incoming and outgoing expatriates, as well as workshops for entire teams in Denmark or other countries. The product Living Institute sells is developed from anthropological theory, aiming to create a genuine curiosity and awareness of cultural issues, steering away from simple explanations of how people "are" in different parts of the world. However, as in most cases where academic theory is applied in the fast and global world of business, the message must be given a shape suitable for a business context where the clients are not necessarily "talking anthropology".

The company applies a cultural analytical perspective to help it tailor solutions to best suit the needs of the client. Living Institute sells a number of template products that can be customized to fulfill specific demands, such as the Danish Living Crash Course and Cultural Awareness Workshops. The Danish Living Crash Course is a one-day course for expatriates living and working in Denmark. It focuses on Danish history, working culture, mentality, "do's and don'ts" and unwritten rules at work as well as in private life. The Danish Living Crash Course is held once a month, if enough participants are enrolled. Cultural Awareness Workshops are arranged for clients working internationally. This course can be customized

for teams or for single individuals in need of personal coaching in addition to country-specific information or more general cultural awareness.

## Theoretical framework

*In this chapter we will touch upon three theoretical themes relevant to our study. The first, "Previous Research", focuses on studies similar to ours, dealing with research on the field of intercultural communication as well as perspectives on the application of culture in the world of business. The second, "From interculturalism to diversity management", deals with some of the most prominent currents within the field of intercultural communication and management strategies. In the third and final, "Culture analytical perspectives", we will present the theoretical tradition in which this thesis places itself along with a number of theoretical perspectives used to dig deeper into the empirical material.*

## Previous research

While there has been much literature written about intercultural communication itself, surprisingly little has been written about the consultancies working with these issues. Tommy Dahlén's (1997) doctoral dissertation, *Among the Interculturalists*, is an anthropological study of practicing consultants in the field of intercultural communication, a group that he calls "the interculturalists". Dahlén (1997) focuses on the varied range of consultant companies and organizations in the field, emphasizing the professionalism of the interculturalists, "and the way culture and cultural differences are conceptualized and represented among them" (p. 9). Dahlén examines the complex field where interculturalists work and exert influence. In relation to our study, Dahlén's research represents a more general macro level view of the field of intercultural communication, while zooming in on the one specific consultancy.

Dahlén (1997) looks at the field from two perspectives. Firstly, he strives to understand the interculturalists' culture in its own context. Secondly, he compares the relationship of the interculturalists' understanding of culture to an anthropological one. This is emphasized in the conclusions of the doctoral thesis, where Dahlén discusses the way in which interculturalists are recycling older anthropological conceptions of culture and that they seem to have neglected to examine the new discussions and developments within anthropology.

Media and communications scientist Inger Larsson's dissertation, *Att Bygga Över Kulturgränser*<sup>2</sup> (2010), focuses on Swedes working in an international context, but also discusses the field of intercultural communication from a critical perspective. She questions the traditional functionalist approach to culture often used within intercultural communication, instead advocating a social constructionist perspective. The functionalist

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<sup>2</sup> Roughly translates to "Building bridges across cultural borders".

approach to culture treat it as fixed sets of categories and characteristics, turning culture into logical systems of ideas and values, an approach that has a long standing popularity within the field of intercultural communication. According to Larsson, social constructionism instead provides a point of view from where it is possible to follow the development, changes and fast transformation of culture, something which is closer to what actually happens in the interaction between people. Social constructionism should be regarded as a key concept when talking about national identity, instead of resorting to the often misused concept of national culture. Larsson writes about cultural and national identity, regarding identities as socially constructed through interactions with other human beings. Larsson also notes the lack of relevant literature and research on the field of intercultural communication, especially within the field of anthropology.

When examining a company like Living Institute it also becomes relevant to touch upon research dealing with the interbreeding of cultural science and business. Billy Ehn and Orvar Löfgren (2009) discuss the problems faced by culture analytical academics working as consultants in the public and private sector. According to them there is a need for reciprocity in the relationship between academia and practicing consultants and that there is great potential for gaining new skills and understandings in dialogue with each other. Ehn and Löfgren point out that as academics they have crossed the thin border between the two worlds many times without even noticing, for example, when organizing workshops or being consulted by organizations outside of academia. They conclude, “research that does not involve the ways potential users of the results act and think always misses something important” (p. 47).

The amalgamation of culture and economy is further touched upon by Löfgren and Willim (2005) in the book, *Magic, Culture and the New Economy*, who claim a more intimate connection between the two can be traced to the growth of what has been called “the new economy”, where culture began to play a more prominent role in business as companies started to borrow concepts from academia and cultural analysis. They point out the most important way in which economy and culture mixed was in the attempt to package and sell intangible cultural concepts and experiences. Cultural technologies such as ritualization and narration are put to work to give credible form to the culture-as-product, turning them into tangible goods. According to Löfgren and Willim, these amalgamations are fruitful objects for cultural analysis, partly because they use many of the same signs and ideas, albeit in a new context, but also because they often make great claims, highlighting some things while keeping others out of the light.

The very same theme is discussed by du Gay and Pryke (2002) who claim culture and economy cannot be understood as separate entities since they are to a great extent dependent on and part of each. They point out the “turn to culture” can mean many different things and take various forms, but that it is an outcome of the re-emerged focus on culture as a critical notion for understanding the economic and organizational life. One of the central features of the cultural turn according to du Gay and Pryke (2002) “is a renewed interest in the production of meaning at work” (p.1), meaning that it is regarded constituting for how people are acting, thinking and feeling in an organizations. Ray and Sayer (1999) also claim that the border between culture and economy has become blurred, but they also stress that it is still there, since the concepts otherwise would have been synonymous, which they are clearly not. In most cases, the value of economy is instrumental while the value of culture is not. However, economy must always been understood as a part of culture since it is through cultural processes that it gains its values.

### **From interculturalism to diversity management**

As mentioned above, this sub-chapter deals with some of the most prominent currents within the field of intercultural communication and management strategies. The theories presented in the following serve a threefold purpose: to function as a cursory outline of the field, to be a source for analytical concepts and to form empirical material in the cases when being an internalized part of Living Institute’s curriculum.

The field of intercultural communication was founded in the 1950s by anthropologist Edward T. Hall, who developed theoretical and methodological frameworks for dealing with communication across national borders (Hall, 1973). Claiming that “There is no way to teach culture in the same way that language is taught”, (p. 25) he touches upon one of the core elements of our study—the processes of teaching and learning culture. He describes his own experience of teaching cultural science to people outside academia who were going overseas to work, often lacking the keen interest in culture he was used to from his anthropology students. Together with George L. Trager, this led him to start developing a new method for analyzing culture, which is by many considered the foundation for the intercultural communication field.

Following in the footsteps of Hall, Geert Hofstede and Fons Trompenaars are two of the most widely recognized theorists within the field of intercultural communication today, being prime representatives of the functionalist approach propagated against by Larsson (2010) and having little to do with the field anthropological roots. This becomes evident in categories

employed by Hofstede (2001) for representing differences in national cultures for a large number of countries<sup>3</sup>. According to Hofstede (2001) there are “five independent dimensions of national culture differences, each rooted in a basic problem with which all societies have to cope, but on which their answer vary” (p.29). The dimensions he has identified are: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity and long-term orientation versus short-term orientation. Hofstede (2001) argues “that there must be mechanisms in societies that permit the maintenance of stability in culture patterns across many generations” (p.11). He refers to “mental programs”, a type of conditioning that stays stable over time, learned in very early childhood and containing basic values (p.2).

Fons Trompenaars<sup>4</sup>, along with Charles Hampden-Turner (1998) has focused on cultural differences and what kind of impact these differences have on “processes of doing business and managing” (p.1). Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998) define culture as “the way in which a group of people solves problems and reconciles dilemmas” (p. 6). Their book presents the solutions that different cultures have on universal problems and from these solutions they have identified seven fundamental dimensions of culture, which are divided into categories, much in the same way as Hofstede uses his dimensions—i.e. to describe differences in national cultures, placing different cultures on a cultural scale according to scores they have gained through surveys.

While theories in intercultural communication seemingly focus on the cultural differences across the borders of nation states, emphasizing the meaning of nationality in social interaction, the strategy called diversity management instead spreads its focus to encompass other factors of cultural difference. According to Wrench (2007) diversity management is a relatively new management strategy that gained prominence in the European market during the early 1990s and has continued to play a vital role. It partly shares the same concerns with intercultural communication, striving to minimize cultural frictions in diverse workplaces. The theoretical framework is, however, very different. While intercultural communication focuses on cross-culturalism, national origin, misunderstandings and problems that might arise between individuals in business, diversity management is a strategy that not only takes the individuals’ needs into account, but aim to create policies and strategies on an organizational level (Wrench, 2007; Kandola & Fullerton, 1998).

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<sup>3</sup> For a more comprehensive summary of Hofstede’s theory, see Dahlén (1997).

<sup>4</sup> For a more comprehensive summary of Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner’s theory, see Dahlén (1997).

### Cultural analytical perspectives

Having given a theoretical outline of the field in which we operate, we are now going to introduce the tools we bring in order to “make sense” of it all. This thesis places itself within the cultural analytical tradition. In practice this means that not only is culture the object of study, but also the lens through which the field is viewed, meaning that different types of knowledge can be created by shifting between different perspectives. We approach culture in the same manner as Ehn and Löfgren (2001), treating it, fellowship and identity as multifaceted and fragmented concepts that are created and negotiated through different categories dependent on specific contexts, rather than as essential properties. Culture is not a rational, systematic and well thought out structure, but something which is renegotiated and fluctuating, often made visible through friction, conflicts, inconsistencies and paradoxes. Along the lines of the anthropologists Patricia Sunderland and Rita Denny (2007), we do not regard culture as something determinately tied to a group or a place, neither as a property “active” in some instances while dormant in others.

To create a clearer distinction between the etic, anthropological use of culture and the emic “layman’s” definition we will look to the ethnologist Magnus Öhlander (2005) who discusses the concept of culture and how it is used outside of the cultural sciences. According to him, there are three common categories for how the concept is put to use, all of which are interlinked and in many ways dependent on each other. The first is as a quality that one can possess, e.g. “being cultured” or “being refined”. The second is as something that one “does”, like literature, music, theatre and thus culture becomes more or less synonymous with art. The third definition of culture is as values and ideals that people gather round, i.e. that it is a quality shared by a certain group. Öhlander claims that all of these definitions are problematic since they treat culture as the result of a process, as an object. In essence this means that culture could exist without people, a notion that does not fit with the culture analytical perspective.

Since the empirical material on which this study will be based primarily consists of interviews, we have also chosen to employ analytical concepts from two theoretical traditions apt at catching the ways in which meanings are transferred through language: narrative and discourse analysis. These analytical methods focus in different ways on how language is used to convey meaning. The distinction that we are primarily going to employ here is that of Barbara Czarniawska (1998), making a distinction between the discourse and the conversation. The narrative is isolated in the former while it originates from actors or “speakers” in the latter. The first treats texts as entities unto themselves, while the second

treat texts as communicative action. Discourses are spread out and reoccurring while conversations are located in a specific place in space and time. The two perspectives are complementary with the discourse functioning as a repertoire for the conversation and the conversation as a developing medium for the discourse. The perspectives carry with them a further implication; not viewing language as a mere representation of the world but as constituting for social life. Therefore, the positions from where one can define the flow of discourse are positions of power (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2000).

When evaluating a pedagogic activity like the training that Living Institute provides, both a narrative approach and discourse analysis are useful since they can function as means to uncover how meanings are transferred between different contexts, keeping in mind that the relationship between experience and narrative isn't static; the narrative is shaped by the experience but at the same time it gives shape to it (Palmenfelt, 2000). However, since we do not wish to limit ourselves to studying the use of language, we will also employ a more experiential perspective. This becomes particularly important when turning the gaze to Living Institute's training session. The study of events like these are touched upon by both O'Dell (2005) and Ristilammi (2000), dealing with how different atmospheres and experiences are invoked in order to achieve certain results.

To create further understanding of how culture can be packaged, taught and sold, we have also chosen to use Pierre Bourdieu's capital metaphor, originally used to illustrate that economic capital merely is one of several factors affecting social class and the micro management of power. Besides monetary assets, individuals also possess cultural, social and symbolic capital, the possession of which can be used as means to display power, given the right context. Cultural capital can be embodied dispositions, objectified in shape of "cultural" possessions or institutionalized in the shape of education and the like (Skeggs, 1997). Social capital is manifested through social connection and belonging, while symbolic capital is the shape the other types of capital take once recognized and acknowledged; the point being that the different capitals not being "worth" anything until they are legitimized from a position of power (Bourdieu, 1999).



## Methodological approaches

*In this chapter we will discuss the research methods used for creating our empirical material along with the possibilities and limitations they present. We have performed a kind of “double ethnography”, putting focus on Living Institute and its clients in order to create a broad foundation for the forthcoming analysis.*

One of the main advantages of ethnography is that one can choose a research method best suited for examining the problem at hand. This is, however, an ideal situation and when performing fieldwork one has to be able to adapt to the rules of the specific context in which one operates. Ideally we would have performed participant observation of Living Institute's clients in order to gain a better understanding of what challenges they face in their day-to-day work and of how Living Institute can better address these issues. Alas, even with the help of Living Institute we were not able to establish contact with any informants who were willing to grant access to them for any longer period of time. As a result of this we are prevented from saying anything with certainty about how the informants put their newly gained knowledge to use, being limited to their narrated account of events.

Living Institute warned us from the start that their clients mainly work at the managerial level in international companies, making their schedules often extremely hectic and time scarce. With the help of Living Institute, we were able to establish contact with six former clients who gladly participated in our study, a diverse group containing both Danes and foreign expatriates who had all received different kinds of training. The amount of time they were able to spend with us varied, resulting in some of the informant's voices appearing “louder” than others throughout this thesis.

The scope of the study is limited by two factors: Time and access. The first is self evident. The second is a consequence of the field in which we operate: We were completely dependent on Living Institute when recruiting informants. Although we did have a say in who we thought would be rewarding informants, we were restricted by the sample that was presented to us by Living Institute. Naturally, this limits the empirical material and the different perspectives on Living Institute and their education to a few voices that the company itself has judged to be interesting and/or accessible, something which must be taken into consideration when viewing the results of this study. It stands to reason that former clients willing to spend their time by sharing experiences and opinions on Living Institute will not be entirely negative toward the company and the training. Hopefully, the evaluation genre in

which we write led the clients to give clear and sincere answers. It is also hard to imagine them wanting to waste their time by not sharing their honest opinions.

The interviews performed can be described as “semi-structured”—using a specific set of questions as base for an open-ended conversation, allowing us to control the conversation while not controlling the informant. The main advantage of the semi-structured interview is that it allows for flexibility while it at the same time lets you keep your “eyes on the prize”. This kind of interview is best suited for situations when you are looking for empirical testimony from an individual perspective (Fägerborg, 1999, p. 55). We strove to ask the kind of questions that encourage the informant to “narrate” rather than “answer”, allowing the informant to put focus on what they found to be important, not reducing them to being mere objects for us to study. Another benefit of this interview technique is that leading questions are less of a concern since it is harder for the researcher to have the “correct answer” in mind beforehand (Arnstberg, 1997, p. 90). Because nearly all interview situations had a rather strict time limit, the interviews were relatively focused on the informant’s story, with us asking questions, striving to make them recall specific memories in relation to Living Institute and the problems that led them to contact the company. While being open with the purpose of the research project, we were deliberately vague when describing our research questions as suggested by Davies (2008), since we did not want the informants to focus too much on the culture concept itself, but rather to the ways it was put to use in their everyday lives. To be able to listen more actively and ask relevant follow-up questions, we used a digital recorder.

While an ethnographer always must be wary of the power relations that are active during an interview, being careful not to exploit the informant, this did not seem to be an issue of great importance for this study. In the meeting with the informants both our roles were clearly defined. Though we were met with nothing but smiles, it was clear we were the ones who had been granted an audience and not the other way around. We; rather young ethnographers writing our master’s thesis. They; aged 30 to 50 with long professional careers behind them and high positions in their respective companies. The fact that we worked as a pair for nearly all of the interviews proved to be a good strategy for dealing with what potentially could have been a rather intimidating situation. We did, however, manage to establish meaningful conversations with all informants and several of them claimed they felt it had been a good opportunity for them to reflect on their own situation and on the training they had received from Living Institute. One example of this was Valerie who seemed to be quite disappointed when she, after more than two hours, had to break off the interview in order make an important business call.

