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Comprehensiveness versus Pragmatism: Consensus at the Japanese–Dutch Interface

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ABSTRACT By comparing the views of managers working at the interface of two consensus-oriented societies, Japan and the Netherlands, we show important differences between the consensus decision-making processes as seen by Japanese and Dutch managers. These differences relate to how complete the agreement of opinion should be in order to speak of consensus, with the Japanese managers demanding a more complete consensus than the Dutch. The processes and conditions that Japanese and Dutch managers see as leading to consensus also differ. Japanese consensus is based on a more ordered, sequential process than Dutch consensus. Our respondents differed deeply regarding the role of the hierarchy in their own and the others' consensus processes, with both Japanese and Dutch managers seeing their own consensus process as less hierarchical. Our findings show that the concept of consensus is interpreted quite differently by Japanese and Dutch managers. This is an important warning for companies operating at the interface of these two societies. More in general our research illustrates the usefulness for international management research of detailed comparative studies focusing not on stark contrasts but on more subtle differences between management practices.

INTRODUCTION

In many societies achieving general agreement concerning important decisions is more than just the preferred way to make decisions, it is seen as 'indispensable' (Moscovici and Doise, 1994, p. 43). But what actually *is* consensus? Although the concept has a prominent place in social theory, it seems to mean different things to different researchers. The same can be expected from practitioners, in particular if they come from different societies. The practical implications may be important, e.g. when different decision-making processes complicate the achievement of consensus or when partners even differ in their assessments whether consensus has been reached.

In this paper, we show that the concept of consensus can indeed be interpreted in different ways by comparing views on consensus in firms from two societies that have

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been characterized as consensus-oriented, namely the Netherlands and Japan. The Dutch quest for consensus in decision making has been pointed out by d'Iribarne (1989) in an ethnographic study comparing a US, a Dutch and a French plant of the French aluminium company Pchiney and has been confirmed in a number of studies (Lawrence, 1991; Noorderhaven, 2002; Sorge, 1992). A parallel can be drawn with early observations of Japan. In the late 1970s, researchers used the term consensus to characterize important aspects of Japan (Nakane, 1973). This is also reflected in studies of Japanese firms. Consensus decision making is now generally accepted to be an important characteristic of Japanese organizations (Ouchi, 1981; Simeon, 2002; Taplin, 1995; Trevor, 1983; Yoshino, 1968).

Although both Japan and the Netherlands have been given the label of 'consensus society', these two countries appear to differ substantially as representatives of 'Western' and 'Eastern' cultures. This raises the question whether the meaning of the concept of consensus is the same in both countries. It seems not unlikely that quite divergent social realities can be found under the label of consensus society. If this is true, more knowledge about the meaning of consensus in these societies is theoretically interesting, as a demonstration of different social constructions of reality (Berger and Luckman, 1966). Focusing on the specific subject of consensual decision making, across management systems in two different cultures, we identify more complex and subtle differences than are commonly acknowledged in the comparative management literature. Uncovering these differences is also practically relevant, in particular where representatives of these societies closely interact and may run into tacit disagreements regarding what consensus is or should be.

The results and implications of our research can provide practical benefits to practitioners beyond the general prescriptions that exist in the field. Specifically, we show that the Japanese and Dutch differ about the degree of agreement necessary for consensus to exist as well as about the decision processes that lead to consensus. Moreover, the Japanese and Dutch have divergent views of the role managerial hierarchies play in consensus processes in their own and in the other's culture. These differences should be acknowledged and carefully taken into account by managers working at the Japanese–Dutch interface. We believe that the lessons we derive from our study also have broader implications. International management practitioners should be careful not to extend their own taken-for-granted interpretations of business practices to foreign nationals, whether this concerns consensus or any other important phenomenon.

We develop these implications from our study of both the understandings of consensus and how these understandings differ between the Dutch and Japanese respondents in our study. We develop our empirical evidence by drawing on interviews of Japanese and Dutch respondents who have daily interactions in their workplace with their colleagues from the other nationality and are thus confronted with a continual need to resolve the interpretations of what constitutes consensus from both a Japanese and a Dutch perspective. By inviting respondents who work at the Japanese–Dutch interface to reflect on these differences, we identify important differences and similarities in understanding. More specifically, we find that for the Japanese a more complete agreement of opinions is needed for consensus to exist than for the Dutch. The Japanese also emphasize the

importance to work towards consensus in a specific sequence of activities, while the Dutch process is more ad hoc and improvised. Overall, we typify the Japanese form of consensus as 'comprehensive' and the Dutch one as 'pragmatic'.

THE CONCEPT OF CONSENSUS

The word consensus in common usage refers to 'agreement in opinion: the collective unanimous opinion of a number of persons' (*Oxford English Dictionary*, Vol. II, 1970, pp. 850–1). Reviewing the use of the concept of consensus in sociological research, Scheff (1967) distinguished two divergent meanings. The majority of investigators employ a rather informal and common sense definition: consensus refers to the extent to which individuals in a group agree on a certain issue. This corresponds roughly with the definition given above. Scheff (1967, p. 33) calls this 'individual agreement'. The second tradition stresses the co-orientation of individuals in a group towards a given issue, rather than their individual orientations. The crucial difference is that in the second approach the subjective perceptions of agreement are taken into account. Deeper levels of consensus include the perception that alter agrees, and that alter knows that ego agrees, and so on. In Scheff's words, 'complete consensus on an issue exists in a group when there is an infinite series of reciprocating understandings between the members of the group concerning the issue' (Scheff, 1967, p. 37). Consensus can move along a continuum: people can agree without being aware of it (in which case consensus as defined by Scheff not really exists), or be aware in varying degrees of the fact that they are agree and are aware of that. Thus, Scheff's analysis points at the importance of paying attention to perceptions when studying consensus.

