Finding the way towards a feminist business ethic: exploring the cultural dimensions of femininity, masculinity, and power distance

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It is possible that a company's business ethic could be influenced by the nature of a country's gender-culture in which a company operates.

The purpose of this paper is to look at certain cultural characteristics, that exist in a *country culture* as a way of knowing *how* some companies might be more capable than companies in other countries in achieving a feminist business ethic. Two markedly different country cultures will be examined: Denmark and Italy.[3] Geert Hofstede's theory of cultural analysis will be primarily drawn on to explore why the Danish and Italian cultures are so different in their business ethic.[4] Denmark is an example of a feminine culture and Italy is an example of a masculine culture (Hofstede 1998b: 81). The focus will be on Hofstede's dimensions of *femininity* and *masculinity* , and *power distance*. Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner have also developed and analysed cultural dimensions, but they have not focused on the gender distinction as Hofstede has done.[5] This paper will demonstrate that the gender culture of a country does need attention because it contributes to understanding interpersonal communication and behaviour between superiors and subordinates and the work process.

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[3] Italian is used here to refer to the majority of Italy and *not* the South Tyrol which is a Germanic culture in the Alto Adige province of Italy.

[4] See Hofstede, G. 1980. *Culture's Consequences*: *International differences in work-related values* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage); Hofstede, G. 1983. 'National cultures in four dimensions: A research-based theory of cultural differences among nations', *International Studies of Management and Organization*, XII (1-2): 46-74.

[5] Trompenaars, F. & C.M. Hampden-Turner 1997. *Riding the Waves of Culture*: *understanding cultural diversity in global business* (London: Nicholas Brealey)

In this context, the concepts of *care*, *modesty,* and *taking the time* will also be explored. The conclusion drawn in this paper suggests that a feminine country culture offers the best hope for a feminist ethic taking root in a company or business environment.

Before beginning we first need to know, what is culture? Gary Ferraro defined (1994: 17) culture as follows:

> *Culture is everything that people have, think, and do as members of their society*. […] When people *think*, ideas, values, attitudes, and beliefs are present.

How people think, their values and attitudes, could predict how some companies, dependent on which country they are operating in, would be receptive or not to a feminist business ethic.

Geert Hofstede 'was one of the first researchers to question the adaptability of U.S. management theories and practices to other cultural contexts' (Usunier 1993: 73). Hofstede's theory outlined various theoretical elements that are implicit in a culture: individualistic versus collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and feminine versus masculine.

The dimensions of *femininity* and *masculinity* and *power distance*, appear to be the most relevant to understanding why or why not a feminist business ethic is achievable or not. But some disagree that gender contributes to influencing management styles and instead argue that the influences come from the country of origin (Toren et al 1997: 235), or even from intra-cultural variation as Hofstede's analysis is viewed as being to universalistic because it ignores subtle cultural elements (Au & Cheung 2004: 1339-40). There is a gap in the literature about a country's gender-culture informing ethical behaviour of companies. Furthermore, the literature, especially in the English language, concerning relations between managers and subordinates in Italy—especially resistance to changing masculine organizational structure and treatment of people—is *very* minimal and more research is needed (Macri et al

2002: 301-05).[6] However, in this paper it will be demonstrated that a *country's gender culture* does influence a company's business ethic.

To begin, *feminist* and *feminine* are not synonymous. According to Hofstede (1998a:19) :'Feminism is an ideology taking different forms in *masculine* and *feminine* cultures.' In Hofstede's analysis, *two* types of feminism are distinguished : masculine and feminine. The *masculine feminism* generally is 'about competition between genders', .i.e. that women will also have opportunity in the employment market as men do.[7] *Feminine feminism* is stressing more the equalizing of gender roles, i.e. trying to modify traditional stereotypes of genderized divisions of labor both inside and outside the domestic sphere and power sharing (Hofstede 1998a:19). An example of feminine feminism is: in Denmark it is common to see men participate in taking care of children, fathers also being able to take paternal leave, and state funded community child care centers are the norm (Dahl et al 1996: 51, 293-5; Newell 1996: 37). In Italy child care is primarily relegated to the women at home, i.e. mothers and grandmothers who care for the children (Maione 2000: 92,96). [8] However, Hostede notes (1998a: 19) that *masculine feminism* is not necessarily related to the masculine / feminism dimension." It is the *feminine feminism* that appears to be more relevant when thinking about a feminist business ethic being successful or not in a given culture. Redistribution of roles might have a more likely acceptance in a society that has a more open attitude to "interdependence between people" and promoting to help and care for others (Usunier 1993: 74) as opposed to a culture who is characterized by dominant male traits such as competitiveness, assertiveness, and impatience (Ferraro 1994: 92).