To be able to create a rich empirical material and to contextualize the information gathered through the interviews with Living Institute's clients, we also chose to perform a series of interviews with the people working in the company. All in all we performed five interviews; one with Living Institute's founder and managing director, one with the senior consultant, the anthropologist responsible for most of the training, and three with consultants who have worked with the company on different occasions. These interviews were more "informative" in nature, focusing on the history, practice and ideals of the company, but they also gave us an opportunity to delve deeper into the culture of Living Institute, helping us understand how to best direct our message to the company. To further gain an understanding of the company's method we also attended a number of training sessions as participant observers, with the goal to gain complementary knowledge of the practices that make up Living Institute, not limiting ourselves to studying idealized narratives. As pointed out by Öhlander (1999), this kind of direct observation can function as a great complement to interviews since they present the opportunity to catch un-reflected actions and discrepancies between that which was narrated and what was actually performed, as well as data that not easily can be put into words. This also gave us a better understanding for the stories of the clients and helped us ask more competent and better-informed questions in the following interviews. These observations were kept relatively open, trying not only to catch what was told by Living Institute, but also how the training was performed and what kind of atmosphere and emotions were invoked during the sessions.

## **Informant portraits**

*We will now introduce our primary informants, consisting of former clients of Living Institute. We do this so that the reader may gain better understanding of their experiences, perceptions and lives. The group contains both Danish and foreign knowledge workers, living in Denmark permanently or on a short-term basis. As most of the Living Institute's clients, they work at the managerial level in a wide variety of different branches. In their everyday work they may encounter many situations with potential for cultural friction, such as having employees and colleagues in different countries, traveling frequently as part of the job, operating in a multicultural working environment or as an expatriate in Denmark.*

### **Manfred: Ex-pat veteran**

Manfred is in his early forties and he has been working in the international “hamster-roll”, as he calls it, since he was nineteen. After finishing high school, Manfred started working for a health care company in his native homeland, Germany. He was part of a three-year internal education program where he got paid while studying and as a part of this education he soon received his first expatriate assignment. Manfred remained with the German company for ten years and then went on to work for a Swiss company for nine years. During this time he has lived and worked in the UK, the US, Germany, Austria, Chile, Colombia and Mexico. He has lived in some of the countries more than once and isn't really sure if he has made ten or eleven moves between different countries and jobs.

In 1995 he met his current wife in Colombia and she has since stayed with him throughout his many relocations, until the most current one. Manfred had just finished an assignment and the couple had decided to settle down for a while, moving to Colombia with their two children. However, it did not take long before Manfred was headhunted by a global search company for an executive position in global marketing in the Danish life-science company HumanCare. He decided to take the job, but he and his wife decided that she would stay in Colombia with the children. He moved to Denmark in August 2009 and explains it has been hard to be separated from his family. However, he was pleasantly surprised by the level of understanding for his situation that he received from his new employer and he has been able to make frequent trips to Colombia. Soon however, Manfred's family will be moving “here”, that is, to Barcelona. He explains that he will be in Copenhagen during the weeks and in Barcelona during the weekends. Going from door to door will only take him four hours and taking a flight is like taking a bus to him, he explains with a laugh. When Manfred first came to Denmark the HR department in HumanCare recommended he attend Living Institute's Danish

Living Crash Course. He planned to take the course on several occasions, but because of a busy schedule he kept postponing it. When he finally took the course he had been in Denmark for more than six months and he had already run into several problems and challenges, both professionally and in his personal life.

### **Thomas: Goal-oriented business culturalist**

Thomas works at the managerial level in Microcator, a division of a larger international company, exclusively working with the outsourcing of IT-services. Customers in Denmark delegate some of their functions to Microcator, which then apply different outsourcing models depending on the client's needs. In many cases outsourcing like this means that Microcator takes over the existing resources from the client and replaces some of them with offshore resources. Microcator has employees in both Denmark and Asia that work together in the same development teams. The company is implementing a rotation plan where a small group of Asian employees work on site in Denmark in order to strengthen the collaboration with the overseas teams. Thomas has worked for Microcator for four months and seems very devoted and enthusiastic when it comes to developing the operations, especially the rotation plan described above, and has played an essential role in developing it. Thomas is self-taught in the field of information technology and he has worked in different settings within the business for more than 20 years. He has worked internationally for roughly ten years and has, among others places, been stationed in the US and Italy, something he finds to have improved his cultural competence:

Thomas: "I was the only Danish guy working in this Italian IT-company so I really felt in my own body how it feels to be the only one. Working in the US gave me at least very good sense of working with different cultures and different people and I really liked that and the diversity of people in general so I think that is some of the things that I can make use of today working with offshore people."

Thomas is an experienced business traveler who has traveled a lot. He has tired of the ordinary pattern of business trips, which for him only means spending time in another airport, sleeping in another hotel and catching another taxi, albeit in another country. For him it has lost all sense of adventure. He thinks that he has made all the common mistakes business traveler can, which for him includes the need to know everything about the destination, something which he simply does not have time for anymore. By taking the course he hoped to gain knowledge about how to avoid the most basic problems when interacting with his Asian business partners, both offshore and in Denmark.

**Anne: Born to be interculturalist**

Anne has an ideal background for working internationally. She is multilingual, born in England and raised in Denmark. During her studies she spent one year in Australia and later she has worked in the US as well as in Switzerland. She now works for an international company in the field of health care called Nordhealth. The company is represented worldwide in more than 70 countries, but has its main divisions in Denmark and the US. Since the company has worked to achieve a more global presence in the last two years, its research and development operations have been revised. During this process the Danish office became the headquarters and some of the functions earlier located in the US have been transferred to Denmark, which led to trust issues and communication problems between the two divisions.

Anne manages a global team of experts situated in a number of different countries, such as the US, Japan, China and Denmark. She meets her Danish colleagues and employees in her daily work and the rest she meets in global meetings twice a year, as well as on her frequent business trips to both the East and West. Her daily routine reflects this, since when she wakes up in the morning she starts her day with the e-mails from the East and ends her workday at home in the evening with e-mails from the West—there is a nine-hour time difference in both directions.

**Valerie: Cultural denier**

Valerie works for multinational company as head of an international group of finance experts, being responsible for employees in Denmark, as well as in the US, China and Italy. Valerie is from Austria and has worked and lived there for most of her life. When she moved to Denmark, she had international work environment experience since she had worked as head of an international business unit in her home country. Her first expatriate assignment was a half-year period that she spent in China. She describes this as her first “real” international experience, spending a longer period in another culture and it was also the first time she really felt like a stranger among other people:

Valerie: “I was never thinking that I could experience something like this. It was really strange feeling like a stranger, like an alien somewhere.”

Valerie relocated to Denmark one and half years ago. Early on she faced problems in both her private and professional life for various reasons. As a result of her experiences in the international work field and participation to the Danish Living Crash Course, she has

developed a denying attitude towards culture as an influential factor in human interaction. For Valerie differences in human behavior are caused by differences in people's personalities, having recently decided that *culture does not matter*.

### **Diane: Cultural agent**

Diane works as a human resource manager for QualityHelp, a firm delivering services to other companies. While the firm does not operate in the transnational market, nearly fifty percent of its total number of employees has immigrant background, ranging up to ninety percent in some locations. Diane is responsible for recruitment as well as courses and training offered to the staff. She is very interested in issues of cultural awareness, diversity and equality and has taken on a leading role in promoting these issues within the company. Her reason for contacting Living Institute was that one of the departments with a high number of "new Danish" employees, the term she prefers to use, had problems with managers not knowing how to manage their multicultural teams.

Diane found out about Living Institute from her supervisor, who had decided QualityHelp should buy a workshop from the company. Diane ordered a one-hour workshop on cultural awareness, which was to be held at several of the department meetings in QualityHelp. In total three workshops were held for different audiences, including the managers and some of the company's directors.

### **Doris: Mini-anthropologist**

Doris works as a manager for an international group of experts in an international health care company HealthAid, which produces medical and pharmaceutical products for a worldwide market. She speaks very highly of her company's values and culture, which she finds very easy to relate to. Doris started her career within the company in South America and relocated to Denmark two years ago. She was born in Africa, but grew up in South America, so her family has a history of moving a lot. She highly appreciates the Danish management style at HealthAid and she picked Denmark out of a number of possible relocation destinations, such as France, China, the US and Brazil. Her decision was influenced by her first visit to Denmark some years ago, a visit that lasted three months. She describes it as an important learning process, where she experienced first hand the difficulties of moving to another country to work.

Doris: "I said I do not want to come here. I want to go home. I was just looking forward those three months to go home, but at the same time I think after my second month and when I was on my third month I started to understand a little bit more and trying to understand why things were the way they were so I always had in mind to ask the questions 'Why?', instead of criticizing and saying 'This is stupid, I don't like this' or blahblahblah, so I just try always say 'But why is it like that?' and then I try to understand their culture and why they work as they work. It makes it easier to accept or not, at least to understand."

This shows a great deal of reflexivity and an awareness of her own cultural awareness. In a way, Doris is like a mini-anthropologist observing, interpreting and trying to understand the behavior and environment that surround her. Her main motivation when choosing Denmark was to become a better professional by learning from the Danish work style and business practice. Doris attended the Danish Living Crash Course after being in Denmark for more than six months. She found out about the company from a friend, whom she attended the course with. Before she took the course she had been to Denmark on two separate occasions and had experienced a number of situations that really annoyed her and that she would like to know more about.



## Cultural goods

*Having introduced our aim, our methodological approaches, the theoretical traditions on which we build along the main characters of our study, Living Institute and its clients, we will now commence our analysis, plunging head first into “A day at the Crash Course”, a sub-chapter aiming to give the reader a feeling for the shape and form in which the company delivers cultural knowledge. This is followed by another four sub-chapters, all delving deeper into different aspects of Living Institute and its products. In “The whole package” we will examine the ideals, theoretical foundations and practices that the company is built around, looking to how they affect the relationship to the clients. In “Raising cultural consciousness” we will deal with the strategies employed by the company to create cultural awareness in its clients. In “The Edutainer” we explore how the company’s products balance between theoretical depth and entertaining adventure. Finally, in “Danes – the way they are”, we will map out the way in which the company uses a specific cultural narrative, that of the Danes, in order to convey a message.*

### A day at the Crash Course

We were able to attend training sessions given by Living Institute on three separate occasions. Our goal when attending the courses was to gain a feeling for the practice of the company, the handiwork so to speak. To give the reader a better grasp of what it is that Living Institute actually *does*, we will here recount a day spent at a Danish Living Crash Course. We have chosen to do this in order to move beyond that which is narrated by the company’s representatives and clients, touching upon the unreflected and ephemeral aspects of the training session. If all Living Institute did was to deliver “cultural knowledge” a book could have sufficed. Since this is not the case it becomes essential to examine the shape in which knowledge is presented, looking at the product in its entirety and not only at its discursive content.

The course was held in a Conference Centre close to Christianshavn in central Copenhagen, a location frequently used by Living Institute for this purpose. The Centre is quite flashy, being housed in an old harbour building, right next to the water, combining the historical architecture with modern design, merging old wooden beams and columns with clean, white surfaces. The conference room in which the course was held was dominated by a large, black table with a projection screen at the one short side; the domain of the senior consultant, who led the training session. At each chair around the table a binder was placed, containing the program for the day, contact information for all the participants, the Powerpoint slides displayed during the session as well as a number of exercises and a future

action plan. The binder and its contents were elegantly designed, just like the surrounding environment. During this particular session there were four participants, all from different companies and countries. According to the representative from Living Institute, this was an unusually low number of attendants, which made it possible for each to ask more questions than what is ordinarily possible. Other than this, it was a quite a typical Crash Course, including all the ordinary elements, according to the senior consultant.

Starting at 9 a.m. the course went on until 5 p.m., with a one hour lunch break where the participants and the consultant ate together. It started off with the senior consultant presenting himself and “the package” that he was to deliver to the participants during the day and how it related to what Living Institute usually does. He was careful in pointing out that the company’s claims are based on researched knowledge and scientific tradition, not on mere individual experiences. He further cemented his scientific authority by telling the participants that he could give them references if they wanted to read more and during the duration of the day he frequently used terms like “this is a sociological fact”, which helped maintain a scientific air. The senior consultant was very charismatic and convincing and he seemingly had answers to all of the participants’ questions, even though he often strived to help them come up with the answers themselves, rather than delivering simple solutions to complex cultural issues. He constantly struggled with keeping the right order on the matters that were to be discussed, guaranteeing the inquisitive participants that all their questions about what they should do in certain situations or why Danes do as they do would become apparent later.

Once the program of the day had been presented, the participants were asked to introduce themselves to each other, everyone getting plenty of time to tell their own story and why they were attending the course. They were then asked about what their expectations for the day were and their answers concerned both private and professional matters. The friendly and open atmosphere was kept throughout the day and the participants were constantly encouraged to speak their minds, share their own experiences and ask questions. Two of the participants had only been in Denmark for four weeks, while the two others had been there for roughly six months. The senior consultant explained that four weeks in Denmark is a perfect amount of time for someone to attend the course, but that some who take it have been in the country for a year, while others have just come off the plane. He continued to claim everything is new and exciting when arriving to a new country, a “honeymoon” of sorts, and that it takes a little while for problems to emerge. People who wait too long before attending the training might on the other hand encounter so many problems that they might lose their patience and just want to go home instead.

Once the lecture started for “real” the senior consultant started flipping through Powerpoint slides, rather quickly, presenting anthropology and the tradition of studying cultures. The slides themselves had little information, some consisting of bullet points while others only contained headlines and pictures. Some contained graphs and diagrams, mostly used to illustrate extreme differences in statistics when it comes to Denmark in relation to the rest of the world. Some pictures were “funny” and clearly intended to make the participants smile. An early slide contained a clip from the movie *Borat*, where the main character arrives to the US and breaks a great number of cultural norms upon entering the airport, much to the amusement of the participants. This was then used as a conversation starter, getting the participants to discuss what they had seen, what they thought happened and how situations of cultural confusion can lead to feelings of insecurity and anxiety. The senior consultant stressed that trust is important when it comes to acceptance and that people create trust by sharing cultural behavior. When cultural patterns are broken, trust is lost and people become suspicious of each other. He pointed to that it was not long ago that we were living on the savannah in Africa and that our brains have yet to develop to the multitude of cultures that exist in the global world. Back then humans needed to be able to trust in order to survive and in a way we are still like that, which makes a global world with many unknown environments problematic.

He went on to demarcate what culture “is”. One of the ways he did this was by asking the participants when they stop saying “good morning”. They all had clear, but different conceptions of this. The senior consultant then pointed out that we know the answer, but that we do not know why we stop saying it at a certain time of the day and that saying it in the wrong place at the wrong time might have unforeseen consequences. One of the participants claimed that he kept saying “good morning” until noon, something which some Danes, being the sarcastic people that they are, might interpret as implying that they are late for work. The senior consultant warned the participants of asking people “why” they are doing things, since traditions and habits often are un-reflected. Asking “why” only reminds people of this and might embarrass them. Instead the participants were encouraged to ask about what happens in certain situations, letting the “natives” explain to them in their own words. The senior consultant concluded that culture is not rational and that they need to understand that if they are going to be able to live in a foreign country for an extended period of time. At the same time they should not be afraid to address cultural issues. He told them that they are allowed to try to change the behavior of their Danish co-workers in case it interferes with the business

goals, but he also stressed choosing their battles carefully and not confronting every cultural issue faced since it would be too exhausting and frustrating.

After the initial presentation of cultural awareness the participants were told to look in the back of their binders, where there was a text describing a number of real “case stories” about cultural misunderstandings. They read and then discussed what they thought the problem was. The senior consultant pitched in, explaining certain behaviors and contradictory statements. The course continued with the participants discussing the cultural clashes and differences they themselves had encountered during their time in Denmark. Some of the things that came up were the need for consensus, conflict avoidance, strong division between work and personal life, relaxed attitude, trust, “hygge” and healthy lifestyle. The senior consultant reminded them to look at what they were comparing against, what it is that makes these things stand out as different, thus shedding some light on their own cultural habits. He then asked them to once again look in the back of their binders for an “action plan”, something that they could take home and work actively with to change their behavior. The action plan consisted of three fields: positives and negatives of the current situation, what to do about it and the dream scenario. They were then asked to fill in the first and last field, i.e. what their current situation was like and what they would like it to be in the best of worlds. They then got to present what they had written. Most of the dream scenarios were personal, like getting personal contact, learning to speak Danish and generally not feeling alienated.

After lunch the focus was placed on Danish history or, more specifically, parts of Danish history that the senior consultant claimed to have influence on the Danish mentality today. He went on to speak about Denmark: as a very old country; that used to be very big but now is very small; that religion has never been extremely important; that all social revolutions were nonviolent; that has been invaded by the Germans two times in recent history; and that there is a tradition of collective ownership. All these factors he turned into arrows pointing at the Danish characteristics that had previously been mentioned. He continued by recounting about Danish society today, moving more and more into the world of business, answering many of the questions posed by the participants. The issue of trust was central in his argument and he claimed that trust is the foundation of the way that Danish society works. In several occasions he said something general about the Danes only to add the opposite, e.g. “The Danes are great at working in groups, but they are also very individualistic”—constantly being careful of not painting an overtly stereotypical image of the Danes. The participants were allowed to get more “hands on” with their questions and the senior consultant gave more direct answers and suggestions.