A cornerstone of consensus, differentiating it from majority vote procedures, is the right of an individual to block a decision endorsed by the rest of the group (Renz, 2006). Consensus can also be distinguished from unanimity on the one hand and compromise on the other. In the case of unanimity all concerned agree about the best solution (Noorderhaven, 1995, p. 203). This optimum is what consensus processes aim at, but do not always completely achieve. At the other side of the continuum we can distinguish compromise. In the case of compromise 'an agreement is reached to patch up differences, that is, to avoid discord and put the differences "on hold", without their having been settled in the mind of each individual' (Moscovici and Doise, 1994, p. 20). Compromise can be seen as abandoning the expectation that genuine consensus can be reached (Van Dyk, 2006). Consensus sits in the middle, and consists of the exploration of 'various conflicting viewpoints and possibilities, focuses them, and directs them towards an entente that all acknowledge' (Moscovici and Doise, 1994, p. 1). The outcome is not always a decision preferred by all concerned, but the option chosen and the argumentation leading to its choice are acceptable to everyone (Renz, 2006).

The discussion above indicates that consensus can be considered both a process and a product. Discussion on the basis of certain rules plays an important role in the process. Various procedural guidelines for the consensus process have been formulated (see the references in Noorderhaven, 1995 and Renz, 2006). It will be clear that a group can follow a consensus process without actually reaching consensus (Renz, 2006). The opposite is less clear: can consensus be formed through a process that rides roughshod

over consensus procedures? This question is all the more important where a consensus over consensus procedures does not seem to exist (Renz, 2006).

This brief discussion illustrates that consensus is a 'disarmingly complex' concept (Van Lear and Marbry, 1999, p. 30). Consensus is multidimensional, and exists in the perceptions of the individuals involved. Renz (2006), in a study of residents of four co-housing communities, all strongly committed to consensus decision making, concluded that there is no single form of consensus. If that is true of these groups of like-minded individuals in one particular country, it will certainly be true of individuals from different countries who may be less consistently and less strongly committed to consensus. Van Dyk (2006, p. 409) also concludes that although consensus is 'at the centre of the academic and political debate', the phenomenon still has a 'shadowy existence'. Sager and Gastil (1999, p. 78) suggest that what is needed is 'probing more deeply into individuals' understandings of consensus'. This is exactly what we do in this study, focusing on individual managers at the Japanese–Dutch interface. Before we move into a discussion of our empirical findings, we will briefly describe the consensus contexts in Japan and in the Netherlands.

CONSENSUS IN TWO COUNTRIES

The importance of consensus in Japanese society is signified by the concept of *wa*, 'the avoidance of wanton opposition and the importance of building cooperative, benevolent, and trusting relationships' (Hill, 1995, p. 124). It signifies the primacy of group harmony, even if at the expense of one's individual self-interest (Brannigan, 1999; MacColl, 1995). This importance of the group has been related to the production of rice, which required cooperation in the development of irrigation systems and the transplantation of seedling from nursery beds to rice paddies at the right moment (Hill, 1995; Taplin, 1995). Its importance shows in the education of Japanese children who are brought up with the sense that being banished from a relevant group is a major tragedy (Kiritani, 1999) and who are thus socialized into complying with the general point of view. At the macro level 'groupism' has been a central vision underlying consensus politics, although this consensus has always remained partial, covering up lingering differences of interest (Edwards, 1997).

At the micro level of decision making within organizations two specific processes are associated with consensus, *nemawashi* and *ringiseido*. As a matter of fact, these processes are usually equated with the traditional consensus-based decision making in Japanese organizations. The literal meaning or denotation of the word *nemawashi* originally refers to cutting of the roots of a tree circumferentially around the base of the trunk, one or two years before the tree will be transplanted. *Ne* means root or base, *mawashi* means to go around. The tree will then form new roots that will help it survive when transplanted (Fetters, 1995). In the context of organizational decision making *nemawashi* takes on the connotation of 'the cautious feeling-out of affected parties before action is taken, prior consultation of all affected parties, and behind the scenes negotiation before formal negotiations' (MacColl, 1995, p. 376). Parties are approached and consulted bilaterally in a sequential fashion.

This process occurs for two reasons. First, with the process of *nemawashi*, in bilateral meetings open and conflictual discussions are possible without a fear that somebody

looses face in front of his peers. Furthermore, addressing the right people in the right order is important because in this way the emerging consensus will become more and more difficult to refuse by each additional party involved (Fetters, 1995).

Two aspects of *nemawashi* can be distinguished, both characterized by informal, off-the-record communication. 'First, when a plan is in the making, the initiator of the plan needs to modify or polish it by contacting all the people the plan would involve after it is officially approved . . . The second aspect is that in order for the plan to be approved unanimously, all the major decision makers have to be fully informed informally of it' (Sumihara, 2002, p. 329).

Regarding the relationship between *nemawashi* and the formal hierarchy, two divergent viewpoints emerge from the literature. Some see *nemawashi* as a masquerade of top-down hierarchical decisions that automatically, even if involuntary, are accepted by those consulted (Kiritani, 1999). Others, however, present a quite different view, according to which the final decision, although taken at a higher management level, is little more than a formality: 'although the final responsibility for a particular decision may rest with nominal decision maker in Japan, the actual decision-making process is a cooperative effort with the cooperation of everyone involved in or affected by the decision's implementation' (Fetters, 1995, p. 379). What all commentators agree on is that *nemawashi* is a tediously time-consuming process (Brannigan, 1999).

Ringiseido, or the *ringi* system, is a more formal variation on *nemawashi*. Whereas *nemawashi* is largely oral, *ringiseido* proceeds around a formal document, the *ringi*, which is circulated among the relevant organization members (Ala and Cordeiro, 2000). Recipients can indicate approval by affixing their *hanko*, personal seal, on the document. A *hanko* placed upside-down means rejection; a *hanko* affixed sideways indicates indifference (Ala and Cordeiro, 2000). *Ringiseido* is an essential element of decision-making in Japanese firms (see, e.g. Sasaki, 1981; Tennant and Roberts, 2001; Zimmerman, 1985) but we will not discuss it in any detail as it proved of minor importance in the firms of our study. This is understandable given the relatively limited size of many of the organizations involved (especially when measured in the number of Japanese managers) and the likely impediments to the adoption of such a formal system in an intercultural setting.