After having delineated the two types of feminism in Hofstede's analysis,

[6] See Giangreco, A. 2001. 'Resistance to change of middle managers: a case study of the Italian national electric company (ENEL)', *Economia*, 5 (118).
[7] For a discussion about women's entrance into the Italian labour market see Maione, V. 2000. 'The female labour market in Italy from a historical perspective', *Women in Management* Review, 15 (2): 90-101.
[8] See Saraceno, C. 2004. 'The Italian family from the 1960's to the present' *Modern Italy* 9 (1): 47-58.

it now necessitates comparing a feminine culture with a masculine culture. But what does this all mean for a concept of a feminist business ethic? In other words, in what cultures would a feminist business ethic be more likely to succeed and where would it be more difficult to take place? We are confronted with two questions that inform each other. First, what is a *feminine* culture and what is a *masculine* culture? Second, how is this femininity and masculinity dichotomy relevant to a discussion about a feminist business ethic? To answer these questions we will begin by defining what characterizes a feminine versus a masculine culture.

First, a feminine country culture is quality of life oriented and embraces values of *care*, a *listening ear*, *taking the time* to do something, emphasis
on relationships, empathy, and a personal tone versus indifference towards people (Hofstede 1998a: 19; Arrindell 1998: 47-8; Robbins 1996: 567-8).[9] Whereas a masculine country culture is *quantity of life oriented*, meaning it is materialistic, performance and competition driven, and thrives on inequalities of power, (Arrindell 1998: 47-8). A country's culture is predominantly masculine or feminine. However, individual persons are not necessarily polarized, because for example, an individual person coming from a feminine culture might exhibit characteristics of both types of cultures (Hofstede 1998a: 19).

Denmark is an example of a feminine culture and Italy is an example of a masculine culture (Usunier 1993: 74-75; Tixier 1996 :24). A cultural norm unique to the feminine Danish culture is the concept of *modesty* based on the *Janteloven*: modesty versus assertiveness (Hofstede 1998b: 84).[10] In Danish thinking modesty is also conflated with the idea of equality, between all persons and genders in having the right to speak, participate and share in decision-making. Modesty, as we shall see later, does contribute to a feminine feminist business ethic.

[9] See Manning, R.C. 1992. *Speaking from the Heart*: *A Feminist Perpective on Ethics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield).

[10] Geert Hofstede's translation from the original Danish version written by Aksel Sandemose 1933/1938. 'Du skal ikke tro …'

Elements of Italian culture sharply contrast with Danish culture; observable divisions of class with its inherent inequalities of power distribution and in how people are treated are a given in Italian society. Italian culture is more pretentious and formal in its treatment *of* and *for* people, and it is difficult for persons coming from different social backgrounds to interact comfortably with each other.[11]

How can we describe the Danish feminine values? These feminine values appear to be rooted and are practised in Denmark's social welfare state in its public social system, where there is a society-driven need to care for people whether it is the elderly, young children, the handicapped, or for the unemployed; it also offers education opportunities for not only young people but for unemployed adults (Dahl et al 1996: 51,293-95; Newell 1996: 36-7). In contrast, despite Italy having child care and other social services, it is not on par with Denmark and still presents a burden for employed Italian women (Maione 2000: 92, 99). Danish business people also *care* about family matters and
will give precedence to this over business matters when necessary (Hofstede 1998a: 4-5). In contrast, in Italy there is a general attitude of apathy on the part of companies towards the needs of employees with respect to their family's needs (Maione 2000: 99).