At the end of the day the participants were once again asked to pick up their action plans and fill in the second field, “what to do”, using the knowledge they had accumulated during the day to map a way from their current situation to their dream scenario, with the senior consultant pitching in with suggestions. The session ended with the senior consultant handing out evaluation forms and telling the participants that he’d be happy to come out to their companies and speak if need be—for pay, naturally. When the forms were filled out everybody got up, shook hands and said good bye.

### The whole package

Senior consultant: “/.../ but I think still that our method is quite unique... I think, but I have no idea, it’s just a feeling I have and sometimes something I hear from the others, the other, some of our clients who’ve been to one of those courses and say ‘you are so it completely different’, what we see there is some very schematic thing about the ‘others’, ‘that’s how they are in Asia or China’, but the idea of cultural understanding is neglected. For us it’s a package and it’s very important for us to keep it as a package.”

According to the managing director of Living Institute the company was the first mover on the Danish cross-cultural communication market and even though a few competitors have emerged since the company was founded, both the Director and the senior consultant pride themselves on having a unique and superior product. The company puts emphasis on finding the most knowledgeable persons to work as external consultants in order to provide different perspectives in the education they deliver, as well as keeping up to date with the most recent developments in the field of intercultural communication. What really sets the company apart however is the anthropological perspective added by the senior consultant, who uses Living Institute as part of his personal agenda to popularize anthropology and put it to use outside of academia. He reasons that intercultural communication training only gives someone the mere basics for operating in a foreign culture and interacting with “others”, which might be enough to survive, but hardly to live. Just teaching “the basics” is already done by the company’s competitors and the bare minimum does not fit with his and the managing director’s idea of high quality. Instead, Living Institute strives to convey a more anthropologically flavored understanding of culture, encouraging the clients to be curious about the “others” they may encounter and try to understand why they are acting “differently” instead of dismissing them as weird or stupid. However, since they are operating within a business context, he often points out that the clients are allowed to change the “others” they work with in case their behavior conflicts with the business goal. In that case, a deeper cultural awareness can help the client understand what battles to fight and when to let go.

There is a strong ambition within Living Institute to keep the education true to its scientific roots and not “cheapen” the message. What the company strives to deliver is cultural awareness and not simple answers about “how people are” in different parts of the world. Because of this, both the managing director and the senior consultant express reluctance toward arranging courses where they do not have sufficient time for delivering “the whole package”:

Managing director: “When we were at Intertell I promised myself for 50th time that I will never do this again. When we have an hour and half to tell 50 to 60 people about cultural awareness, ‘Why Danes are weird’ or whatever, and then knowing that we didn’t even scratch the surface, but when we say good bye to the sponsor, the person who bought the hour and hired us, I can hear that she says ‘This was great, good bye,’ and for me we didn’t even start yet and I keep promising to myself not to do this.”

Another concrete manifestation of this is that the Living Crash Course always starts with a thorough lecture on cultural awareness, to the extent that the course leader avoids answering specific questions about Danish culture until the part on cultural awareness is done, as mentioned above, all to prepare the participants and make them realize that there are no easy answers. The company uses three steps (see figure 1) for conveying their message to the clients, the first being to promote “cultural awareness”, i.e. an understanding for what culture is and why it matters to them.

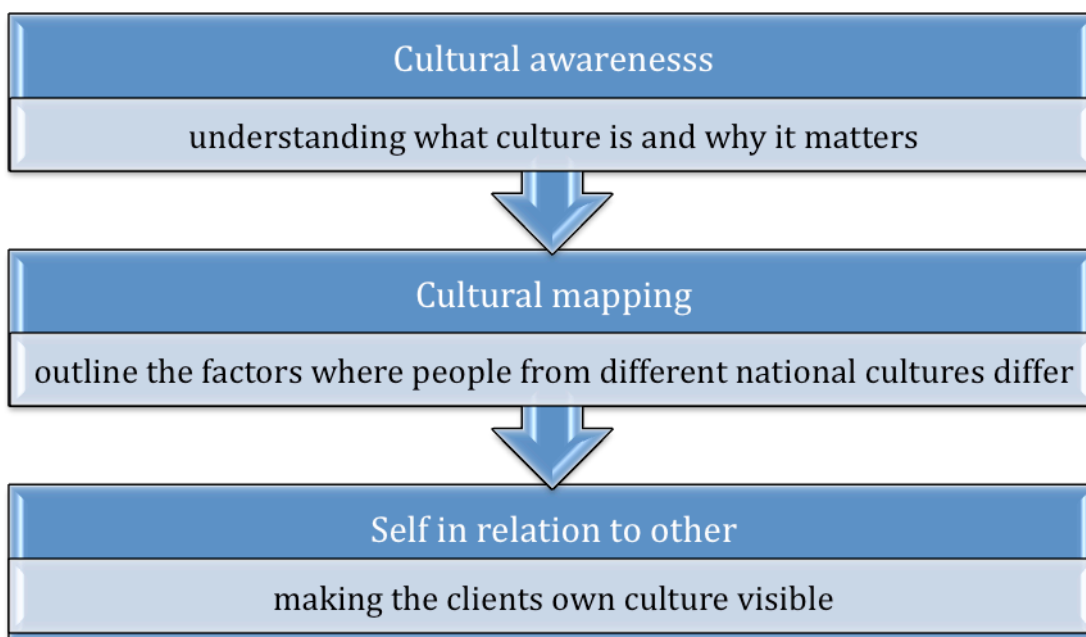


Figure 1. Three steps to cultural awareness

The second step is called “cultural mapping”, wherein focus is put on the ways in which people tend to differ and cultural issues that are of significance to the client, pointing out “the differences that make a difference”, as the senior consultant puts it. Here interculturalists such as Hofstede and Trompenaars play a more active role, their categories of cultural difference serving as a way to illustrate cultural variety. The third and final step aims to help the clients question and explore their own culture, thus making them aware that culture is not just something that “others” carry and that what one carries with oneself inevitably colors cultural encounters. Thus Living Institute combines what Hofstede (2001) calls the *culture-specific* and *culture-general* approaches, dealing with both information about specific “target” cultures and cultural awareness in a broader sense. The claim that this combination is a necessity plays a central role in the company’s narrative, since the former is seen as useless without the latter. It functions a “nodal point” of sorts; an idea around which the Living Institute’s cultural narrative is constructed and which this discourse strives to uphold as true (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2000, p. 33).

The anthropological perspective, scientific validity and high quality are concepts that are explicitly held in high regard within the company, functioning as key symbols around which the ephemeral products can be constructed. The senior consultant describes the goal as turning all of their clients into “small anthropologists”, making them systematically inquisitive and curious when facing cultural frictions. A good example of this approach is Doris who seems to fully have embraced this ideology. She constantly strives to understand rather than explain and as a result she often compares events she experiences in Denmark to what she is used to from her home country, weighing and comparing different approaches. She has gone on to not only being analytical about her own life but also helping her expatriate friends:

Doris: “Then she asked the person ‘Would you like me to take something? What should I take?’, then she looked at the person ‘What do you mean, what should you take?’, ‘Yeah, should I take some fruits or something to prepare the pizza?’, and the other person ‘No, only you’, ‘But are you sure? I can take something, there is no problem’, ‘Did you hear me? It’s only you’, then I looked at her when she was telling me this story later, I said, ‘Ah-ah, you did all wrong! You should not do that, a person invited you. It’s because she wants you to be there at her place and she is offering. She will prepare everything for you. You don’t need to ask if you need to take anything. If she wants you to take anything she will tell you’/.../ It’s nice because we can talk to each other and exchange and how we think and what is behind that so that’s why I always say ‘Why is the question’, so when you understand the person is inviting you and it’s her pleasure to have you at home to prepare the dinner for you, so that’s something nice.”

Some of the clients had received cross-cultural training previously from other companies and they were thus able to compare their previous experiences to the training received from Living Institute. In all cases, the company represents a better alternative and the training they had received before compares badly to that of Living Institute. One of the informants had participated in so many courses that he could not really specify their nature. One informant described courses that were not that successful as “lectures with nice pictures”, yet another one described the one that she had attended as “more irritating to me” and she concluded that she could have gotten the same information from Google.

The conviction to deliver “the whole package” might however put Living Institute at odds with their clients. It is far from everyone who has taken the message to heart to the same degree as Doris. Many of the clients are extremely busy people, as already mentioned, taking a course to solve concrete problems they have faced in their work. Even though all of the clients interviewed appreciate the complexity of the training some have complaints regarding the lack of focus on business issues:

Thomas: “Maybe I would have liked to have a little bit more business related. I really can’t put my finger on, it was not that business oriented that I expected, like how do you negotiate or how do you get along the things when people keep on saying ‘yes’ when they mean ‘no’ and how do you actually, if you want to do this, you are going there and you want to implement a new thing and it is against something and it is against their culture, it is against something and they will just not eat it, so how do you do that like small things because it is different and it is difficult. That could be nice to have.”

Manfred: “I think the way the day is structured you can re-assess to make it more worthwhile for the participant. What happened is that during the whole morning the consultant would say ‘We’ll get back to it. We’ll get back to it. Let’s park this. We’ll discuss later, we’ll discuss later.’ I think you’re better off to open up the day with the stereotype Dane and you do this for thirty, forty-five minutes just, you know, “This is how we are, this is how we are’/.../ If you just started off saying “This is the Dane’ and then you complete with the history piece and then this and this and this, I think it would be a little more effective and this way you get around this ‘We’ll get back to it, we’ll get back to it’, but over-all I think it was a good structured day.”

Living Institute’s clients do not always see the importance of the cultural awareness training. They often approach the issue from their own perspective, looking for knowledge and tools that are quick and easy to access, delivered in a language familiar to them. Simple tools for business and structure are both highly valued and sought after and thus some of the clients express a mild frustration because of the extensive scope of Living Institute’s training. The question then becomes who benefits from the focus on delivering cultural awareness, instead



of quick answers. Living Institute claims it is in the clients' best interest, regardless what they think themselves. One can however not overlook the purpose the narrative conveying these values serve as a foundation for a company culture and corporate identity, profiling Living Institute against its competitors. According to Czarniawska (1998) it is important to turn the narrative perspective to an organization in this way in order to understand how knowing and communicating takes place within it. In the case of Living Institute the "knowing" is of particular interest, since it serves a foundation for teaching, something we will return to later. For now, let us keep our focus on the concept of cultural awareness as we go on to discuss one of the company's main strategies for making culture's significance visible to the client.

### Raising cultural consciousness

Senior consultant: "There is so much taboo around culture, that people feel that they are not allowed to address it or say something about it. I usually use that old picture of the elephant in the room that everyone knows is there but you can't talk about it. You can feel it, you can smell it and see it, but everyone is just pretending that it's not there, you need to get beyond that. You need to be able to feel that it's all right to address and talk about culture and see when it's there and also sometimes question it."

As we have already mentioned; a large part of Living Institute's training revolves around helping the clients realize the ways in which culture matters. Since simply telling the clients that culture plays an important role in day-to-day dealings would not suffice, the company actively puts the clients' own experiences to work, encouraging them to share with each other and Living Institute through narrating their own views on culture and cultural problems they have faced. This becomes most apparent during the Living Crash Courses since the full focus is turned to the expatriates' living conditions in a new culture. Even though it is not explicitly stated by Living Institute, this process can be interpreted as a form of "consciousness raising"; a concept that is an organizational form as well as a political theory and an analytical tool, originally developed within the United States' feminist movement in the 1970s.

Consciousness raising traditionally was a feminist method where the participants would gather and share their experiences of gendered oppression. Even though the sharing of experiences might have a therapeutic effect for the participants, this is not the point of consciousness raising. Instead, the goal is to create a greater awareness of the individual's place within a certain group and in society as a whole. By sharing stories about oppression, the participants would be able to see that what they had experienced were not isolated, personal incidents but parts of a larger oppressing structure—and by defining the problem a

more effective movement for change could be mobilized. Thus personal experience was transformed into a political issue and the individual became part of a collective (Gemzöe, 2003; MacKinnon, 1982).

While it might not be relevant to speak about “oppression” when it comes to the problems the Living Institute’s clients face, one can clearly draw parallels between consciousness raising and the way in which the company strives to create cultural awareness. By encouraging the clients to share their experiences and thoughts on being in a new culture or country, Living Institute can turn the participants’ attention to the ways in which culture affects their lives. This often involves challenging the clients’ view of themselves as “normal”, making their own culture visible to them, helping them move from “this is just normal” to “oh, this is actually specific behavior that could just as well be completely different if I was brought up in a different environment”, as the senior consultant puts it. During the training sessions that were observed, the participants were actively encouraged to speak their minds, share experiences and ask questions. Anecdotes about cultural frictions were frequently used by the senior consultant to illustrate problems or to serve as a starting point for the clients in order for them to share their experiences on a similar topic. The participants were asked to discuss, analyze, list and compare different empirical cases on several occasions during training sessions. One result of this was that the clients start to share their experiences on similar events and situations that they have experienced, even when not explicitly asked. Thus individual narratives the clients share with each other become part of Living Institute’s greater narrative and the problems or challenges that they narrate are molded into a cultural shape. What the individual has experienced is not an isolated incident, but part of a greater structure, i.e. culture. Thus the training sessions serve as a framing device of sorts, putting the everyday experiences in a frame defined by Living Institute as culture. This is a way for the company to exert discursive power by using scientific authority, claiming the right to interpret individual experience.

However, there is naturally no guarantee that the clients will interpret their own experiences as proof of validity in Living Institute’s narrative. There is always a risk that experiences are framed in another way, forming a discursive resistance—something Valerie does on several occasions. She has chosen personality as the primary frame for understanding behavior, thus she does not feel her experiences fit the narrative presented by Living Institute, even though the company might still use her experiences as a tool for raising cultural awareness. According to ethnologist Per-Markku Ristilampi (2000) it is of little importance whether the participants at an event are critical or not since their presence in itself is enough

to sanction the event. One could go so far as to argue this kind of resistance has little direct relevance for Living Institute since the presence of the client does in itself confirm the presence of culture, or at least of some kind of problem that the clients have no means of solving. The clients are representatives of cultural problems merely by being present.

While the consciousness raising process allows the clients' narratives to become part of a greater cultural narrative defined by Living Institute, they simultaneously shape the company's organizational narrative. Living Institute uses its clients' stories as a way to put flesh on to theoretical bones, to adjust the narration to the listeners and as a way to gather further evidence for the validity of their claim:

Senior consultant: "When I started out, what I did was that I was really look in to the classics, all the anthropological classics, and all the cultural understanding I've learned there and all the examples from fieldworks in Africa and that sort of stuff, but afterwards I just got so many examples from business life that basically told the same stories but with other examples and just with other issues, so I used that information in my example giving and I just chucked away the theoretical stuff /.../ So, the more experience of working with people in business life and their agendas has really changed the format and the contents."

In a sense, the courses serve as a form of fieldwork where Living Institute is able to gather empirical material to further develop the education it delivers. One should also consider the air of authenticity that the use of examples from "real life" gives to the training sessions, letting short anecdotes illustrate a certain problem or serve as a basis for a discussion. By instigating a cultural conversation, Living Institute wants to encourage the clients to keep talking about culture after the training, keeping awareness alive and spreading it to other people in the work place. The analytical process is started through speech and it is by "talking about the elephant" that the clients are supposed to begin a cultural analysis of their own. The presence of "cultural experiences" thus makes the training more efficient; the more examples the participants themselves have, the more concrete examples of culture's effects can be given:

Doris: "Something I couldn't understand and I was very angry about them and then when I went to the Living Institute and we did this whole day course, my friend, I did it with a friend as well, South American, and we were the ones that had the most time in that group in Denmark and we could see that it was much more benefit for the both of us because we were asking questions all the time, we had examples and we were just keen to extract whatever we could get from him, so we had a lot of things to discuss /.../"

In practice, this can seem a bit contradictory since this, for example, would mean the foreign expatriate should wait before attending the Danish Living Crash Course, gaining valuable “cultural experiences” by running into problems in their everyday lives. The inexperienced client who has yet to make his or her mistakes might avoid some of them by attending a training session, but would potentially not be conscious about them in the same way, making the lesson invisible to him/her. The sharing of cultural experiences is also hugely dependent on the participants’ willingness to talk about the frictions they have encountered. Considering that experiences like these might be of a very personal nature, often revolving around potentially embarrassing mishaps in social interactions, this is hardly something one can take for granted. The challenge for Living Institute thus becomes to create an environment that encourages the clients to share, which we will explore further in the following chapter.