In comparison to research on Japanese decision-making, Dutch decision-making has been little studied. In the literature, there are no apparent concepts that parallel as the concepts of *nemawashi* and *ringiseido*. However, a particular breed of consensus is said to exist. This is the Dutch *poldermodel*, a corporatist agreement at top level between labour unions, employers' associations, and the government. More in particular, the 'Dutch miracle' of relatively high growth of both national income and employment in the 1990s has been ascribed by many observers to the consensus formed in the early 1980s between the aforementioned parties that a prolonged wage restraint was necessary (Delsen, 2002; Visser and Hemerijck, 1997).

The word *poldermodel* refers to the polders that are protected by dikes. Constructing and maintaining these dikes required joint efforts, obliging representatives of various factions and parties to reach and maintain a general agreement. Becker (2001, p. 471) describes the Dutch culture as one in which 'talking to each other and looking for common solutions is ingrained in everyday life'. This 'consensualism' has the effect that 'disputatious exchanges and conflict are avoided, and the overt intention to impose someone's

will on others is considered counterproductive' (Becker, 2001, p. 476). Van Dyk (2006, p. 423) sees the *poldermodel* as 'a symbolic consensus about the necessity and the existence of consensual solutions'. d'Iribarne (1989) links the Dutch preference for consensus to the political history: in the delicate balance between the provinces, lengthy processes of persuasion and mutual accommodation were necessary to reach decisions. The cohabitation of different religious groups (mainly Protestants and Catholics) was regulated through the same mechanisms (d'Iribarne, 1996, p. 33).

The consensus-inclination of the Dutch *poldermodel* also works within organizations. Dutch companies are typically managed through collegiate leadership by a team of top managers. The all-powerful CEO is a rare exception (Van Zanden, 2002) and Dutch managers tend to have a non-directive style of leadership (Hovius, 2000). Moreover, participative decision-making is formalized by the Works Council Act. Decisions can never be taken unilaterally, subordinates have to be persuaded on the basis of arguments (Van der Horst, 1996). As a result Dutch organizations are characterized by a continuous process of negotiation (Van Dijk and Punch, 1993).

But the Dutch drive for consensus also has its limitations. De Bony (2005), from a French perspective, observes that in Dutch consensus the involvement of individuals seems to be restricted. The individual offers his or her opinion, and the group listens to express respect for the person and his/her words. But nobody is expected to display a strong personal and emotional attachment to an opinion, and the decision is not based on a competition between contested alternatives but rather constructed on the basis of compromise.

This review of the relevant literature clearly suggests that consensus processes play an important role in Japan as well as in the Netherlands. In both countries there is a historically rooted culture, interestingly in both cases related to the management of water, which underpins these consensus processes (Hofstede and Soeters, 2000). This embeddedness can be expected to colour the views of our respondents regarding the consensus processes within companies. Our expectation is that practitioners operating at the interface of both cultures, i.e. practitioners working together closely with individuals from the other nationality, are particularly interesting informants. They are directly confronted with possibly subtle differences in interpreting consensus processes and hence may help us uncover nuances that otherwise could easily escape us. We can thus expect that the current study will deepen our understanding of how consensus is perceived in two different countries, and throw light upon the practical consequences of possible differences in perceptions for companies working at the interface of the two cultures concerned.

DATA AND METHODS

A qualitative approach was deemed most effective for investigating the meaning of consensus in Japan and the Netherlands. We wanted to know what consensus meant to our respondents, what they saw as processes leading to consensus, and what according to them would be consequences of consensus. These questions call for a qualitative in-depth study of the meaning of consensus to our respondents, to understand their own logics, rather than forcing our explanations upon them in the form of a preconceived questionnaire (Yin, 1989).

Our method of focusing on a single concept in a comparative international study is borrowed from d'Iribarne (2000), who proposes that this approach is particularly fertile when the aim is to uncover divergent realities as constructed and perceived by different cultural groups. The concept in focus serves as the lens through which the two realities compared are viewed. We furthermore consider managers working at a cultural interface (here the Japanese–Dutch interface) to be particularly interesting informants. Given its historically embedded character, we expect the meaning of consensus to be of a taken-for-granted nature in both countries. However, our respondents have been confronted with different interpretations of their taken-for-granted concept of consensus, and therefore may be expected to have been compelled to reflect upon its meaning, in both their own and the other culture. Hence we chose to collect data from managers at the Japanese–Dutch interface through open interviews.

Data Collection

Data were collected in 1999–2000, in the context of a research project and a conference organized at the occasion of the celebration of 400 years of Japanese–Dutch relations (see Benders et al., 2000). The Japanese Chamber of Commerce and Industry in the Netherlands and the Dutch Embassy in Japan assisted in contacting firms for participation in the project. Together with the Japanese Chamber of Commerce and Industry in the Netherlands a shortlist was drawn up of Japanese companies with substantial operations in the Netherlands. The main criterion was the number of Japanese expatriates in management positions. The ten companies on the shortlist were contacted, and seven agreed to participate. The Dutch Embassy in Tokyo provided us with contacts with six Dutch companies operating in the Tokyo region that maintained active contacts with the Embassy. All these companies were approached; at two of them the number of Dutch expatriate managers was deemed too small for the research. The other four firms all agreed to participate in the project. Our final sample of firms consisted of five electronics companies, two car manufacturers, a chemical company, a bank, a hotel and a firm in the food and beverages sector.

In all participating firms we had an initial interview with the CEO or Managing Director to explain the research project and to select interviewees. In all firms we selected interviewees who were in intensive interaction and joint decision making with individuals from the other nationality. In all, we conducted 50 interviews, but for this study we excluded the interviews with respondents with a nationality other than Japanese or Dutch. Our data consist of transcribed interviews with 43 managers. Of these, 28 were Japanese, either working in Japan for a Dutch company ($n = 11$) or in the Netherlands for a Japanese company ($n = 17$). Fifteen managers were Dutch, either working in Japan for a Dutch company ($n = 6$) or in the Netherlands for a Japanese company ($n = 9$). The experience of Japanese respondents in working with the Dutch ranged from 1 to 18 years, with an average of 5 years. The Dutch experience in working with the Japanese ranged from <1 to 13 years, with an average of 7 years. Our interviewees worked in positions such as Vice President, Human Resources Manager, Sales Manager, or Controller.