To further illustrate feminine values at work we could of course consider the ancient example of the Good Samaritan in the Bible (Hofstede 1998a:18).
One thing it does show us is that we ought to stop, reflect, and *take the time* to make an effort to care about other peoples needs. A modern example that is more relevant to the purposes of this discussion is this writer's experience in a Danish business college. In Denmark it is common that when a student academically excelled in areas where her fellow students did not, it was expected that *this* student help the others students so that everyone could reach a similar level of performance, so

[11] But there also seems to be a lack of literature in the English language about the feminine culture of women in Italy, so it is difficult to know the extent of power relations implicit in womens lives, not only in their relations with men, but also between women and of women. See T. De Lauretis 1990. *Sexual Difference* : *A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press);
Muraro, L. 1991. *L'ordine simbolico della madre* (Rome: Editori Riuniti).

that no one was left behind. This way of thinking—*caring about the other*— is profound and beneficial for productivity and self-esteem among people working together. The experience of helping along one's fellow classmates, is a real-life example of a *feminist ethic* at work. At a glance however, it also appears as yet another engagement with team work. This is *not* just about team work, it is much more than this: it is about caring and nurturing. Making certain that everyone in the group achieves to a near similar level, is an example of care and nurturing each person in the work team. It must be noted also that the Danes are very business savvy, but despite this they instill an ethic of concern—care— into the minds of their people when achieving a productive work goal. This attitude of caring in practice enhances not only the productivity but the motivation and self-esteem of the employees.

The interpersonal relations, and the equality of respect given to people, is profoundly different between the Danish and Italian cultures. In Danish culture, the tradition for modesty, encourages communication, interaction and discussion among co-workers and management—everyone has a right to say something when they want, as no one is better than another. Listening to people's suggestions or their critique is a hallmark of the Danish cultural tradition for discussion. Moreover, fully informing persons whether they are one's employees or one's customers, demonstrates treating them as *persons*. The Danes also have a penchant for scepticism in the meaning that they will always ask questions, never thinking twice about questioning authority, or even laughing in a very formal situation.[12] The Italians also demonstrate scepticism, but are much less inclined to question authority. In Italy there is no emphasis on harmonizing interpersonal relations between people belonging to different social class levels; subordinates are not empowered, and would not question authority, but instead experience

[12] A recent example of this is in July 1997 when President Clinton was a guest of the Queen of Denmark and gave a public speech; the audience laughed at a statement that Clinton made. In American and Italian culture this is considered very rude, but in Danish culture no one is considered to be so above everyone else that one cannot be rediculed or criticized—even in public.

being ordered around.[13] Italians also appear more rushed when talking to people in business contexts. The scope is to arrive at a formal, authoritative, decision in the shortest possible time, especially if there is social and organizational disparity between the two parties. This sense of hurriedness is considered dehumanising in some cultures (Ferraro 1994: 92). And, this is the point where it necessitates pulling in the *power distance* dimension.

Power distance is 'to what extent a society and its individual members tolerate an unequal distribution of power in organizations and in society as a whole'(Usunier 1993:74). There are low, medium, and high power distance societies. For example, the U.K. and the Untied States are in the medium category (Hostede 1998a: 81).

In Denmark the power distance between managers and subordinates is very low compared to a high power distance in Italy (Hofstede 1998b: 80-1;Tixier 1996: 22-3). In Italy a typical manager (predominantly male) will exert their authority in various ways: giving orders, not speaking directly to subordinates, dressing elegantly and expensively, and minimal contact. Furthermore, a superior's subordinates actually expect to be treated in a subservient way and

it is not questioned (Usunier 1993: 74). For example, in Denmark, managers tend to dress more informal, but dressing casual or formal depending on the occasion.[14] It is common for a head of a department or manager to sit with their co-workers and drink a cup of coffee during morning breaks. In Italy it would be quite the opposite situation; managers would not be taking a coffee and *brioche* together with their workers because this transgresses the border between those in power and the subordinates. In Denmark there is an *accepted* equality between people / employees of different levels (Hofstede 1998b: 84), this is characteristic of low power cultures (Usunier 1993: 74).