### The Edutainer

Closely related to the company’s ideal of creating an open and welcoming atmosphere during their training sessions to facilitate sharing experiences, is the idea that the training should be fun and entertaining. In the training sessions we observed a number of strategies were used to create “fun”, ranging from telling small jokes about Danish peculiarities to showing clips from the movie *Borat*, exemplifying cultural friction through the Kazak main character’s chaotic arrival in New York. However, the entertaining aspects are tightly intertwined with scientific reasoning and reference, in order to prove certain points or to serve as a basis for further discussion within the group. Naturally, not every little joke serves an analytical purpose, but they help create an atmosphere of friendliness where the participants feel free to speak their minds. One of the consultants who have worked with Living Institute on a few occasions gives an example of how exercises can be made entertaining at the same time as they are thought-provoking:

“Basically the group gets split into two, /.../, I think we had 30 people, so half of them stayed inside the room with the managing director and the other half came out with me into the hallway, so closed off from one another. The group inside with the managing director is told ‘All right, we’re gonna form a receiving line, and we’re gonna act like we’re meeting the queen and this is gonna be very, very formal and we’re gonna be very, very serious and try not to break our composure’. With my group, I’m telling them ‘All right, we’re gonna go in and they are gonna be on a line and we are gonna go up and shake their hands, but I want you to do something when you shake their hands’ (*She shakes the authors’ hand and tickles them in the palm with one finger*) /.../ So, this is sort of the plan, you know, some people are gonna get it and some people aren’t and so I started, there was a circle, and so I gave

the handshake to one person and then I said 'Pass it around to everyone else' and they can't see what you're doing with your hands when you do this handshake so everybody just starts laughing when they go around in this circle, passing on the handshake and what it means is 'I want to sleep with you' /.../ It's basically bar culture and later when we were talking about it one of the women said 'Yeah, you know, I haven't had that kind of thing happened to me since I was nineteen going at the bars in college' /.../ So the point of the exercise is: How did you adapt your behavior? If you knew what it meant and you knew you had to pass this on to somebody, did you change somehow? Did you smile at them in a certain way to let them know that this was a joke coming up? And for those who didn't get it and had to pass it on, you know, did you try to act like it was funny even though you didn't think it was? So the whole conversation then opened up and became... this is how things happen with cultural awareness. There may be a custom that you do not understand but you have to think fast. How am I gonna react? If I laugh, are they gonna get insulted? And if you do know what it mean, how am I gonna manage my behavior to be appropriate?/.../ so that helped break the ice with the whole group. "

The company's ambition to "edutain" is explicit and the reasoning behind this is that people become more receptive when having fun and are not as defensive about their own values and habits as they might otherwise have been. Ristilammi (2000) has pointed out how the management of expectations and suspense are important when arranging any kind of event, but especially when the participants are expected to act and not merely observe. By being emotionally stimulating, an event will engage its participants to a higher degree, making them more likely to continue the process instigated at the event afterward.

One consequence of the ambition to keep the message entertaining and engaging is that Living Institute has cut down on theoretical content, avoiding lecturing about cultural theories and focusing on concrete examples the participants can relate to. The attitudes within Living Institute toward this seem to be rather ambivalent: while the preaching of theory is not held as important in itself, the goal is still to teach and the edutainment is merely a tool to get there. While most of the clients interviewed seem to have enjoyed the humorous approach and cited it as one of the company's strengths, Valerie, who took the Living Crash Course and enjoyed it, was rather disappointed when her co-workers that took the course after her did not seem to come out of it with the same questions and curiosity as her:

Valerie: "/.../ some of the colleagues who participated in the course and asked about their opinion and they all said 'Yeah, it was quite interesting', and I said 'Okay, what did you take out of it?', 'Yeah, it was quite interesting'. So, I don't know if there was really an eye-opener. It was interesting to hear something about different cultures – there it is again- and different countries, history of different countries, but what you really take out of this in your daily business, I really don't see any huge impact."

Being entertaining is a balance between being engaging and merely being a source of amusement. While Living Institute's intentions are clear one cannot guarantee what the participants take with them when leaving. O'Dell (2005) discusses this problem, pointing out that experiences always are subjective and individual, but the environment in which they are experienced can be planned and organized. This is the only form of control that an organization selling experiences as products can have over what its clients actually experience. Judging from the clients' praise, Living Institute seems to have a rather good routine for creating an environment for positive experiences. One can only theorize about what it would have meant for the rest of the company's product had it not had competent event managing capabilities. It is however important to note that what Living Institute sells to a large extent is defined by the format in which is delivered, not only functioning as a mere form of entertainment but also as a way to engage and get the participants to open up, making it easier for them to share their experiences.

### Danes – The way they are

The active participation of the clients is a central part of Living Institute's training sessions, as we have discussed in the preceding chapters. However, a large part of the training also revolves around the story of the Danes and Danish culture, regardless of clientele. While giving an overview of Danish history and society today, the focus eventually ends up on factors that are relevant when dealing with Danes in a business context: Danes are anti-authoritarian and crave consensus; they view their culture as superior while avoiding bold claims on a personal level; and they are very dedicated at work but do not let it intrude on their private life. The list can go on and on, the point here not being *how* Living Institute describes the Danes, but *why*.

When training foreign expatriates the story about the Danes serves as a source of information, a script of how to act in the new context, but also as what Ehn and Löfgren (2001) call a "symbolical inversion" (p. 49); by making the Dane's culture explicit the expatriate can compare and make her own culture visible by seeing what it is not. When training Danes, the story serves as a surface for reflection, illustrating that culture is not just something that "others" carry. The story of the Danes thus functions as a tool for cultural understanding on several levels, fundamentally becoming a "we" or "others", displaying the categories of cultural difference that are deemed relevant by Living Institute. This serves as one of the cornerstones in Living Institute's philosophy, allowing for clients to be reflective about their own culture so they may move on and explore others'.

However, by telling the story about the Danes, Living Institute does what it tells its clients to avoid; create a stereotype. The consultants of Living Institute take great care in pointing out that it is in fact a stereotype and that few people in “real life” actually will correspond to it. One could compare it to what Hofstede, Pedersen and Hofstede (2002) would call a “synthetic culture”; the exaggeration and simplification of national elements of culture with the goal to illustrate cultural “dimensions” relevant for the client. There is however an anxiety within the company, regarding if the clients actually understand the pedagogic purpose of the stereotype and not just incorporate it at face value.

Using the Danes as a tool in this way can be traced back to Living Institute’s ideal of retaining scientific accuracy. Since the company operates within the Danish market and continuously strives to stay up to date with the latest research on Denmark, it does possess a lot of information on how Danish society functions on both a societal and cultural level. The Dane in Living Institute’s narrative isn’t a mere stereotype; it is an extremely well grounded stereotype. One might also argue that, from the company’s standpoint, the Danes are a “safe” alternative for using as a pedagogic stereotype since the ones telling the story are Danes themselves. A lot of humor is put into the presentation, with the aim to make the clients laugh as well as think, something which hardly would have been possible if using another “other”.

While it is impossible to say how the story of the Danes is put to use in the clients’ everyday practices, we can see how it is put to use on a discursive level, functioning as a source for explanation for why things are as they are in the kingdom of Denmark in the stories of both Danes and expatriates. One example of this is the “tribe” concept, used by Living Institute to explain the low cultural variation, high level of trust and low respect for authority within Danish society, that make repeat appearances in some of the clients’ stories. In this case Thomas uses it to explain how he must change his managerial approach when going abroad:

Thomas : “I think a lot of this is actually also that we learn how we are to other people and the way we act and behave but, for instance, this being a tribe; what can you say coming from a tribe country and to another country than a tribe country? We question the leader all the time but they never question anything the manager down there says /.../”

This goes to show the great explanatory potential of these concepts at the same time as it highlights the potential risk of unreflected use, turning pedagogic image into a truth about the self or the “other”, turning culture into a “being” rather than a “doing”. Once a stereotype is transmitted, for whatever reason, there is little control over how it is put to use when

entering new contexts, which once again illustrates the delicate balance Living Institute must tread between using concepts that are simple to understand and use as well as explaining the complex realities of culture.

Another risk when employing stereotypes is the opposite—that the picture painted is rejected along with all the paint and brushes used to create it. If what is described does not correspond with the existing understanding, then there is a risk that not only will the stereotype be seen as false, but so will everything that comes along with it. Manfred has only had three weeks to reflect upon what he learned during the Danish Living Crash Course and while there are many things he praises about it, there are some points in the story about the Danes he does not recognize:

Manfred: “So it’s a lot around this speed. Speed in decision making, speed in action... a lot was discussed at the course about the Danish productivity (sigh), I’m not sure I see that, I’m not sure I see it. It’s a lot of meetings and a lot of, don’t get me wrong, but wasted time or time investment that you make that takes quite a bit to produce something, so I’m not yet there, I’m not yet a hundred percent convinced that the Danish are so productive. Not sure yet.”

Valerie represents a more extreme result of this, apparently rejecting the concept of culture altogether since she did not feel the information she received helped her solve the problems she faced at work.

The story of the Danes might however serve an additional purpose and that is as an ideal picture or warning sign. The level of “truth” present in the stereotype becomes less of an issue in this case, its main function instead being to serve as a catalyst in a process of change. This approach becomes most apparent in the stories of Doris and Anne. Doris, coming from South America, regards the Danish style of work as more efficient and rational than what she is used to from her home country, something she wants to attain. Anne, who ordered a workshop with the goal to get an American and a Danish team to work better together, points out how the strengths and weaknesses of Living Institute’s Dane helped them see what the teams could learn from each other:

Anne: “We recommended to each other, what can the Americans learn from the Danish? One thing that came up that they could learn from us was trust, learn to trust us, because we trust them, but they should also learn how to trust us. I think that was the main thing that came out from that. I think for what we could learn from them is that the diversity, it is a very diverse society they come from and we can learn from them in managing that.”



While these approaches also can be interpreted as examples on internalized discourses of difference, with an enclosed risk of essentializing culture, they can also be seen as the opposite. Using stereotypes as an inspirational model fundamentally builds on the assumption that we can change, that we can learn from “others” and that our culture is not a life sentence that we must carry around on our shoulders.

## Cultural experiences

*Having examined the central values and practices of Living Institute we will now turn our gaze to clients and the cultural frictions they have encountered. Firstly, in “Overcoming culture”, we will take a look at what kind of cultural issues the clients encountered that made them contact Living Institute as well as how and if the training they received helped them resolve these issues. In the two following chapters, “Cosmopolitan Culture” and “When you’re strange”, we will further explore issues that seem to highlight or obscure the significance of culture in the stories of the clients.*

### Overcoming culture

In this chapter we will employ most basic form of narrative analysis to shed some light on what ways the clients have found the training useful. According to Czarniawska (1998) a narrative consists of a minimum of three elements: an original state of affairs, an action or an event and the consequent state of affairs. In this case we have already explored the event, namely the training delivered by Living Institute, so we will instead direct our attention toward the original and consequent state of affairs, i.e. the causes for and consequences of the training. It is worth noting, however, that the clients have not received the exact same type of training (see figure 2) and the time that has passed since they received it varies greatly, ranging from three weeks to more than two years. This means the informants have been in very different situations since then, which reflects in their individual stories. In the following we will let the clients describe their perceptions and experiences of the training received. What did they like or dislike? What do they remember and can still relate to? What things do they find important and not that important? What would they have done differently? What are the things that remain with the clients after some time has passed by? What kind of knowledge have they been able to put to use?

**Manfred** was interviewed just three weeks after he had participated in the Danish Living Crash Course. During the interview he was still in the phase of putting the training into use and processing the knowledge received during the training. After moving to Denmark Manfred quickly encountered cultural frictions, despite having lived and worked in many different countries. One of the reasons why Manfred attended the training was that he had a hard time coping with the Danish meeting structure at work. The custom of having meetings upon meetings until reaching consensus did not sit well with what he describes as his “Germanic” management style. Accordingly, his tendency to make quick decisions and move on made his co-workers feel uncomfortable. Another work related challenge for Manfred was

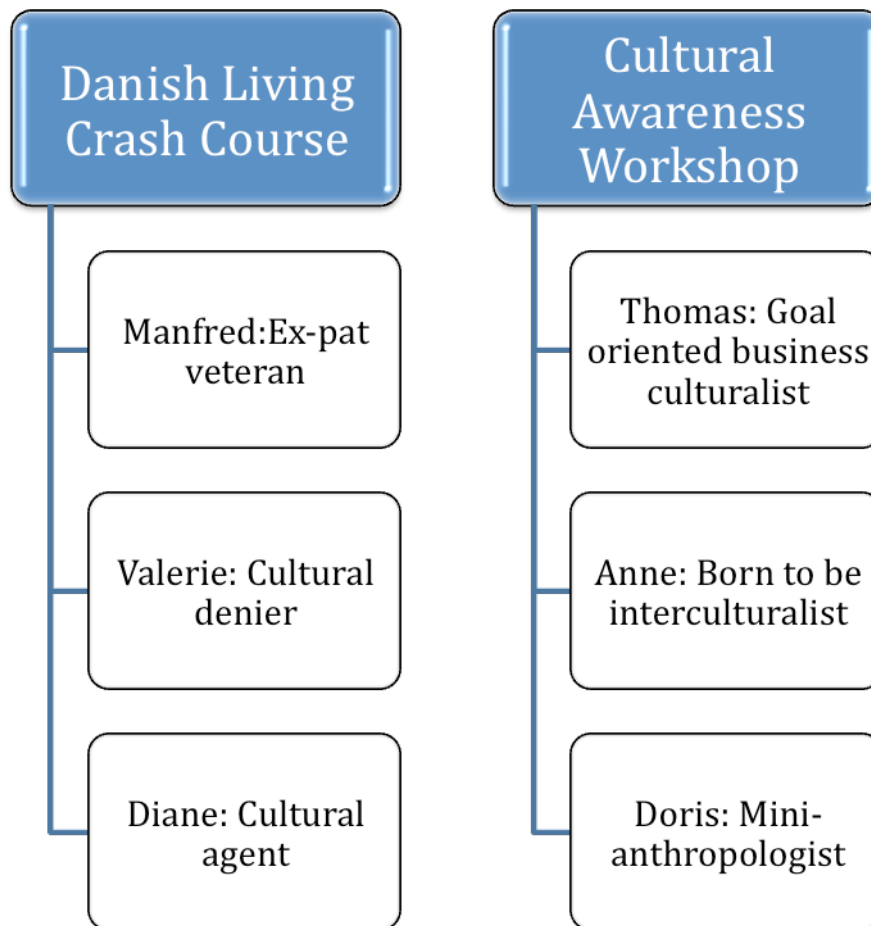


Figure 2. Overview of the clients

to understand the strongly embedded element of trust in the Danish culture. He describes that before the course he had spent too much time and energy worrying when people worked from home instead of in-office. He doubted the motives of the employees and had concerns regarding whether the work got done or not. After the course he started re-thinking this and adjusted his strategies, while also changing his personal working practices by doing less long hours at the office:

Manfred: "The course actually helped. I think we now have found a much better balance, not 'we', I have found a much better balance between one extreme and the other extreme. So instead of having five meetings and instead of having no meetings we now have one or two meetings, we discuss, but then I'm leading the group more towards a group decision which is still what I think is the right thing to do, sometimes it's not, sometimes it's just that they have a very good point, so, that has changed."

The way Manfred talks about his experiences it seems that he has really incorporated the message from the Danish Living Crash Course and he has literally used the action plan that he sketched during the course. The story Manfred tells us implies he has succeeded in

transferring the knowledge from the course to everyday practice. He is not sure whether it was good or bad that he waited such a long time before taking the course: On the one hand, he already had a lot of experience of being in Denmark, which made it easier to participate. On the other hand, he could see many problems that he possibly would have been able to avoid if he had participated sooner. In conclusion, he says the course helped him “calibrate his expectation”, helping him go after goals that he can actually reach rather than sticking to old ideals.

Approximately four months before we met him, **Thomas** received Cultural Awareness training as preparation for a short but important business trip to Asia. He was looking for tips and guidelines on how to communicate successfully with his Asian business partners in order to reach a mutual agreement during his short visit. He heard from colleagues that Living Institute had provided cross-cultural training for employees of Microcator previously. Since he never had traveled in Asia before, Thomas ordered the course, wanting to avoid the most common mistakes of Western business travelers. His aim during the training was to get as much information as possible. Since he had never been in Asia before he had a great number of questions, but it also made it difficult for him to predict potential problems. He received training in the basic cultural differences between Asia and Denmark, but he was especially interested in business related matters. He wanted to learn how to show respect for the Asian business partners, which he also did:

Thomas: “I wanted to know exactly about business relations. How do you do and what can you say: touching, clothing, saying hello; good bye. Whatever how you can behave to show a little bit of respect, like not to say hello with the left hand and stuff like that. Small things. Bring a small present. Yes, it was very specific stuff I asked about, because I had a limited time and I was going two days later or something so I needed to know the small things.”