The interviews were loosely structured, starting from the concept of consensus decision-making and extending into the processes leading to consensus and the effects of

consensus. Other related subjects brought forward by the respondent were also discussed. In the interviews we asked about experiences with consensus decision-making in general, not about specific decisions. We assume essential characteristics of the decision process, as perceived by the interviewee, to come to the surface in this way. Because of this approach, we cannot distinguish between particular issues or types of decisions (e.g. strategic versus operational decisions). We also cannot distinguish between decisions linked to the specificities of the industry in which the firms in our sample are active (e.g. decisions concerning the manufacturing process of cars versus decisions concerning policies with regard to loans). All interviews were performed by a bilingual Dutch–Japanese team of interviewers, who also transcribed the interview tapes. The interview transcripts can be seen as containing relatively ‘natural’ data (Kabanoff, 1997), with minimal influence from preconceived ideas of the researchers.

Method of Analysis

The transcribed interviews were analysed using Atlas/ti (Barry, 1998). This program allows the researcher to select quotes from texts, and to assign codes to these quotes. Subsequently, codes can be merged (or split) and links between codes can be explored. In this way the program helps to systematically analyse unstructured data. We used Atlas/ti to classify our data on the basis of ‘native categories’, i.e. categories generated by the local contexts themselves rather than by the researchers (Buckley and Chapman, 1997). This approach has the advantage of ‘allowing interviewees to use their own unique ways of defining the world, and to raise their own issues’ (Harris, 2000). Given our goal of tapping into the concept of consensus and its connotations as interpreted by Japanese and Dutch operating at the interface of both cultures, this seemed the appropriate method.

As described above, our interviews were organized around the meaning of the concept of consensus, the processes leading to consensus, and the consequences of consensus. These three categories were our point of departure in the analysis, plus a category ‘context’, consisting of other issues related to consensus brought forward by our interviewees. Going through the interview transcripts, 646 quotations falling in these four broad categories were initially selected. In a number of consecutive cycles, these quotations were assigned to one of the ‘native’ subcategories that arose from the process of assigning codes and merging/splitting up code categories with Atlas/ti. The following quote from an interview with a Japanese respondent working at a Dutch firm in Japan can serve as an example:

In a Japanese organization, it is very much a bottom up system as many people claim. The young people have not much say but middle management are the major decision makers and they make proposals to the management and the board, who will normally say, after many questions, ‘if you believe in it, do it’.

In the first round of analysis this quote was placed in the category ‘consensus antecedents’. Then, in the next rounds it was grouped in the subcategory ‘process’, and summarized as ‘Japan: consensus = formed bottom-up from middle management’.

Figure 1. Categories and subcategories used in the analysis

Statements falling within a particular subcategory and describing either Japanese or Dutch consensus were grouped together, to enable a quick recognition of the main trends (and possibly contradictions) in the observations.

After several rounds, no further shifts in the selection and categorization occurred, and the coded 489 quotations fell into one or more (a quote can be categorized in more than one category) of the following 14 subcategories: decision process; information, communication and discussion; formal meetings; *nemawashi*; *ringiseido* (grouped under consensus antecedents); consensus attributes; decision implementation; speed; risk; harmony; loyalty to company goals and commitment (grouped under consensus consequences); hierarchy; responsibilities; and management styles (grouped under decision context). Any quotes not falling under one of these 14 categories were discarded from the analysis. Figure 1 presents the scheme used to organize our analysis. It should be emphasized that this scheme is not theory-based and does not constitute a model to be tested. Moreover, the distinctions between antecedents, attributes and consequences of consensus are by necessity blurred, as 'the process matters in and of itself, and because the process and outcome are likely to be tied together' (Innes and Booher, 1999, p. 415). The scheme simply served as an organizing device in making sense of our data, and we also used it to structure our discussion of the findings. The underlying logic is that the process influences the nature of the consensus formed, which in turn influences the outcome, while in all phases contextual factors may play a role.

FINDINGS

In discussing our findings we follow the chronological order of the decision making process by starting with process aspects and decision context, then moving on to

characteristics of the consensus formed, and finally discussing the effects, all as perceived by our respondents. As many aspects of consensus concern the process of consensus forming, the section on antecedents is most extensive. In quoting from or referring to specific interviews we identify the nationality of the respondent (J or N for Japanese and Dutch respectively), the country of employment (j or n for Japan and the Netherlands respectively), and the individual respondent (1–43).

Consensus Antecedents

In discussing the antecedents of consensus, we start with elements of the consensus process proper: the phases in the process, the flow of information, and the function of formal meetings. Subsequently, we discuss pre-meeting communication and coordination by discussing the relevance of *nemawashi* and *ringiseido* in the Japanese–Dutch setting. Not surprisingly, these elements are strongly related and often presuppose one another.

The data suggest three phases in consensus decision-making: the discussion and information exchange preceding a more formal decision meeting; the formal meeting itself; and the implementation process. In Japanese consensus-forming processes pre-meeting communication and formal meetings are clearly distinguished. The preparation phase consists of many bilateral and small-group discussions in which a process of informal sounding proceeds. When sufficient preparation has been done a proposal is brought to a formal meeting. This is typically a formality: no further discussion takes place and the meeting is more symbolic than functional. ‘In case of Japan, officially we maybe do not talk about much during the meeting, we look at the others’ faces, before and after the meeting, however, Japanese do talk’ (Jn23); ‘In Tokyo [everything is] already set up before we had the meeting, just decision, one time, there’ (Jn21).