A Danish manager will listen to their subordinates's suggestions; an employee may always question or criticize the boss. No one gives orders

[13] This author's conversation with managers in Italy.

[14] Danish business women wear either very little or no makeup and jewelry, as compared to Italian business women

because it's all about *giving* and *seeking* advice; it is a reciprocal work process—shared and engaging the consciousness of all involved (Irvin 2002: 373). Decisions are often taken as a group only after discussions and receiving input from everyone (Tixier 1996:24; Robbins 1996: 568).[15] In a environment of competition between subordinates and even between managers, is detrimental to nurturing cooperation (Irvin 2002: 153). In Italy superiors will take decisions and it is especially difficult for subordinates to talk on equal terms with them, or to contribute to any decision making. In a low power distance culture, such as Denmark, transgressing the border of power is not something people think about. In Italian companies there is resistance to both transgression of power bondaries and to change, and it is not yet fully understood (Macri et al 2002: 301-05).

What is especially noteworthy in the Danish culture, and pertinent to the discussion about a feminist business ethic, *is* the emphasis on argument rather than status. Moreover, this dichotomy also demonstrates the divide between *power sharing* and *unshared power*. The tradition for *argument* and *power sharing* is rooted in the Danish 'obsessive concern with modesty' and its conflation with equality (Tixier 1996: 24; Hofstede 1998b: 84). To be more precise: caring means we care that all people have a voice and are equally autonomous, in the meaning that they are not mere *occupants* of positions who just take orders from a boss, but are actually empowered.[16] The caring concept can also be extended to co-workers who ought to engage with each other; in this sense they are also achieving a self-actualization as human beings (Robbins 1996: 213-14).[17]

But what is essential to highlight here is that, a company's ethic, i.e. in how it treats its workers, managers, and even its customers, as persons, is directly influenced by the country's culture, hence it informs the ethics of a company. The ethics in a company will influence the communication methods, interaction between workers and managers,

[15] These elements also noted by the author while working in Denmark.
[16] For a good discussion about job autonomy, see Au, K. & .M. W.L.Cheung 2004. 'Intra-cultural variation in Job Autonomy in 42 countries', *Organization Studies*, 25 (8):1339-1362.
[17] Abraham Maslow's theory of *hierarchy of needs*.

management art, maternity / paternity leave, sick leave, and even educational programs for employees (all levels). The nurturing or care of the employee, whether they are a worker or a manager, is of essence here, because it is when people feel that they are cared for that they feel good about their job, as it motivates them to work. In this regard the *care attitude*, of a company and amongst the employees themselves, could also influence job motivation and satisfaction, and quality of life—these ideas can be attributed to both Abraham Maslow and Frederick Herzberg (Woodall 1996: 36; Robbins 1996: 216 - 17).[18]

The view presented in this paper is only a partial view and is by no means conclusive, certainly more cross-cultural analysis is needed about the Italian situation. The discussion has offered some theoretical criteria that need further investigation, as well as, first-hand lived experience in Denmark and Italy that can at least inform about areas that have been neglected by researchers in the areas of business studies and the social sciences.[19] There is always the concern about why power structures exist the way they do and how to overcome them; more research is certainly needed in knowing what processes contribute to resistance to change. It is only when we understand this that a care ethic could, in theory, be implemented and eventually take root. Interpersonal relations between superiors and subordinates, and attitudes towards family needs of workers is yet another area open for research in Italy.

Where would a feminist business ethic stand a chance of being accepted or setting roots that gain acceptance? Argument and power sharing appear as nonexistent concepts in Italian business environments. The elements of a *caring attitude*, *modesty*, and *taking the time*, appear to be at the heart of a feminist ethic, but more research needs to be done to understand why and how such an ethic could be implemented in a primarily masculine culture.

It appears that a feminist ethic seems hopefully more viable in those countries that already embrace feminine cultural values along with an

[18] Frederick Herzberg's *motivation-hygiene* theory.

[19] The authors would also like to thank two anonymous reviewers in Denmark and Italy for their critical input.

informal attitude toward interacting with people and therefore have a low power distance.

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