After our interview, Thomas was going to go back to Asia a second time, this time taking Danish managers working with Asian teams with him, managers who haven’t received any training from Living Institute. He tells us he is also guiding and trying to train the other managers himself. He sees this as a return on investment, being able to forward the message to others. While he recognizes he will not be able to give them the same level of detail, but can help them with the basics of cultural awareness, preventing them from making the most common mistakes.

**Anne** and her colleagues had taken part in a workshop on Danish and American working culture approximately six months before the interview. The reason for this was that

controversies between the members of the teams in the US and Denmark had become commonplace since Nordhealth instigated a globalization process, forcing the divisions to work more closely together. There were differences in communication style, which led to a large amount of chagrin and feelings of distrust between the two teams. Anne had just experienced a similar situation in her previous workplace and saw there was need for an open discussion about the cultural differences of the two divisions. Anne found out about Living Institute on the Internet and after contacting the managing director she became convinced that she could use the company's competencies. A group consisting of roughly fifteen people from both the US and Denmark attended a whole day's training during a global meeting in Copenhagen.

Anne is extremely content with the training she and the teams received. She talks about it as interactive and hands on, describing it as an important wake-up call for people in her organization:

Anne: "Yes, I think it was good, both a good to release the bad tension there was in the group, but also as a team building event. It felt funny, it was like a game. We were playing games at some stage in that respect. It was like team building event and that we all learned something from it and more than just simple thing, but also I think that we learned intellectually, we got a lot out of it and I think that it is important in the group where you have very intellectual people working."

Anne had her own theories as to what might have caused the misunderstandings and the course offered her more theoretical and practical perspectives to help her deal with cultural issues and guide others in her workplace. During the training it was pointed out that the friction between the teams was mainly caused by differences in communication style and expectations. The way Anne describes it, the knowledge from the training turned out to be really useful, leading to significant changes in the communication style of both Danes and Americans. She now plays a central role in the communication between the teams, being something of an internal interculturalist in the organization, often being consulted by her co-workers as how to best establish communication with the American division.

We met **Valerie** for an interview about one year after she had attended the Danish Living Crash Course. Valerie had both personal and professional motives for taking the course. Most importantly, she had received a lot of critical feedback at work because of her management style. She had been told on several occasions that her German management style did not work in a Danish context. Valerie attended a one-day Danish Living Crash Course, including dinner, with approximately twelve other participants. She describes the exchange of

information and support between the participants as the most rewarding part of the course. She vaguely recalls the part of the course that focused on Danish history and the pictures showing funny Danish habits, like leaving babies to sleep outside in their carriage. She explains she really cannot remember any important key points in all of it, but that it was really nice to meet the other participants and to prepare dinner with them at the end of the evening.

After the Danish Living Crash Course, Valerie spent a lot of time thinking about cultural issues, claiming she tried to analyze and interpret her own behavior. She believes she did her best to respect Danish culture and adjust her own practices at work by giving full responsibility to the employees and letting them work on their own instead of being as controlling as she had been before. This did not turn out as she had hoped and she did not think anything got done, thus she reverted back to her old management style, not feeling like herself in her new role. She started to think the problems did not stem from culture, but from the personality of her co-workers and thus she formulated a somewhat denying attitude toward culture as a significant factor in human interaction. This means she gets very annoyed when people tell her how she should behave in order to fit into Danish society.

Valerie has a three-year contract in Denmark and she has already decided to continue as an expatriate somewhere else. She describes she will not be taking cultural training anymore, saying it is something that cannot be trained but must be experienced. Even though Valerie now claims she does not recall the key points from the course as well as a denying culture's significance, she did organize cultural awareness training, provided by Living Institute, for her colleagues at work. She explains this by saying that she did not want to be the only one in the workplace thinking about those issues, but that the training did not seem to change anything:

Valerie: "No, the only positive effect I saw out of this were that we were starting joking about our own cultural behaviors, our own habits, like Ritter Sport chocolate or whatever, yeah, something like this. It is the first step if you can make jokes about your own culture, instead of being too proud about your background, that you are getting just angry when somebody makes jokes about this, this is something you have to let go /.../ so it was the positive effect I would see out of this. The senior consultant, he made some jokes and told some funny stories and we laughed about this /.../ and he also made some jokes actually about himself /.../ but otherwise I did not see any changes in behaviors. I mean, you don't change your habits, you don't change your behavior, personality just because four hours cultural course/.../"

We interviewed **Diane** two years after she had participated in a Cultural Awareness Workshop that was organized on three different occasions for her company's managers. QualityHelp had problems with the "new Danish" employees leaving their workstations early and not following their instructions. The managers had problems managing since they were afraid to be called racist, something which had happened earlier in the firm, and they did not know how to act in many of the situations they were confronted with in everyday work. A Cultural Awareness Workshop was ordered for the managers with the goal to enhance their skills in managing the multicultural workforce.

Diane describes that during the workshop they were shown images and one series of pictures seemingly captured her attention. She describes an image of Mecca, with people walking around the Kaaba, something she considered exotic. This was followed by a picture of a Christmas tree and people dancing around it. This seems to have made a strong impression on Diane, illuminating the peculiarities of her own culture and that she is as different from the "others". Diane regards the workshop as fun wake-up call for all the participants. According to her it was very interactive and not just a "talking head" standing in front of the audience. Diane talks about "the staying power" of the training on a personal as well as on an organizational level. She describes the training made her realize she wants to learn more and she proceeded to educate herself further, turning to the field of diversity management. In QualityHelp the managers are not just faced with frictions stemming from national culture, but from social differences as well and thus she has pushed for an increase in management strategies acknowledging this. Diane was very impressed by Living Institute's workshop, but she feels her company probably does not belong to Living Institute's target group.

**Doris** had taken part in the Danish Living Crash Course two years before our interview and she has countless examples of everyday issues where her way of doing and understanding things clashes with what she perceives to be Danish culture. People pushing her without apologizing surprised her and at work her way of communicating via e-mail caused confusion, since she likes to write long and very well phrased e-mails, as opposed to the short and straight to the point style preferred by her colleagues. She seemed to have been trying to organize and analyze the Danes according to her own categories, but there was too much that she was not able to make sense of which made her feel annoyed and confused, while at the same time being curious and wanting to understand.

When she finally attended the Danish Living Crash course the pieces seemed to fall into place. She was really impressed by the course and through it she obtained some of the facts she needed to continue her investigation of the Danish society. Even two years after the

course, Doris is still using the knowledge gained to constantly categorize and analyze both her own behavior and the behavior of others, which most of the time means “the Danes”. Doris speaks very positively about the course and points out she would have been interested in some form of continuity. The Danish Living Crash Course helped her to reorganize her own existing categories and refit them to her reality in Denmark. This has resulted in Doris paying even more attention to behavioral details. She is even acting as cultural translator between her South American friend and the mysterious Danes.

While all the clients have faced different problems and found different solutions, the training received from Living Institute seems to have functioned as sort of turning point for all of them, leading them in their respective paths to change. For most it has been a positive experience, while it has been more problematic for others. What we can glean from this is however that culture does seem to matter and it affects both the private and professional lives of Living Institutes’ customers, regardless of how they themselves chose to interpret their problems. It does also seem like the way in which the knowledge from training sessions is put into use depends highly on the clients’ own expectations and attitudes, emphasizing the challenge of making people interpret a message as intended.

### Cosmopolitan culture

Having discussed the individual challenges of the clients, we are now going to turn our looking glass to a more general theme in order to gain further understanding of culture’s influence. While all of Living Institute’s clients operate in a transnational context, some (first and foremost the current and former expatriates) form a special category of clients that we, with social anthropologist Ulf Hannerz’ (1996) terminology, chose to call “cosmopolitans”. According to Hannerz this is a group of people that has emerged due to the “new supernational restructuring” of the Western world, a condition where national belonging no longer is emphasized (p. 104). Instead, cosmopolitan cultures tend to emerge around certain transnational work markets, often shaped in a fashion suited for professionals from Western Europe and North America. Cosmopolitans tend to be of a certain disposition, being willing to engage with the “other” and keeping an open mind toward divergent cultural experiences, while avoiding committing to them, always knowing where to find the exit. They are often part of several cultural networks, both territorial and transnational.

In practice this means that many of Living Institute’s clients operate in a cultural sphere where national belonging does not play a prominent role, where English is the “official” language and where transnational mobility is high. A prime example of this is Manfred, whose



family will soon relocate from Colombia to Spain. Even though he will stay in Denmark he still says they are moving “here”, the distance between Copenhagen and Barcelona being of little significance to him. Another example is Valerie, who thoroughly enjoys working in a transnational context and meeting people from all over the world. In fact, her experience of working transnationally has played a central part in her realization of culture’s insignificance:

Valerie: “There is no cultural difference visible anymore from my point of view and recently actually some events, like for example we had a global sales meeting from our company in Iceland. There were seventy people from thirty-five countries, so about two people from every country in average and it was so international and so great and we were all talking English, we were all not on our own playground, nobody came from Iceland, so it was really a good platform/.../”

This perspective is based on the assumption that culture is something intimately tied to national belonging, which Valerie and her colleagues have transcended. In this case it seems like Valerie decided on culture’s insignificance after attending the Danish Living Crash Course, otherwise this perspective might have prevented her from seeing the usefulness of cultural training altogether. For Living Institute this may provide a challenge since the company may have show to clients with this disposition that they are still culturally bound. At the same time it could prove to be an advantage in case one does want to make a point of nationality not always being the most prominent factor in the generation of cultural friction.

While he does not outright deny the significance of culture, Thomas’ experience as a cosmopolitan has given him a perspective that might also prove problematic for Living Institute:

Thomas: “No... I have been traveling a lot really, really business traveling a lot so for me it was just another business travel and I am not I have been business traveling so much that I really don’t care where I am going. It is just a business travel. It is just another hotel, airport and taxi and I have been doing all the mistakes of business traveling like, ‘Okay, now I am going maybe five times to this country so I need to know everything about the country and the city and all that’ and I don’t have the time to do that anymore so it is just a business travel. It sounds sad, little bit sad, but it is no fun doing business travel.”

Extensive experience of operating in the transnational arena has left him somewhat jaded, simply not thinking that that it is worth the effort to be curious and inquisitive. He has had enough of being a cosmopolitan and it might prove to be a challenge to get someone with this perspective to embrace a more open, anthropological approach to culture. However, being an experienced cosmopolitan might also have the adverse effect as in the case of Manfred, who

arguably is the “most” cosmopolitan among the client interviewed. In his case the extensive experience of working in different cultural contexts helped him understand that he had come up against challenges he could not solve without deeper understanding of the underlying causes.

### When you're strange

The cosmopolitans described in the previous chapter are in a sense at home anywhere in the world, but there are always situations where nowhere feels like home, when you feel left outside, when you feel strange and estranged. In some shape or form this is manifested in all of the clients' stories, albeit in different ways. To some it is a question of failed communication at work, while it for others has been a personal crisis. In essences, it is situations like these that Living Institute wants to help its clients avoid, or at least to help them handle and get something out of. However, as mentioned in the chapter “Raising cultural consciousness”, clients being exposed to situations like these are not necessarily a bad thing from Living Institute's perspective. It is in situations like these that culture becomes tangible, manifesting itself as emotions and concrete problems. It is also through situations like these that culture can be captured and marketed as a product.

According to Hofstede, Pedersen and Hofstede (2002) situations like these are to be expected when immersing oneself in a new cultural context and they can range from mere cultural misunderstandings to fully fledged cultural shock, a state in which feelings of frustration and confusion become overwhelming. Given enough time, most people overcome cultural shock and adapt to their new setting, but time, as already mentioned, is often a scarce resource in the world of business and “riding out the storm” might not always be deemed profitable. As a result, cultural shock might end up costing companies a lot of money, e.g. through the failed integration of an expatriate (Hofstede 2001). This is one of the main arguments for companies to invest in the kind of cultural training Living Institute offers. However, this perspective hardly captures the frustrating and sometimes painful process a person going through a cultural shock experiences. We have also chosen to avoid using the concept of cultural shock throughout this thesis, speaking instead of cultural frictions, since it puts focus on the contextual and interactive aspects of culture, rather than treating it as a state to which one succumbs. This does however not mean that the concept is without use. The feeling of being distant, both geographically and culturally, from what is familiar can take on many shapes, like in the case of Doris, when she first arrived to Denmark from South America:

Doris: “/.../ my first experience was the first day I came here. It was February 28<sup>th</sup> and it was snowing and it was -15 and I come from a country that is 30 degrees. So the first time I put my foot outside the airport and I look, it was dark, three-four o'clock in the afternoon, something like that and I said 'What?'. I looked outside, 'I want to go home!' (*laughs*). It was a very difficult period because at that time I didn't understand much of the Danish culture and to be in Denmark, it's completely different. Although I worked with Danes in Brazil, it was one thing and in another environment where there's sun, where you have fun, where you leave from work at five and have a beer, but it's not here. Here it's cold and it's much more family related so you leave work at three-four, you pick up your kids and you go home. Not time for beer with a friend, only if you book months in advance (*laughs*). I found it really, really difficult in that time, in 2006 and I said 'I don't want to come here, I want to go home/../'”

Valerie describes her previous expatriate experience in China with equally strong emotion. Unlike Doris who returned to Denmark, she decided to leave the country as a result of it:

Valerie: “So, yeah, that was quite strange and after half a year I really happy to leave the country again and we had some experience also when were outside the normal areas, the international areas like Beijing or Shanghai, so in smaller cities and when we came into supermarket the people were crowding around us. They had never seen European people and especially with my boss, tall man, grey hair and they were looking at the size of his shoes and touching the shoes and laughing and running away so it was really (*laughs*), it was so strange... an experience, something that I was never thinking that I could experience something like this, it was really strange, but it as really feeling like a stranger, like an alien somewhere/.../'”

Stories like these can be found repeatedly in the narratives of current and former expatriates among the clients. In many cases, like the two above, the cultural friction might seem overwhelming with small likelihood for the individual to overcome. This might trigger a defensive disposition, dismissing the “others” as strange and turning the expatriate further away from wanting to understand, focusing instead on the strength or “superiority” of the individual's own culture. Using a phenomenological perspective one could claim there might be an inherit fear of losing oneself in situations like these, where the life world is turned upside down and the lack of the familiar environments in which one feels at home, prevents one from feeling at home in the self. Anthropologist Michael Jackson (2005) claims this fear of “falling”, of losing sense of one's place in the world, can severely hamper a person's willingness to open up to the cultural encounter. According to Hannerz (1996) the adaptation to a new culture is no guarantee for avoiding feelings of disjuncture, something which is also exemplified by Valerie:

Valerie: "Yeah, somehow. I noticed that I'm coming back again to be myself. I tried to play a role when I came here first, yeah, 'cos I was really told from every side that 'You have to do like this, and you can not do like that here and you have to change this one and this is not working here' and so on, and you start not to be yourself anymore, you start being somehow an entertainer and somehow less of a person and always trying to... because if you are the stranger you always tend to behave to be accepted somehow and that makes, just change your personal, that don't make you authentic/.../"

The incorporation of strange ideals can be another way of "not feeling at home" in oneself. Needless to say, this outset makes adapting to a new cultural context far more complicated since the foreign culture is regarded as directly threatening one's own identity.

For some, cultural frictions have not been primarily a personal issue, but rather an organizational one. In Anne's case it meant trying to manage two teams with increasing cultural misunderstandings between them, leading them into what Living Institute calls a "spiral of distrust" where every action taken chips away at the trust for the "other", going faster and faster toward the bottom. For Diane it was a question of management not knowing how to handle a culturally diverse workforce without being called racist. For Thomas, part of the challenge was to make the Asian expatriates within his organization feel welcome in Denmark and helping them and the Danish team adapt to each other. Handling the cultural frictions thus becomes more a question of leadership and of emanating cultural awareness into the organization. This might lead to another type of problem since it no longer is the trust and curiosity of Living Institute's client that is in question, but his or her ability to summon it in others. Just because a person knows about the "locals" and trusts them does not guarantee the opposite, which, according to Hannerz (1996) might also lead to feelings of estrangement. It is however important to remember most cultural clashes faced by the clients are far more mundane than the examples given here. It is also important to note the clients, with few exceptions, have been able to handle their cultural frictions, finding solutions both on their own and with the help of Living Institute.