In contrast, the Dutch tend to prepare little and use the formal meetings to vent their point of view, sometimes causing heated discussions. As a consequence, meetings can be longer and more conflict-ridden. The outcome may be a deferment or a decision that when implemented proves to be less than optimal. Consequently, decisions are relatively frequently reconsidered, and there is no taboo against raising a subject even if a decision has already been taken at a previous meeting. This is in sharp contrast with the Japanese, who prolong the preparation phase as long as necessary to come to a proposal that is regarded to be the best possible and supported or at least accepted by everybody concerned. ‘They [the Dutch] seem to have a preference for very intensive discussions at the meetings rather than the well-prepared arrangements’ (Jj6); ‘If I look at the Japanese colleagues, once the data is there they start to discuss with each other at the correct level and do a kind of *nemawashi*, and then the actual meeting where we as Europeans start the discussion, then the Japanese have already, not always a consensus, but no big misunderstandings anymore between the departments’ (Nn41).

Once the Japanese have taken a decision, there is no turning back; one Dutch respondent calls this the ‘no escape’ aspect of Japanese consensus (Nn39). We can therefore conclude that the Japanese consensus process is clearly unidirectional, compared with the Dutch process that can go back and forth. ‘The Dutch prefer formal discussions during meetings, they tend to follow a more conflict-oriented style. When a decision is taken it might happen that a week later someone wants to re-evaluate’ (Nn37).

These differences are reflected in the second antecedent to consensus, the exchange of information. This is particularly important among the Japanese and many Japanese respondents emphasize the contrast between the flow of information in Japanese and Dutch organizations: 'one of the big differences is that Japanese companies want to share information more than Western companies' (Jj5).

Whereas Japanese share information with as many people as possible, the Dutch share information only with those who really need it for their own task. Japanese communication at a given level may also be more intensive because managers expect their subordinates to propose concrete solutions when a problem occurs. An advantage of the consensus process is that 'knowledge is brought together' (Jn12). In Dutch companies it is not uncommon for subordinates to come to their manager with a problem, but without a solution. This puts more pressure on Japanese subordinates to use all information available to find a solution. The style of information exchange and discussion is also different. The Dutch style, according to Japanese respondents, is characterized by 'a lot of discussions but no real discussions; everybody speaks his own opinion' (Jn14). Japanese, in contrast, 'add their opinion for improvement rather than disagree, are more constructive' (Jj11). Related to this, Japanese communication has a degree of implicitness that is alien to the Dutch: 'we can often feel what the other thinks but the foreigner cannot' (Jj9). The Dutch in contrast are louder, they 'boast their opinions more' and 'are satisfied when they can express their opinion' (Jj11; Jn15).

Formal meetings have different functions in both types of consensus processes. In Dutch consensus forming, the formal meeting is where the consensus is hammered out. For the Japanese the meeting symbolizes the unity of opinion of the group. Surprises, in the form of opinions or proposals not previously voiced during preparation are extremely unwelcome: 'Japanese don't like very sudden, or surprising, things' (Jj9). Hence, Japanese meetings are of an entirely different nature than the Dutch ones, and the two do not mix easily. However, we found a degree of mutual adaptation in the companies studied as formal meetings are the most explicit meeting place for the two traditions in decision making: Japanese had to force themselves to speak up during meetings, and the Dutch needed to restrain themselves to give the Japanese a chance to participate. Remarkably, those reporting to have adapted their style of communication at meetings considered this an improvement over their previous styles. 'I think I am very Japanese. I'm rather a good listener rather than to express or take initiative during meetings. . . . I still see myself as a good listener but I'm trying more to adjust the directions of the meeting, to stop the wrong direction, etc' (Jj6).

Just like the meetings, pre-meeting communication and coordination also differs. *Nemawashi* is very often referred to. But whereas the more neutral concept of 'consensus' was almost unanimously regarded positively, this was not true of *nemawashi*. Some see *nemawashi* as indispensable: 'every organization in every country needs *nemawashi*' (Jj10), for 'without *nemawashi*, how to get approval?' (Jj9). To others, *nemawashi* has a ring of persuasion and politicking, '*nemawashi* is politics' (Jn17). Here two divergent opinions emerge: on the one hand there are those who see *nemawashi* as a bottom-up process through which subordinates build a countervailing power towards their superior, who at the end of the process can do little else than formally consent with the proposed decision. *Nemawashi* in this point of view means 'excluding the boss; they discuss among each other

and afterward inform the boss' (Jj7). On the other hand *nemawashi* can also be a top-down process used by managers to influence a decision process at a lower level in a preferred direction, or to make clear to subordinates that a certain proposal has to be made and implemented loyally. As *nemawashi* consists of bilateral rather than group discussions, it allows for more open disagreement without the fear of losing face but also offers more opportunity for manipulation. These different perspectives can also be understood from the two different aspects of *nemawashi*, the exchange of information to enable a better researched decision versus the (political) obtainment of support among major decision makers (Sumihara, 2002).

Decision Context

Three important contextual factors, not directly related to the consensus decision-making process, came out of our interviews: the hierarchical relations within the company, the style of management, and the demarcation of responsibilities.

The most striking differences between the Japanese and Dutch respondents pertained to the role of the formal organizational hierarchy in consensus processes. Whereas the Dutch and Japanese respondents largely agreed on the differences between the consensus processes preferred by the two groups, their views were almost completely opposite with regard to the role of hierarchy. A large majority of both groups of respondents was of the opinion that hierarchy plays a more important role in the consensus processes espoused by the *other* group, and that this process as a result is of a more vertical nature. According to the Japanese:

- In Japan the bottom-up process, the consensus building is there but [at headquarters in the Netherlands] it is more top-down (Jj6).
- I don't know about real Dutch decision making [i.e. in a Dutch company, not a Japanese transplant], but as far as I can imagine it is more top-down (Jn15).
- Japanese consensus might be horizontal while Dutch consensus tends to be vertical (Jn23).

The Dutch voice the following opinions:

- I think that the hierarchy is much more important in Japanese organizations (Nj31).
- In Holland we are much, much less authority-centred, everyone is equal (Nj32).
- In the Japanese environment, people more easily seem to accept a limited role (Nj33).