Another, more obvious, source of feelings of distance and estrangement is language. Not understanding what the co-workers in the cafeteria talk about can understandably make one feel isolated. In most cases, at least for the expatriates in Denmark, this is mitigated by the fact that most of the natives are more or less fluent in English. An extended stay in a culture where communication is not possible, like in the case of Valerie's stay in China, can lead to extreme frustration. For Anne the problem was not that the American and Danish team could not talk to each other, but part of what led them in to the "spiral of distrust" was the fact that the Danish team felt reluctant to call their Americans because they did not feel like their English

was good enough for talking over the phone. The Americans, in turn, did not like communicating via email and as a result neither team communicated with the other. Speaking the same language is no guarantee for successful communication either, something which Manfred (who is fluent in German, English and Spanish) has experienced:

Manfred: "By far, by far the most difficult country I ever lived in was Chile and that is because the Chileans... well I guess the first mistake was on me. The first mistake was to believe that because I had lived in Colombia and Mexico, Chile being a Latin American country, Spanish speaking, piece of cake! Major mistake. It's like people going from Germany to Austria thinking 'It's just a different dialect' or you guys going from Denmark to Sweden, there is differences/.../ I think it's, overall speaking, the biggest risk when you go to another country is that you and the country believe that because you have a common language platform, you will understand each other. I think that's the trick. The fact everybody here speaks English doesn't mean that we will understand each other, so I guess that is another good learning here, so this applies to the other countries."

Believing that a shared language leaves no obstacle for clear communication across cultural borders might leave one open for an even bigger cultural shock, or at least a cultural surprise, when one trips and falls over the cultural practices surrounding a language. It is perfectly possible to be a "fluent fool", knowing all the right words but still being at a loss in a foreign culture (Hofstede, Pedersen & Hofstede, 2002, p. 18).

## Critical perspectives on Culture

*After having examined the practices and ideologies of Living Institute as well as the cultural frictions faced by its clients, the time has now come to explore the consequences of cultural awareness, putting the spotlight on the meeting between company and clients. In this chapter we will employ a number of critical perspectives for delving deeper into relationship between Living Institute and its clients, looking for how culture is put to use at the core of the enterprise. In the first sub-chapter, “Enacting a balance”, we shall examine the theoretical split between a functionalist and constructivist perspective on culture and how they manifest within Living Institute. In “Differences that make a difference” we will, as the name implies, discuss what role differences play in the company’s definition of culture. This is in turn followed by “Cultural currencies”, a sub-chapter where we look closer at the relationship between economy and culture. In the fourth, “Work in process” we compare the courses of Living Institute to diversity management, in order to shed some light on how culture can be worked with as a process. In “Learning a lesson”, the fifth and final sub-chapter, we will summarize some of the insights gained so far, discussing the effects of teaching culture.*

### Enacting a balance

There is an inherent tension within Living Institute, stemming from the two different frameworks the company employs for teaching culture. Living Institute balances between what Dahlén (1997) and Larsson (2010) refer to as a functionalist and a constructivist use of culture. The first is common within the tradition of cross-cultural communication, where culture is often conveyed through certain categories, along the lines of Geert Hofstede’s (2001) cultural dimensions. Dahlén (1997) claims contemporary interculturalists such as Geert Hofstede and Fons Trompenaars turn the notion of culture “into a separating device, distinguishing and classifying cultures in terms of dimensions” (p. 164).

The second use comes closer to the approach we ourselves use in this study, treating culture as something fluctuating, dependent on context and people. During Cultural Awareness Workshops, Living Institute uses Hofstede’s dimensions of national cultures and value systems, while at the same time promoting an anthropological, constructivist use of culture. One of the company’s consultants praises the usefulness of Hofstede’s, while at the same time being aware of his limitations and mentioning that every student of cultural science, at least at the universities in Denmark, is trained to criticize Hofstede’s theoretical framework and the way culture is presented in it.

The same discussion about Hofstede returned in an interview with a former consultant of Living Institute. She summarizes his popularity in the following way:

“We are in business where you have tools and tools are asked for when solving the cultural problem. If you could do it in the two hours course that would be wonderful. I think that is why Hofstede is so popular. I mean, he does not give a recipe but he has very nice dimensions where you can see the differences, but the way he is used very often is exactly to the direction of a recipe /.../”

Hofstede’s impact on the field of intercultural communication is discussed by Larsson (2010), emphasizing his frequent use among consultants. This popularity is explained by Dahlén (1997), claiming the “advantage of the conception of culture as something with its own properties, rather tangible, bounded, atemporal, and internally homogeneous. It thereby has an advantageous commodity form, being readily accessible.” (p. 178). Hofstede and Trompenaars use large numbers of charts, diagrams and tables, something that makes them easy to interpret in contexts apt to interpreting quantitative data, as most business driven contexts often are. This is an approach adopted by Living Institute to some extent, using charts of Hofstede’s cultural dimensions to illustrate extreme differences in national culture. Living Institute uses Hofstede’s cultural dimensions in the same manner, employing them as tools for training purposes in order to emphasize categories of difference and to create stereotypes, which in turn can be used to make cultural differences more accessible and tangible for the clients.

While being well aware of the criticism directed at Hofstede, the company put his theories and others like his to use, albeit putting it into practice with an anthropological touch. Using Dahlén’s (1997) definition, Living Institute could most defiantly be referred to as “interculturalists”, i.e. consultants in the field of intercultural communication. He claims that these rarely keep up to date with the current discussions in anthropology, being too busy to stay abreast and instead rely on old anthropological theories that have been tried and tested. In the case of Living Institute however, the interculturalist is an anthropologist, merging the constructivist and functionalist approaches. Much like any cultural analyst, Living Institute combines different perspectives in order to gain a deeper understanding of the issue at hand, being aware of the limitations of different perspectives. Considering the anthropological theories Living Institute builds upon it is hardly surprising that most static interpretations of culture can be negotiated, not treating functionalist theories as “truths” but as tools. Whether or not this reflexive approach is picked up by the clients is another question, which we will explore further in the following chapter.

### The differences that make a difference

Given the context in which Living Institute operates, with its high tempo, focus on profit and little space for theoretical extravagances, it is hardly surprising that the culture concept provided to the clients is somewhat limited in comparison to how it is normally used within anthropology. Often the main focus is put on “the differences that make a difference”, as the senior consultant puts it. As in every situation where one uses categories to help make the world easier to grasp, some things are magnified while others become blurred, out of focus. In general, the explanation of culture provided by Living Institute intersects with Hofstede’s (2001) categories of cultural difference, told through the story of the Danes. Distribution of power within the country, attitude toward authority and the relationship between masculine and feminine values are all themes touched upon to illustrate different points of Danish culture. Looked at from farther away one can say that the narrative circles around the things that set Danes apart, the peculiarities one needs to know if one is going to interact with the Danes. In essence, it becomes a story about difference, turning culture into a list of distinctions one needs to keep in mind. Here one can discern the functionalist perspective being at the forefront, looking for explanations to the potential problems that the clients might encounter in terms of cultural belonging. On the level of discourse, this equates culture with difference or at least as something which is only relevant when it manifests itself as difference, especially as differences between national territories.

The use of national culture as a way for explaining cultural differences carries with it a number of problematic implications, one of the most easily discernable being the contradictory potential it carries with it. The Danes are held to be a well organized, efficient people at work, something which Doris reflects upon:

Doris: “The Danes are very focused, so, as I said, they don’t have time to lose, so when you are, between 8 and 3 or 8 and 4, you are there to work and you stick to your plan. If you have a meeting you go to the meeting, clearly what is the meeting about and what is expected as an output and you have to leave the meeting with that. A Brazilian can go to a meeting and take hours discussing a lot of things and you don’t come up with a conclusion or you come up with some other things that are not what you expected to get out from the meeting so we lose a lot of time doing three, four, five things at the same time and the Danes, no, they take one and then ‘I’m doing this today and this is gonna be the output of this task that I have.’ So, it’s very much focused and the Brazilians are not.”

Manfred, however, does not recognize this description of productivity of the Danes, instead he finds them to be an inefficient people. He thinks their meeting culture is very time consuming



and wasteful and he is not yet convinced that the Danes are as productive as pointed out during the Danish Living Crash Course. These views illustrate what happens when culture is treated as a property and not as a process of relationships. It also points out a potential problem for Living Institute. As already mentioned, pointing out what something “is” gives the client an opportunity to disprove it, potentially sowing a seed of distrust.

The close relationship between culture and nationality in Living Institute’s narrative carries with it a whole complex of problems. According to Hannerz (1996) national belonging has a tendency to overshadow other kinds of belonging, even though it is a highly incorporeal kind of belonging, not depending on personal relationships. A factor that sets it farther apart is the fact that it most of the time is tied to a geographical territory. Since people move around, national belonging and culture is transported into a multitude of contexts, all bestowing new meaning upon them. Ethnologist René Léon Rosales (2005) points out one of the largest risks of equating culture with ethnic or national belonging is that everyone sharing nationality is seen as sharing culture, missing the fact that belonging is highly contextual, depending largely on the situation a person is in. Making nationality the principal explanation for culture also shadows other important “genres of difference”. Class and gender are examples of categories that are not clearly visible in the narrative of Living Institute, something noticed by Diane who went on to work with diversity management since she did not feel the cultural awareness perspective could help her address class-dependent problems within her organization. In the case of Valerie, who consequently denies the importance of culture, gender is the one category where she herself recognizes the influence of culture on people’s actions:

Valerie: “/.../ the other thing is with the different view on women in some countries. This is the only thing that sometimes annoys me, I’m not respected, also not respected in my position so as a manager there’s nothing worse ‘cos I feel, but this is also quite seldom because the people living in countries like this but working international, they know about, that they know that they can’t just ignore me, you know, they want to make business with me. But anyway, it is just are polite to me because they want to make business with us is also something which you can feel and this is not honest and that’s what’s quite negative, but I don’t know. This might be about culture or at least about the country, behavior of the country, maybe more or less about the religion/.../”

Unlike national belonging, however, gender and class are concepts that carry with them certain political connotations that might be problematic to confront certain clients with and one cannot help but wonder if this is one reason for letting these categories stand back in

favor of the less controversial and more easily applied concept of national membership. Every difference, failing or misunderstanding can however not be attributed to culture, or as the senior consultant puts it:

Senior consultant: "That is also important for us to tell from time to time; 'Well, it's because of his culture that he is doing like this, it is impossible to work with', no, he might be an idiot. He simply might just have a personality disorder (laughter), it has nothing to do with culture! He's just an idiot"

Culture presumes that we have something in common and it can therefore be an imprecise concept from time to time. In some cases it is more useful to speak about the individual and identity. However, identities do not exist outside of culture, being constructed through the use of "cultural props" and processes of differentiation (Alsmark, 1997, p. 11). If the individual identity is treated as an alternative to cultural belonging, explaining differences becomes a case of "either/or", turning the relationship between individual and culture invisible. This further illustrates the problem of equating culture with national belonging since it makes the individual "cultureless" in situations where the national is not judged to be important, as in the case of Thomas:

Thomas: "So there are some major differences, but what I have also told to people here, that we can use a lot of time and we can use a lot of excuses and call them culture things but when it comes to working relations it is also just two humans beings working together, like one office down there with an office up here, so we cannot put everything into the culture basket. There are some culture things and then we come to just human relations, business relations."

For Valerie this is expressed even stronger and she challenges the explanatory power of culture on a discursive level since the national connotation she associates with culture does not explain the problems she faces in her work place. Instead of working as an explanation, she perceives culture as a scapegoat, something people hide behind when they are not willing to take individual responsibility:

Valerie: "Yeah, finally it was just nothing done, so it did not work like this. The task I gave with complete freedom were not solved in the end like I asked for it, so I don't know if this is now Danish or not Danish or whatever, this is just nothing related to the company and it's just about how people work together and how people are able to work or how their attitude of work is, which is always coming from their personality and it always comes back to personality."

Naturally culture is not always a fruitful concept for interpreting the world, but when one equates culture with nationality or puts it as an opposite of individual identity one loses sight of the cultural dimension that is present in everything made by man.

This brings us back to the split between a functionalist and constructivist perspective on culture. What Living Institute does is produce certain logics of difference and belonging, based on a constructivist approach but expressed through a functionalist one. The company is largely dependent on the explanatory power that the former carries, but keeps the complex understanding of things as one of its core values. When it comes to explaining cultural difference however, the functionalist approach appears to be dominant. According to Larsson (2010), there is always an inherent risk when using stereotypes for describing a national, regional or ethnic community or treating culture as synonymous with ethnicity or nationality in a pedagogic situation, since the reflexive nuances are easily lost in the transferal of knowledge. The strong discursive connection between nationality and culture has a tendency to overshadow other categories of cultural difference in the stories of the clients. Without a more intersectional perspective on difference, as suggested by de los Reyes and Martinsson (2005), there is a risk of losing track of how differences are created in specific historical and geographical contexts and of the ways in which they are bound to the power relations that exist there, instead treating them as static properties.

### Cultural currencies

Living Institute is in the business of what Goldschmidt Salamon (2005) refers to as “turning values into value” (p. 48), which means turning the often ephemeral and contextually bound concept of culture into something that can be packaged and traded. Incidentally, this is done by highlighting the value of values, illustrated by how the senior consultant during a Danish Living Crash Course exclaims “It is worth money!” when talking about the role of trust in Danish culture. The primary frame of discourse Living Institute operates in is that of business, with culture merely being a tool for increasing value. Culture’s place in the world of business is motivated by its potential for raising profits and preventing failure, the economic aspect of culture being a nodal point around which all other definitions of the concept are organized: “Culture matters... for the bottom line”, being the implicit message of Living Institute’s slogan. Naturally, this limits the meanings Living Institute can inscribe into the culture concept:

Senior consultant: “I learned that what matters to these people are the bottom line; ‘How can we make money out of this? And if it is not relevant for bigger results, then it’s not relevant for us’, and that’s just how you have to

do business when you're in business life, so that makes me very focused on how can this be made more efficient and better and how can we avoid disasters and misunderstandings and all that, it's much more focused on that now than it was in the beginning."

Even when culture is taught to improve the clients' private life it is done within the business discourse. If an expatriate cannot navigate the culture in which he/she lives he/she will suffer from cultural shock, with private life thus threatening the professional. However, the expatriate's intimate connection between private and professional life also illustrates another important aspect of the culture that Living Institute teaches. While the significance of culture is motivated in economical terms, its effects might reach far and wide outside the discourse of business. While a company might pay Living Institute to train one of their expatriates in order for him or her to accomplish a mission, the training is likely to give he or she competences that make his or her private life in a foreign culture much easier on both an emotional and practical level. Under the best conditions Living Institute's training gives something back to the client that cannot easily be measured in money, a "quality of life" for lack of a better term. Culture becomes a practical effect, helping the client organize and make sense of the new context, recognizing its inherent logics and categories, highlighting the most basic currency of culture; to understand the meaning of "order" in a given setting.

To shed more light on what is being transferred when the training is bought we will use Bourdieu's metaphor of "capitals". Amongst the clients interviewed, the problem does not seem to be a lack of capitals, since they all are well educated with large social networks and employers that seemingly do not hesitate to pay for pricey cultural training. "Class" which Bourdieu originally examined through the capital metaphor, is not a category that seems to be active here, so what kind of capital is Living Institute dealing in? For most of the clients, the aim of the training is not to incorporate new cultural habits but to gain the competence to recognize and be recognized in a foreign cultural space. The problem could be interpreted as the failure to transform the cultural and social capital they possess into symbolical capital, rendering them passive. According to Bourdieu (1999) the capitals one possesses must be acknowledged by social actors who have the competence to recognize and evaluate them before they can be ascribed a value and give the owner any advantages or be transferred into other kinds of capital. What Living Institute does, in exchange for economical fund, is to give its clients the cultural competence to recognize and communicate with actors like these, in effect transforming economic capital into symbolic and granting them greater mobility in the social field. For this to be possible however, the client must recognize and acknowledge Living Institute's authority, turning the company's cultural capital into symbolic value.

Wanting to avoid some, but not all, the connotations of Bourdieu's cultural capital one could claim Living Institute deals in a cultural currency where an initial economic payment guarantees a substantially larger return of investment in the future. This currency is an amalgamation of social and cultural capital that allows the client to transform the capital he or she already possesses into symbolic capital in the given context. It is implied the economic investment, over time, will pay for itself many times over at the same time as it provides a higher quality of life to the client. While one should always keep in mind that these are metaphors and not empirical positions, they do shed some light on how Living Institute and its clients negotiate positions in the social field.

The use of the business discourse can also be interpreted in terms of capital, since it is by giving the Living Institute's cultural capital an economic veneer that it can obtain symbolic value and be made active in the company's field of business. The company is in a position of power, dictating the conversion rate between economic and cultural currencies, but it needs to use the right signs and language to receive recognition from its customer base. This goes to show that what is central in a company's discourse is not necessarily a core value. Naturally, money is important to the company, but it is not held above the ideals of delivering a unique high quality product. Culture is the business of Living Institute but that does not mean that culture is only business and it does not mean that it is something added as an afterthought, being something permeating from within rather than mere "icing" on the surface.