In describing their own consensus process, the Dutch respondents emphasize the larger extent of delegation of decision-making authority to lower-level managers; as a result decision processes often fall under the full responsibility of a single manager. Whereas this clear concentration of authority on the basis of formal position might point in the direction of hierarchical decision making, this is belied at least partly by the egalitarian Dutch style. Open discussions between lower and higher ranked are permitted and 'the opinion of the boss is far more questioned, perhaps not

directly but among colleagues' (Nj34). In the end one can completely disagree, and keep one's own opinion, as long as one nevertheless goes along with the decision taken by the responsible manager. This situation tends to be different in Japanese organizations with middle management playing a key role in the consensus process. Middle managers make proposals to higher management, but not without listening to their subordinates, because their support is needed. The decision itself is subsequently taken at the higher management level, but only if all relevant employees who will be affected by the decision have indeed been consulted. Once higher management has made the decision, this is accepted without open confrontation or indeed any further discussion.

Comparing the two processes, Japanese consensus can be said to be more horizontal in that the process is not confined to the sphere of authority of a given manager, but crosses departmental boundaries. Thus, horizontal discussions are combined with vertical sounding and consultation. Dutch consensus processes are more vertical, between a given manager and his or her subordinates. If other departments are involved, this is typically organized through the formal hierarchical lines.

The hierarchy issue is clearly related to differences in management style, a second contextual factor that was seen as having an important impact on the consensus process. Two related phenomena were mentioned by respondents: the tendency of Japanese managers to be much more persistent and penetrating in the follow-up once orders to lower level managers or employees have been given; and the need of Japanese managers to know all details about the field they are managing. The Japanese manager 'wants to see with his own eyes, check, check, check' (Jn14). This constant checking is often interpreted by the Dutch as a lack of trust, but the Japanese manager sees it as 'a normal part of the management communication process' (Jn16). Of course, if a manager regards it necessary to remain informed about every detail concerning the operations in his department, the attitude of checking is comprehensible. 'The Japanese manager should be close to the field and know and understand everything . . . the Dutch manager doesn't have to know everything, he can delegate to specialists and go home at 5 pm', one Japanese respondent commented, not without a certain acidity (Jn14).

One of the effects of the Japanese managers' tendency to check frequently, and their Japanese subordinates' anticipation of this, is a higher intensity of vertical communication than is customary in Dutch companies. The emphasis on checking and the related vertical information flows may very well contribute to the Dutch perception that Japanese organizations are more hierarchical. However, this interpretation can be disputed. According to one of our Dutch respondents, Japanese middle managers actually have less decision-making authority than their Dutch counterparts (this also is consistent with the notion that the Japanese delegate less), but they do have more expertise and for that reason they can exert influence.

Finally, both hierarchical relations and style of management are closely related to a third contextual factor, the demarcation of responsibilities. Many Japanese respondents reflected negatively on the Dutch (Western) practice of having rather precise job descriptions, defining what falls within the responsibility of a certain employee. The great danger of such a system, according to the Japanese respondents, is that tasks that do not

clearly fall within any individual employee's responsibility will not be taken up. 'When there is no clear responsibility, it is perceived as a problem because nobody takes the responsibility. Japanese, on the other hand, tend to feel a general responsibility for the company' (Jn17).

The implications for decision-making can hardly be overestimated. The absence of job descriptions in Japanese organizations 'fits' the extensive exchange of information, the strong follow-up by Japanese managers, and the need for decision by consensus. The existence of such descriptions can explain the Dutch willingness to accept decisions taken by employees with a certain authority. The demarcation or the lack of demarcation of responsibilities also explains the respective weaknesses of Dutch and Japanese decision making. According to the Japanese respondents decision making in Dutch organizations proceeds smoothly as long as problems fall within a given job description; if not, decision making becomes very slow, as the issue has to move up and down the hierarchy to be resolved. The flipside of the Japanese system, also noted by the Japanese respondents, is that there whereas there may be a broad consensus, if things go wrong it is not clear who is responsible; 'everybody *has* responsibility but nobody can *take* responsibility' (Jj3).

Consensus Attributes

The respondents were prompted to talk about 'consensus' during the interviews, without formally defining the concept. Nevertheless, many respondents spontaneously gave their personal working definition, or mentioned important aspects. Two related issues come out as particularly salient: whether everybody should agree completely for consensus to exist, and whether Dutch and Japanese consensuses are different.

As for the first question, various Japanese respondents against none of the Dutch were in favour of a 'strong' conception of consensus, with everybody in complete agreement. However, also among the Japanese the idea that consensus does not necessarily entail complete agreement dominated: 'it might be so that not everyone fully agrees when consensus is reached' (Jj11). Nevertheless, the answers clearly suggest that the depth of consensus is an important variable, and one on which the Japanese and Dutch are likely to differ. Many respondents see Dutch consensus as shallower and less complete than Japanese consensus: 'Dutch people can live with incomplete consensus' (Jn15); 'the Dutch appreciate the process of trying to reach consensus, but when a difference of opinion persists, the decision is taken by someone' (Jn28); and 'in the Netherlands we look for consensus only to a certain degree' (Nj35). Some of the Dutch respondents maintain that consensus is equally important for the Dutch and the Japanese but that either the process of coming to consensus is different (as discussed above) or the level of detail of the consensus is lower in the Dutch case. As a result of the lower level of detail, what the Dutch see as consensus is not always recognized as such by the Japanese. On the other hand, some Dutch respondents also doubt the veracity of Japanese consensus: 'they share much information and this has the appearance of consensus but in the end the highest in command confirms the decision' (Nn39). This remark echoes the divergent perceptions of the role of the formal hier-

archy in the consensus process discussed above. More in general, it confirms that the existence of consensus is indissolubly connected to process characteristics, for both the Dutch and the Japanese.

Consensus Consequences

Both groups mention positive and negative aspects of the consequences of consensus decision making but the positive aspects are generally seen to outweigh the negative. At the same time, the Japanese respondents were much more likely to mention positive aspects than the Dutch, who seem to regard consensus decision making as a practical necessity rather than something desirable in itself. They see themselves as reasonably consensus-oriented but recognize that consensus is even more important for their Japanese colleagues. For the Japanese, consensus is 'very necessary' and 'very important' and 'decisions should be made as much as possible by consensus' (Jn12; Jj10; Jn28). All respondents agree that fast and easy implementation is a main advantage of consensus. Whereas the Dutch appreciate the speed of implementation of the Japanese once a decision has been taken, the Japanese themselves are rather critical about the Dutch because of the lower degree of completeness of Dutch consensus. The Dutch, it seems, 'don't worry what happens after a decision' (Jj3), and Dutch employees 'may not implement a decision they do not like, and get away with that' (Nj30). The two main reasons mentioned for implementation of 'Dutch consensus' to be less smooth are the lower level of detail of the consensus decision and the weaker commitment of the Dutch to a formally taken decision.

A related issue is the speed of decision making. Almost all respondents feel that Japanese consensus forming takes much time. The Dutch are quicker, but frequently have to retrace their steps because the decision turns out to be less than optimal due to oversight of some detail. Therefore, Japanese respondents consider the time used to form full Japanese consensus as well spent; you need to go through that process, 'if you want to finish in time' (Jj9). Clearly the Japanese include the time spent in implementation in their mental calculation, while the Dutch apparently worry less about what happens after the decision.

However, for the Japanese smooth implementation and decision-making speed do not seem to be the essential criteria for the importance of consensus. Two other reasons for consensus decision making were brought forward time and again, implicitly and explicitly, by the Japanese respondents: to avoid risk for both the decision maker and the company; and to preserve harmony and employees' loyalty. Regarding the first issue, several elements of risk were mentioned. For the company, it is important to avoid 'major mistakes' (Jj1). For the individual decision maker consensus functions as a safety net; if there is a wide consensus it is 'not clear who has the responsibility; responsibility is shared' (Jj8).

The Japanese stress that everybody who will in some way be affected by a decision should be heard, to preserve harmony and the loyalty of employees. The Dutch agree to a certain extent but predominantly because dissenters may obstruct implementation. This is unlikely in the case of Japanese employees, who even when they do not agree will follow once a decision has been taken. But the price to be paid would be an erosion of

the employees' loyalty to the company and company goals, which would hinder subsequent consensus making processes. Moreover, preserving harmony seems to be an end in itself for the Japanese. This importance of harmony reflects both well-known Japanese cultural values and the prevalence of long-term employment relationships. Interestingly enough, this observation is made, not by the Japanese respondents themselves, but by a number of Dutch respondents; 'consensus is important for maintaining harmony' (Nn37). The apparent peacefulness of Japanese consensus forming processes is in stark contrast with the sometimes very heated discussions among the Dutch. For the Dutch there always seems to be room for dissenters. Instead of the importance of group harmony, the Dutch seem to stress a continued personal independence, both in their perception of a certain level of disharmony as natural and in their relative independence from the organization they work for, because for them the 'exit' option is a significant alternative.

Finally, there clearly exists a certain circularity between loyalty and harmony as consequences of consensus decision making, and the same loyalty and harmony as ingredients of future decision processes. Thus loyalty/harmony could also be seen as influencing the consensus forming process, rather than a consequence of consensus.

DISCUSSION

Three findings highlighted above, corresponding to respectively the process, context and attributes of consensus, merit further discussion: (1) the process of reaching consensus differs between Japan and the Netherlands; (2) Japanese and Dutch respondents deeply disagree over the role of hierarchy in their own and the other's decision processes; and (3) the Japanese tend to aim for a more complete consensus than the Dutch.

The Decision Process

Decision preparation and the actual making of the decision are clearly separated in Japanese consensus forming. The process proceeds sequentially, involving either individual members or small groups, and is unidirectional. A formal meeting is called only when the preparation phase has led to consensus, and then mainly functions to symbolize unity. In Dutch consensus processes this distinction is less clear, formal meetings can be used as preparation but also to take decisions. Involvement in the process is more synchronic, those concerned are addressed more or less simultaneously. The decision process may be iterative, from decision-making back to preparation, and from implementation to decision-making. Information exchange during the whole process is restricted to those directly involved in the decision-making process.

The importance of sequence in Japanese consensus processes, indicated by our respondents, concurs with observations in the literature. Fetters (1995, p. 380) maintains that '*nemawashi* is the art of contacting the right people in the right order'. MacColl (1995) describes in more detail how Japanese consensus processes advance in sequences of lateral and vertical sounding, negotiation and communication, and work through ever-widening cycles until all relevant organization members have been involved. Looking at the Dutch case, d'Iribarne (1989, p. 213) emphasizes that the Dutch have a preference

of seeking consensus through formal procedures and, especially, formal meetings. However, as Van der Horst (1996) notes, if necessary the Dutch do not hesitate to use informal processes, next to or instead of the formal procedures.

The Role of Hierarchy

As mentioned earlier, the views of individuals who work closely with colleagues from the other nationality are seen as important sources of information concerning more subtle and less obvious differences in how two groups see themselves and each other. This comes out particularly clearly in our findings concerning the role of hierarchy. To our knowledge the peculiar mirror image we found with regard to hierarchy has not earlier been described in the literature. We believe that our respondents' radically different views are deeply rooted in the meaning of the concept of consensus in their respective societies.

The Dutch consensus process is bolstered by cultural values like egalitarianism and distaste for overtly being ordered around (Lawrence, 1991; Van Dijk and Punch, 1993; Van Iterson and Olie, 1992). In accordance, Dutch consensus remains a meeting of particularistic individuals and a pragmatic means rather than an end in itself. This is clearly reflected in accounts of the Dutch *poldermodel*, emphasizing the continuation of hard-headed political manoeuvring and power struggles behind the screens (Becker, 2001).