### Work in process

Diane, our informant from QualityHelp, described how the Cultural Awareness Workshop was the first step on the company's path toward increased corporate responsibility and a more active approach to managing diversity in the workplace. In QualityHelp's case, knowledge from the Cultural Awareness Workshop was used to further investigate the role of culture in organizational interaction, leading to the diversity management strategy. This illuminates a weakness of Living Institute. While the initial training served as inspiration, the company was not contacted for the continuous work with cultural issues in QualityHelp, being seen as too focused on national culture as well as a provider of events rather than as a facilitator for processes. There may be a discrepancy here between how the company defines its products and how the clients view them. The following definition of Cultural Awareness Workshop is from Living Institute's web site:

“Cultural Awareness”-for people working interculturally by applying basic tools you will be able to unlock any given culture – swiftly and efficiently. A workshop for employees working in an intercultural environment. During the workshop the participants will learn how to bridge cultural gaps, gain insights to and operate efficiently in unfamiliar cultural settings. The participants will learn how (sic!) to use and apply basic anthropological tools through experimental exercises, fieldwork, cases, debates and presentations.”

The Cultural Awareness Workshops focus on giving theoretical and practical tools for working with people from different nationalities in a transnational context. The emphasis is on cross-culturalism, national origin and on misunderstandings or frictions that these categories might cause in a business context.

As described before, Living Institute uses a unique anthropological approach and the Cultural Awareness Workshops are divided in three phases: cultural awareness (to give the participants an impression of what culture is), cultural mapping (showing the cultural differences that make a difference) and finally to make the participants open their eyes and learn about themselves in relation to the others. All these steps are more or less interwoven with national culture, but cultural frictions can arise from other “genres of difference” as well, such as gender, age, ethnicity, class and education. It might be that two persons from cosmopolitan cities that have similar educational background but different nationalities have more in common than a farmer from the countryside has with a compatriot living urban city life in the same country. These other factors and the way that they are affecting behavior and world views are toned down in Living Institute’s narrative. These were however the issues that QualityHelp was striving to manage, being an example of what Mor Barak (2005) calls “intranational diversity” (p. 29), i.e. a diverse workforce operating within one country, as opposed to the transnational context most of Living Institute’s clients operate in.

According to Kandola and Fullerton (1998) and Wrench (2007) diversity management is a business strategy which was developed with the aim to get representatives of normally excluded minorities to be included in employment to a higher degree. The authors continue pointing out that the strategy is said to differ from other common employment strategies in number of ways: Its goal is to improve competitiveness and efficiency in the organization. It aims to emphasize the importance of recognizing cultural differences and making allowances in policies around these. It is to encourage cultural diversity, which makes it possible for people to work in creative and productive environments using their full capacity. It is said to be a positive management strategy compared to a traditional, more negative approach focused on avoiding certain anti-discrimination laws. And finally it should contain a profound element of actively managing the diversity to add value to the organization’s efficiency. So,

what is diversity in this context? According to Wrench (2007) there is an ongoing discussion and a number of definitions on what diversity is in organizational policies. The main dimensions are sex, age, 'race' and ethnicity, but there are others interpreting diversity in tighter or more loose terms.

Diversity management intersects with cultural awareness in the active intention to recognize cultural differences, address the differences and increase general cultural knowledge and understanding among people. What differs is Living Institute's anthropological approach to the training and its focus on transnational contexts, as opposed to diversity management's focus on diversity within an organization. The emphasis on nationality is replaced with a focus on other dimensions affecting the social interactions, such as sex, age and ethnicity. Diversity management is also regarded as a process, as opposed to the clearly demarcated events delivered by Living Institute. By making this comparison we want to spotlight how the issues addressed by Living Institute can be tackled in a different way. The example of Diane and QualityHelp might be extreme, but one could say that all of the clients interviewed instigated some kind of cultural process, private or organizational, after attending Living Institute's training, without the direct involvement of the company. While this to some degree proves the impact of the company's message, it also raises the issue of Living Institute's seeming lack of continuous contact with its clients. This also makes it relevant to examine the ways in which Living Institute's knowledge flows into other organizations, often entering at a managerial level, no doubt affecting managerial strategies. Several of the clients claim to function as what we chose to call "champions", spreading the word of culture's importance in their respective organizations and functioning as cultural translators where need be. The relationship between the single event and the process also mirrors the discussion surrounding the concept of culture itself, raising the question if culture can be understood as an isolated entity or if it has to be treated as an ever-evolving set of relationships.

### Learning a lesson

Managing director: "Yes, the 'do's and don'ts', every time when I am approached by a client who wants to... like the guy who just called, they all say and 'We want tools!', 'It has to be applicable!' My first answer is that 'The fool with the tool is still a fool!'"

Throughout this study we have looked at how Living Institute packages, promotes and sells culture as a commodity. The company's goal is to provide a profound theoretical and

methodological framework to the clients in order for them to understand how culture affects them and thus help them overcome the challenges of operating in a cross-cultural context. In line with Living Institute's ideals, the clients we have interviewed seem to think the training held high quality. However, competent teaching does not necessarily translate into successful learning, in the sense that the clients do not necessarily incorporate the understanding for culture that Living Institute promotes. How the clients chose to interpret the knowledge received and translate it into practice once back in their everyday context is outside of the company's control. The same kind of course can trigger vastly different kinds of reaction, as we have seen, ranging from Valerie's denial of culture's importance to Doris' high anthropological approach. Drawing an outline for what Living Institute sells has been relatively easy, but what is it in actuality that the clients buy?

As mentioned in "Cultural currencies", Living Institute's business model builds upon the idea that you have to "spend money to make money", encouraging potential clients to invest in its "cultural currency" in order to make existing assets active in a new context. By using profitability as the main argument for cultural training, Living Institute gives their own product legitimacy within the field of business. This position is consolidated further by the format in which the training is provided. The training events' focus on the participants turns them into pedagogic subjects, creating a social space with a common ground for identification. By inscribing itself in memory the event continues to exist for the clients, materialized through the cultural frictions they face in their everyday lives. However, memory is unreliable and thus the effects of an event are unpredictable over time. The organizer, Living Institute in this case, can only hope the lessons of the event transform into embodied practice and even then one can not guarantee the ways in which it is practiced (Ristilammi, 2000). Living Institute follows this train of thought, regarding the transformation into practice as the key for a continued cultural awareness:

Senior consultant: "Well, I think, for people to remember what I've taught them they need to do it, they need to go out there. Just sitting in an office and not really doing any kind of cross-cultural work, then I think it will be difficult for them to stick, so it is important for us that they do give themselves those challenges all the time."

This in turn means one of the central missions for Living Institute is to provide the confidence for the clients to enact the training, turning the cultural currency into an embodied practice. As Bourdieu (1999) points out, the connection between the symbolic and economic capital is often vague, even though it might appear otherwise. In this case it means the cultural currency clients buy from Living Institute is highly dependent on their own capability to



transform it into symbolic value, rendering it active through practical use. How and if this happens is hard for us to say since we have not been able to observe the everyday practices of any of Living Institute's clients. However, following this line of reasoning, the symbolic value of the training must be recognized by the client in order to be rendered active and thus be perceived as useful.

Returning to Hofstede (2001), he claims the training of intercultural competence is possible, albeit in a limited way. According to him, the acquisition of intercultural proficiency passes through three stages: *Awareness, knowledge* and *skills*. The first step, *awareness*, translates into a fundamental recognition of people existing within cultural frameworks, including oneself. This in turn can be translated into *knowledge* of particular cultures and their symbols, rituals and the like. *Knowledge* and *awareness* can be taught, but to acquire *skills*, one must put these competences to practical use and see what they mean in a lived context, much in the same way as Living Institute claims their training only becomes active in use. Assuming this perspective, one can discern a potential challenge for Living Institute, rooted in the company's use of its clients' own experiences in the training.

By providing an environment in which to develop cultural awareness along with cultural knowledge deemed valuable, Living Institute prepare its clients for going out in the "real" world to develop their cultural skills. However, many of the clients have already operated in cross-cultural contexts for an extended period of time, having developed their own set of skills for handling cultural issues. The sudden introduction of an alternative perspective of culture might seem incompatible with an already functional set of skills and may threaten the assumptions on which they are founded, thus risking to be rejected or tweaked into fitting existing practices. On the other hand, the introduction of cultural knowledge and awareness may have great explanatory power, assisting in the sense-making of unreflected practices. Conversely, cultural training for someone lacking experience from the cross-cultural field is not as likely to challenge existing skills, but at the same time it will not solve any existing problems and thus its usefulness might not be evident for the client. This also illustrates another contradictory property of cultural awareness training. As discussed earlier, culture mainly becomes visible when it manifests itself as friction generated by cultural issues, the goal of cultural awareness training being to minimize issues like these. In theory this means that when working optimally, cultural awareness skills are invisible to the user, helping him or her navigate points of friction carelessly. Using concrete examples that move the clients' perceptions can thus help to serve as a manifestation for cultural awareness—Anne's story of the pictures of Kaaba along with a Christmas tree being a perfect example of this. This also

provides a challenge for anybody wanting to evaluate the effects of cultural training since one cannot be certain the informants are fully aware of the usefulness of the training they have received, not seeing the “non-frictions”.

On several occasions, representatives from Living Institute express anxiety concerning whether the clients will actually understand the pedagogic purpose of, for example, stereotypes and not just take them at face value. However, when studying the clients’ narratives it becomes apparent the culture analytical concepts of Living Institute to a great extent are incorporated as explanatory discourses rather than as analytical tools. One can choose to interpret this in several ways, depending on if one wants to point out the positive or problematic aspects of the company’s training. At first glance, it might seem like the cultural awareness of the clients is not extensive enough to use the concepts in the way intended by Living Institute. In the same vein, one could also regard it as a failure on the company’s part, not having sufficiently informed the client of the relativistic aspects of different cultural concepts. On the other hand, one cannot deny the impact Living Institute’s discourse has had on the individual clients’ narratives. Many concepts presented by the company return in the clients’ stories, helping them to make sense of their everyday lives and problems they encounter. Even in the case of Valerie, who has renounced culture’s significance, one can trace concepts from Living Institute’s training, albeit under a different “flag”, re-framed as “personality”. This goes to show no discourse can ever totally define and dominate meanings and that people can put discourses to use in order to suit their own needs. Discourse may function as a repertoire for personal narratives, but people use them actively, not just carrying them passively “on their backs” (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2000). According to Ristilammi (2000) the significance of any form of event is only realized when recognized by a third party, not present at the event itself. In effect, this means the power over definition of the discourse promoted by Living Institute is limited to its usefulness in the clients’ everyday practices, despite its scientific authority.

## Conclusions

*In this, our final chapter, we will summarize and conclude our findings. In “Striking a balance” we discuss the challenging balancing acts that Living Institute performs, as well as the consequences this has for the concept of culture. This is followed by a number of suggestions for Living Institute in “Insights”. Finally, in “Applying oneself”, we touch upon the significance of this study for the fields of applied cultural analysis and intercultural communication.*

### Striking a balance

The aim of this thesis has been to, through the study of Living Institute and its clients, shed some light on how the concept of culture can be packaged, sold and taught in the marketplace and how it is transformed in the process. In the following, we will give a brief recount of the theoretical framework on which the company’s product is based, how this knowledge is packaged and how it was received by the interviewed clients. This will be followed by an outline of the issues we perceive as central for understanding the company and its challenges, in the shape of five “balancing acts”. Finally we will discuss what we perceive as the consequences for the uses of the concept of culture in such a setting.

Living Institute is a company that by combining theoretical perspectives from anthropology and cross-cultural communication strives to deliver a complex, yet accessible understanding of culture to its clients. The anthropological perspective is used to urge clients to go deeper and try to understand cultural differences in order to resolve cultural frictions. Theorists in cross-cultural communication, such as Hofstede, provide cultural models that, because of their extensive use of quantitative data, are easy to adapt to the business setting in which the company operates. Typically, the Living Institute employs a three-stage model for conveying this to the clients. The first step, “cultural awareness”, aims to give the clients an understanding of what culture is and why it matters to them. The second step, referred to as “cultural mapping”, provides an outline of the factors on which people from different national cultures tend to differ, pointing out “the differences that make a difference”. During the third step the company tries to make the clients’ own cultures visible to them, helping them see that they are as “different” as the “others”. Through the combination of these three steps, Living Institute delivers a mixture of functionalist “facts” about culture and encourages clients to be curious, exploratory and analytical rather than judgmental.

For clients this three-stage model translates into both listening to lectures and participating actively, for example, by sharing their personal experiences of cultural frictions. In order to make its message even more accessible to clients, Living Institute also emphasizes

the importance of keeping the training entertaining, claiming people are more open to challenging concepts when they are confronting them with a laugh. To concretize culture, Living Institute focuses on Danish culture, letting the story about “the Dane” work as both a source of information about Danish society and a reflective surface that makes the clients’ own cultures visible.

The clients interviewed for this study have unanimously praised their training as well executed, having found it engaging and informative. While some have expressed complaints concerning details, like Thomas and Manfred who did not think the sessions were sufficiently business oriented, most clients claim to be satisfied. The degree to which the clients have perceived the training as useful varies as do the ways in which they have put it to use. One thing that unites all of the clients is the training they received has instigated some kind of process, either on a personal or an organizational level. The three expatriates, Manfred, Valerie and Doris, all viewed their everyday lives differently after having received training: They made new sense of the things they saw around them. Manfred claims that the training helped him to adjust his expectations and change his management style, leading to decreased friction in just three weeks. For Valerie, it led to an increased sense of cultural friction and thus she has decided to disregard culture. She nevertheless found the training good enough to organize a session for her co-workers. For Doris, it turned out to be a pleasurable experience, turning cultural awareness into a tool for exploring and explaining her surroundings. For Thomas, Anne and Diane, the workshops were the start of a process that came to spread throughout their respective organizations. For Thomas, the training was first and foremost a preparation for a business trip to Asia, but he was able to use what he learned to teach his co-workers something about the importance of culture. The training gave Anne and her colleagues the tools to bridge the gap between the Danish and the US divisions in her company, facilitating cooperation by making their cultural differences visible to them. For Diane, the workshop became an eye-opener that led to a company-wide turn to diversity management.

By creating an extensive ethnography of Living Institute and its relations to its clients, we have been able to identify a number of problematic issues that we relate to the handling of culture as a commodity. One point we have had occasion to return to repeatedly in our study is the narrow path Living Institute treads between a functionalist and a constructivist approach to culture in relation to its clients. This is however just one of several similar balancing acts (see figure 3) the company performs, constantly oscillating between different approaches and in some instances keeling over to one side. Below, we look more closely at

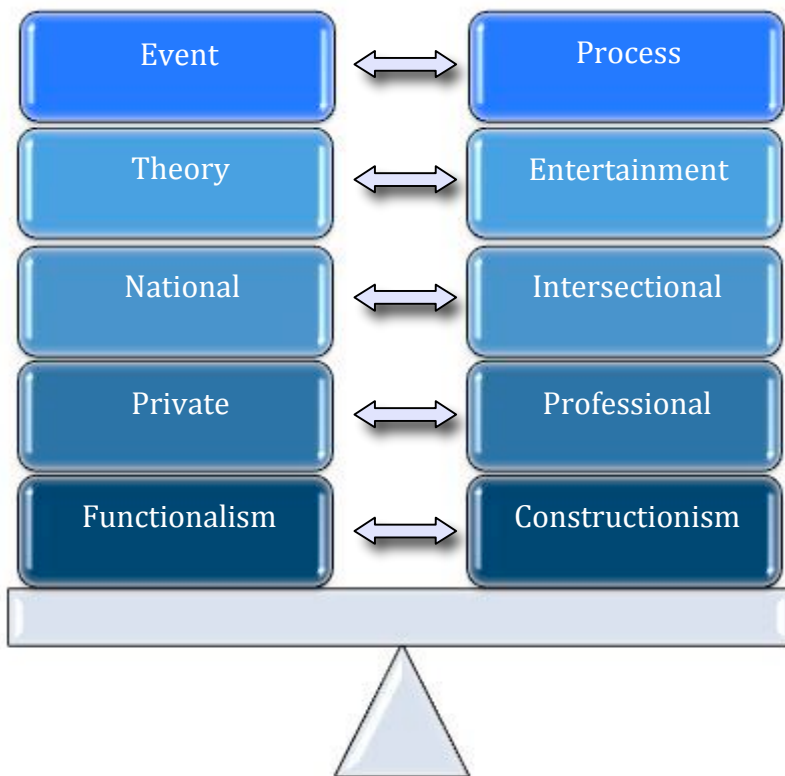


Figure 3. Balancing acts

five balancing acts we perceive to be central for understanding the company, illustrating many of the challenges of dealing with culture in general and the teaching of cross-cultural communication in particular.

**Event – Process:** In a sense, what the company sells is an intense experience, limited in space and time. Living Institute’s intention is to make the event a wake-up call for cultural awareness, but once the event is over and the client has walked out the door the company has very little insight into what knowledge their clients take with them or how they put it to use. While Living Institute rather easily can reach backward in time, incorporating the clients’ past experiences into a cultural narrative, it is much more difficult and challenging to move into their future, retaining a presence in their daily interpretations of culture and to ensure they maintain the “right” mindset. Although the action plan presented to the clients at the Danish Living Crash Course is one way of doing this, the use of a strong explanatory discourse is another. There is no guarantee the cultural awareness perspective will survive beyond the practical problems of the action plan and discourses might become unreflected explanations rather than analytical tools.

For all of the clients, the training session has been the start of some kind of process, but for a majority the end of the event has also marked the end of their relationship with Living

Institute. The clients have been set on their respective ways, but in most cases there seems to be a need for further guidance. Some of the clients have not considered going back to Living Institute since they have not perceived the company's area of competence relevant for them anymore; instead they have looked for knowledge in other places. Others have contemplated returning to Living Institute, but have not had the time or resources to do so. While Living Institute does have a continuous relationship with some of its clients, the company's work often consists of arranging sessions for new incoming and outgoing expatriates, rather than being part of an ongoing process. A tension resides here between what can be seen as a single eye-opening event loaded with meaning and the long-term experiential process of cultivating cultural awareness present in everyday practices. Living Institute depends on the staying power of its message rather than on a maintained presence in the client's organization. The question is if the complex understanding of culture that the company advocates can be successfully conveyed through a single event, or if a more processual way of learning is necessary to become truly effective. This mirrors the way in which culture often becomes objectified when packaged and sold, as discussed by O'Dell (2009), in relation to the culture analytical perspective on culture as an ever-evolving process.

**Theory – Entertainment:** Scientific validity and reasoning are central tenets at Living Institute. At the same time, the company wants to avoid being overly theoretical and to focus instead on delivering cultural awareness in a more entertaining package. At first glance, this might seem contradictory, but our study of Living Institute shows the two approaches can function in concert. Through the use of participant experience, jokes, pictures, movies and anecdotes, the company is able to teach theoretical concepts in an implicit way, immersing them in entertaining tropes. The ambition to “edutain” is more than just a way to deliver the message in an appetizing manner. As mentioned above, it also builds on the assumption that one is more receptive while having fun. There is of course always a risk of the “fun” overshadowing the seriousness of the issue at hand, in case the client does recognize the implied relevance, thus turning the training session into “pure” entertainment. The challenge then becomes to provoke the clients, making sure the ride is not too smooth. Then again, the consultants at Living Institute seem to excel at this task.

The fact that Living Institute handles this balancing act with great skill makes it somewhat harder to discern than the others; the lack of friction making it slip by without notice. If not managed so well, it could easily result in training becoming too dull and inaccessible. Or the training could end up too lightweight, without practical relevance. This is a balancing act that anyone who strives to work with theoretical concepts outside academia

must face. Even though it might not always be relevant to speak about “entertainment”, it highlights the importance of addressing the audience in a manner suitable to them.

**National – Intersectional:** The way Living Institute uses culture puts heavy emphasis on national origin both as a source of friction and as an explanatory factor for differences. The Cultural Awareness Workshops aim to give participants tools for working with people from various nationalities. The Danish Living Crash Course, for example, circles around the peculiarities of Danish culture. Hofstede’s (2001) dimensions of cultural difference are brought to the fore to illustrate challenges the clients might face when they enter a specific national culture. We find this to be problematic since national belonging has a tendency to overshadow other kinds of belongings, rendering invisible other ways in which people are similar or different. In the clients’ stories, national culture often is the primary tool with which differences are explained. This may result in that issues which cannot be explained by way of national culture *not* being regarded as culturally dependent but as “mere” individual differences. While this demonstrates the explanatory strength of Living Institute’s cultural discourse, it also illuminates the potential downside of this strong discourse. If wholeheartedly consumed, it may lead to some clients incorporating these explanations as “truths” about the “other” as well as of themselves.

While Living Institute claims it wants to deliver a complex understanding of culture, the heavy focus on national belonging makes this balance seem a bit lopsided. One must take into consideration that Living Institute and other “interculturalists” make their living from cultural frictions and that it consequently might be in their interest to focus on differences, especially those that are easier to talk about. Nationality is a relatively “safe” cultural category that lacks many of the more sensitively political connotations of class or gender. One must also bear in mind some of the company’s more cosmopolitan clients need a bit of convincing before even recognizing the significance of this relatively safe category of national belonging. The use of an intersectional perspective on culture might however be beneficial for anyone wanting to show that “culture matters” without giving an overly simplified definition of the concept. By applying other perspectives on cultural difference, one can indicate the highly contextual dependency of culture, illustrating how cultural difference can exist within a nation, for example.

**Private – Professional:** Living Institute operates in the world of business, promoting cultural knowledge as a tool for success in the transnational market. The implicit meaning of the slogan “culture matters” is that it matters in the world of business. Even when cultural awareness can improve the clients’ private life, it is implicitly motivated by business profits.

An expatriate suffering from “cultural shock”, without a functioning social life, will not be able to work. Cultural awareness becomes a tool for resolving problematic situations—a strategic hammer for beating down nails one would otherwise hurt oneself upon. While Living Institute’s training mainly is focused on enhancing clients’ business skills, this is achieved through the exploration of everyday social situations. Personal experience, professional or private, is used to illustrate the effects of culture, transforming them into a part of a cultural narrative.

Our point here is that we discern a potential tension between the level of discourse and lived experience. While the significance of learning cultural awareness by Living Institute is warranted through its economic narrative—which says the training will be useful in a business context—its effects stretch far and wide outside the world of business, a fact we believe may become obscured. As we understand it, the knowledge gained might help resolve issues at work, but it may just as well help the client find new friends or help sort out a romantic relationship. Naturally, Living Institute realizes, and teaches, that its clients’ private experiences will influence their work lives. However, we see a danger related to the company’s marketing strategy that runs the risk of reducing the emotional strain of cultural frictions into a discourse of business. Ultimately, this also illustrates the ambivalence of several clients who asked for more business related tools while simultaneously praising how the training helped them resolve personal issues they had been brooding upon. It seems like the cultural awareness is more than a mere hammer, but that its other uses might not be entirely obvious for the person holding it.

**Functionalism – Constructionism:** As our final balancing act we return to the relationship between the functionalist and constructivist approaches to culture. These two theoretical branches might seem incompatible; building on entirely different assumptions about culture’s meaning as well as communicating through different “languages”. For Living Institute, however, they function more as tools than as epistemological truths, serving specific purposes in the teaching of cultural knowledge. The company aims to deliver a complex understanding of culture in an accessible package by drawing on concepts from both traditions. The constructivist approach by itself might appear too academic and multifaceted, without obvious applicability. The functionalist approach, while accessible, runs the risk of creating a simplistic and static notion of culture, too distant from the company’s ideals of cultural awareness. In a way this could also be explained as the balance between ideals and practice. While Living Institute might promote a constructivist perspective on culture, it also must consider what actually works in relation to the clients. The goal is to deliver awareness



and knowledge, not to preach theory for theory's sake. The functionalist approach can then be interpreted as a Trojan horse of sorts, giving a familiar shape to an unfamiliar message through the use of business-oriented language and imagery.

Yet another way to interpret this balancing act is as finding the balance between delivering explanatory or analytical concepts. Living Institute endeavours to avoid giving the clients simple answers, encouraging them to explore and analyze for themselves. There is no guarantee the clients will use analytical concepts as intended, instead viewing them as explanatory examples, as we have seen on several occasions where discourses have been internalized unreflexively and stereotypes have been taken at face value.

So, what are the consequences for the concept of culture? While Living Institute prides itself on employing a complex, anthropological understanding of culture, much of the complexity seems to get lost during its transferal to the clients. Culture becomes more or less synonymous with national belonging, overshadowing most other kinds of differences and belongings, alternatively leading to them not being interpreted as culturally dependent. This also obscures the potential power relations residing in the concept of culture, turning cultural differences into mere questions of overcoming communication problems. The functionalist approach to culture employed by the company further reduces this into *specific* categories of difference in national culture, meaning that we are different but in the same ways. According to Öhlander (2005), this is a way of objectifying culture, turning it into a category independent from human existence, which is problematic since it obscures culture's contextual dependency.

We believe this reduction of meaning to be highly dependent on the business context in which Living Institute operates. The message has to be adjusted to the rules that apply in the business world, which in most cases means it has to be quick to access and easy to apply. To retain a level of theoretical depth, Living Institute has chosen the way of the "edutainer", creating a hybrid of serious problems and hilarious examples in the process. The prominent use of national culture as a source of explanation is likely also an outcome of the challenge of packaging, it being an uncontroversial source of friction that everyone can recognize and even laugh at: "Oh, that's just typically Danish!" To be appetizing, culture must be useful, while at the same time not being threatening and thus emphasis is put on the national and the ways in which it might cause a ruckus. This also leads us to another question: Is culture a commodity where it is possible to separate content from its wrappings? The use of the clients' previous experience and emphasis on creating positive new ones as a means of conveying cultural

knowledge blurs the line between message and envelope, turning culture into something that is experienced as much as it is learned.

The frequent use of the clients' own experiences also turns them into cultural beings, helping them see their own cultural baggage. To learn culture is not (only) to learn about the ways people differ "over there", but to recognize we all differ and we all are somewhat peculiar. While designing the courses for easy access, Living Institute seems to steer away from simple answers, instead striving to cultivate the clients' curiosities. By not giving all the answers and telling the whole story, the company leaves spaces for interpretation and exploration open to the clients. The final and perhaps most important thing Living Institute does to culture is to put it on the agenda. By claiming culture matters, the company makes it matter. While helping its clients reach cultural awareness, Living Institute instills something more into them, helping them not only to recognize but also to explore and manipulate cultural frictions, delivering a cultural confidence of sorts.

## Insights

Former clients of Living Institute have provided us with valuable insights into their experiences before, during and after participating in the company's training sessions. We have analyzed and problematized this information throughout this thesis and as part of the process we have been able to identify a number of problem areas and potentials we believe are relevant for the future development of Living Institute.

**Defining culture** – The concept of culture is at the core of Living Institute's enterprise. Despite this, there seems to be some confusion among the clients as to what culture actually means and in what ways it affects them. We believe Living Institute would benefit from using a clearer and more inclusive definition of culture, helping the clients see it is not only nationality that influences them as cultural beings. This would potentially also broaden Living Institute's range of products. Since the company deals in culture, a broader definition would also be a statement for a wider range of competence.

**Process, coaching and follow-ups** – For all of the clients, the training received from Living Institute has been the start of a personal or organizational process. Living Institute would benefit from improving its capability to harness this catalytic effect. Personal coaching, follow-up meetings or processual work with entire organizations are called for and Living Institute needs to make the clients aware they can provide these services. This could range from working with fully-fledged diversity management to opening a hotline for cultural

emergencies. A continuous collaboration would also be an opportunity for Living Institute to deliver a more complex understanding of culture over time.

**Cultural champions** – Many of the former clients turn into cultural activists in their own organizations, becoming everything from the driving force behind processes for cultural change to the co-workers' cultural go-to guy. Could the promotion of cultural champions become a conscious strategy for Living Institute? The training does not only instill “cultural consciousness”, but “cultural confidence”, “cultural creativity” and even “cultural courage”! By making this even clearer to the clients, Living Institute's influence could reach an even larger part of the client's organization.

**Observing Institute** – Living Institute is already applying methods and theories from anthropology. This could be taken a step further through the use of quick ethnography, allowing for even more tightly tailored products suited to the clients' needs. Direct observations would allow Living Institute to identify the problems themselves instead of only relying on problem descriptions from clients. A deeper relation with the clients' organizations would also allow Living Institute to work on a broader scale, potentially moving beyond “cultural awareness” and into implementing solutions for entire organizations over time.

**Danish Crash Course 1, 2, 3** – Some clients want easily applicable business tools, others want help with social issues and some just want to understand what is going on around them. It can be hard to encompass all needs and desires in one event, especially when the participants' previous experiences vary. A three-step model Danish Living Crash Course would allow the clients to decide their own level of engagement. The first step, directed at expatriates fresh off the plane, could include the basics for navigating Danish culture and business. The second could be directed at clients coming out of their “honeymoon”, needing a broader cultural awareness to deal with increasing frictions. The third would be taken after a longer period of time, once initial problems have been resolved, delivering a more long-term approach to living in a foreign cultural context.

**Cultural macaroni pictures** – According to Ristilammi (2000) events continue to exist by inscribing themselves in the participants' memories. This can be aided by the use of souvenirs, a physical object becoming a recurring reminder of what the participant has learned. In a way, Living Institute already does this through the use of the action plan, but we believe this could be improved further. Perhaps the clients could produce cultural “macaroni pictures”, assembling some kind of physical object they can take home, show their family and put up on the fridge. This could be one way for Living Institute to retain a presence throughout the client's cultural awareness process.

### Applying oneself

Needless to say, the writing of this thesis has been a challenging experience since we ourselves have been juggling a number of balancing acts, the most prominent one being to write an academic thesis at the same time as trying to create applicable knowledge for Living Institute. Obviously, the two are not mutually exclusive opposites, but at times one purpose has obscured the other. In essence, it becomes a balance between being critical and being creative, identifying problems as well as potentials. “Applying” is to a large extent a question of toning down the scientific discourse while retaining the knowledge created through it. From this perspective scientific validity also becomes a more problematic concept. Of course, the “applying” should not go against scientific findings, but one has a certain freedom of interpreting consequences and suggesting future courses of action.

As cultural analysts, we are naturally interested in the ways in which culture is put to use, especially when it carries the anthropological connotations utilized by Living Institute. Consequently, this leads to a sting of disappointment when one fails to see the promised complexity and it is easy to appropriate a critical stance. However, when criticizing Living Institute for delivering a simplified concept of culture one must also remember this criticism comes from a biased position. As cultural analysts we have had several years to develop our cultural awareness and we should know better than anyone that it is quite naïve to believe an equally complex understanding of culture can be taught and learned from scratch during an hour, a day or even a week. Culture and cultural awareness are processes. What Living Institute does is help instigate them.

As we already have mentioned, this study could have benefited from the opportunity to perform participant observations in the clients’ organizations. The problem to gain access reflects some of the issues faced by Living Institute, demonstrating the challenge of finding a place within the fast-paced world of business as an academic. Direct access would have given us a better view of how cultural frictions are generated in their day-to-day routines and a deeper understanding of how Living Institute could fit into these routines. Closer observation would also have allowed us to acquaint ourselves with how the clients’ cultural skills are put into practice, something which we cannot address with certainty from the data we have collected. The relationship between what people say and what they do is often complex, as anthropologist Daniel Miller (2001) points out. Often, that which people say is far more reflexive and critical than what they then actually do. On the other hand, one could argue the discourse of cultural awareness to some extent is its practice and that it is through language that we can interpret and understand culture, as Living Institute’s use of participant

experiences seems to indicate. Nevertheless, in a future study it would have been interesting to get closer to the students of intercultural communication, especially the expatriates, to gain a better understanding of how culture actually influences them and how they chose to tackle these issues. Further studies of consultancies such as Living Institute would also be rewarding, both for the consultants themselves and from an academic point of view.

In accordance with Ehn and Löfgren (2009), we believe there is much to gain from a closer relationship between academia and practicing consultants and that collaboration has great potential for the development of new skills and methods. The utilitarian approach to theory and methods one has to adopt when applying academic skills can be a good reminder of their actual purpose—to help us make sense of the complex world in which we live. The balancing acts Living Institute performs are also relevant to consider for anyone wanting to apply their culture analytical skills outside of academia. Striking a balance between theoretical depth, applicable suggestions, methodological approaches and relevantly adapted communication is no easy task, but it is only by consciously performing these balancing acts that we can hope to apply ourselves while retaining the perspectives that make us unique.

There is, however, a friction between the world of academia and that of consultancy, especially in the field of intercultural communication. The discipline seems to have lost touch with its anthropological roots at the same time as anthropologists seem unwilling to contribute to the discussion, as Dahlén (1997), Larsson (2010) and the senior consultant all point out. One reason for this, according to Hannerz (1996), might be the omnipresence of culture, resulting in a “devaluation” of the concept and thus a need to “guard” their own definitions. The lack of anthropologists and other cultural analysts participating in the debate or development of the field does not seem to be a very constructive approach. If proponents of a constructivist approach to culture steer clear of the field, the functionalist approach is left unchallenged to define the ways in which cultural awareness is taught. As we have shown in this thesis, the teaching of culture brings with it many problems—but as we along with Living Institute hope to have proven, there is much that cultural analysis can contribute to the field of intercultural communication. After all, we all agree that culture matters. The question is just who gets to define what that means.

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Living Institute's website on cultural awareness from

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