This is very different from Japanese consensus: maintaining *wa* is crucial (Besser, 1996, p. 86; Brannigan, 1999; Sullivan et al., 1981). What makes the Japanese frame of mind complicated and difficult to comprehend for the Dutch is that this strong emphasis on harmony goes hand in hand with a strong sense of hierarchy (Ala and Cordeiro, 2000; Nakane, 1973). Unlike the Japanese, the Dutch see these as being in conflict. The formal decision in Japanese companies is often taken at a higher level as delegation of authority is less prevalent (Lincoln and Kalleberg, 1992; Yoshino, 1968). Whitehill (1992) therefore characterizes the Japanese style as decision making by diffusion rather than delegation. A similar sentiment is expressed by Simeon (2002, p. 388), who points out that 'Japanese management cleverly combines the decentralization of employee participation with a high concentration of formal authority'. This, together with their limited awareness of the *nemawashi* process that preceded the decision and the absence of any critical discussion of a decision once taken, may be interpreted by the Dutch respondents as a sign of vertical, hierarchical decision-making. The Japanese, on the other hand, may see the Dutch consensus process as more hierarchical because Dutch employees tend to accept as legitimate a decision if it falls within the sphere of authority of the manager in question, even if they do not agree with the content of the decision.

The mutual tendency to see hierarchical elements in the other group's decision-making process is likely to be reinforced by a number of factors. The Japanese may find the contrast between fierce open discussions and disagreements in the pre-discussion phase hard to reconcile with the philosophical acceptance of the decision subsequently taken by the responsible manager. For the Japanese, open confrontation in public settings is unthinkable, especially across hierarchical ranks. Once a series of bilateral or very-small group meetings has led to a consensus (or at least the conviction of those of a

different opinion that they will have to go with the flow), a formal meeting will be called to symbolize the unity and agreement of all concerned. Hence, much of the Japanese pre-decision consensus process may remain unobserved by their Dutch colleagues, the more so, since separate Dutch and Japanese informal circuits were said to exist in various companies (see also Byun and Ybema, 2005). And even in more formal meetings, Japanese communications (and silences) appear too implicit for the Dutch.

Completeness of the Consensus

The third important difference is that Japanese consensus is more complete than its Dutch equivalence. The study has shown how this extends to various aspects of consensus: the amount of information exchanged, the number of people involved, the preference for a 'strong' concept of consensus, the level of detail, and the commitment to the decision. Moreover, it confirms previous findings, including the fit with cultural values (Brannigan, 1999; Sasaki, 1981), the importance of consensus over the drive to express one's personal opinion (Doi, 1971), the link to long-term employment practices (Trevor, 1983), and even the importance of the Japanese language for reaching consensus (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). We can therefore agree with MacColl (1995, p. 388) that '[a]ppearing unanimous by reaching consensus is of paramount importance'.

Dutch consensus appears rather restricted in comparison. The Dutch clearly appreciate consensus as it fits their sense of egalitarianism, their dislike of hierarchy. In accordance, d'Iribarne (1989, p. 221) sees a more or less comparable social pressure to hold back divergent opinions that may undermine the consensus. However, consensus and the process towards consensus clearly differ from those in Japan. Dutch consensus is based on an iterative decision-making process with a lack of detail and commitment. This means that the harmony that is seen to characterize Japanese organizations can be absent in Dutch organizations, even when consensus is reached. No wonder one Japanese national concludes that he sees 'consensus and no consensus' (Jn28).

Summarizing, Japanese consensus can be characterized as 'comprehensive'; in the process leading to consensus all the people affected are included, all relevant information is exchanged, and all the time necessary is taken to ensure that everybody agrees. Consequently, Japanese consensus is also assumed to be complete. In contrast, Dutch consensus can be characterized as 'pragmatic' (see also Lawrence, 1991). Fewer people are involved, less information is exchanged, and if it takes too long to reach full consensus the Dutch are inclined to settle for less than that and accept a decision by the responsible manager.

CONCLUSIONS

Our study has revealed important differences in antecedents, context, attributes, and consequences of consensus-oriented decision making between Japan and the Netherlands. This confirms that, consensus being a social construct, the perceptions of incumbents have to be studied to understand its meaning in any given context. Our findings have important implications for firms working at the Japanese–Dutch interface as well as

for internationally operating companies more in general. Finally, we believe that our study demonstrates the usefulness of an approach focusing on a particular concept in an international comparative context. We will discuss these various conclusions briefly below.

Differences between Japanese and Dutch interpretations of consensus first relate to the completeness of the agreement of opinion. Japanese managers demand a more complete agreement before they speak of consensus than their Dutch colleagues. The processes and conditions that Japanese and Dutch managers see as leading to consensus also differ. Japanese consensus processes are unidirectional and sequential, Dutch consensus processes more iterative and synchronous. Our respondents also differed deeply regarding the role of the hierarchy in their own and the others' consensus processes, with both Japanese and Dutch managers seeing their own consensus process as less hierarchical.

Our study confirms earlier work of Renz (2006), who found divergent interpretations of consensus within a group of respondents from a single country. Renz focused on the metaphors her respondents used to describe consensus and consensus processes. If we look at the metaphors used to describe the consensus process, the image of the decision group 'massaging' an issue to 'mould' a decision (Renz, 2006, p. 361) seems to come close to the Japanese view as voiced by our respondents. The views expressed by our Dutch respondents fit better with the metaphors of consensus processes as 'tools' and as 'battles'. 'Tools can be picked up or turned on, and just as easily put down or switched off' (Griffin, 2003, quoted in Renz, 2006, p. 358). The image of a battle suggests a rather adversarial consensus process. Turning to the metaphors used by Renz's respondents to describe consensus as an outcome, the image of consensus as 'mortar' (Renz, 2006, p. 362) clearly corresponds to the emphasis our Japanese interviewees put on consensus as a means to preserve harmony. Interestingly, we recognize the opinions expressed by our Dutch respondents in any of the three types of consensus outcome metaphors distinguished by Renz (the other two are consensus as 'synthesis' and as 'insight'). Dutch consensus seems to be like a temporary truce that is always in danger of being suspended. This finding suggests that Renz's taxonomy of metaphors is far from exhaustive. Other studies in different settings are likely to reveal different metaphors and meanings of the consensus concept.

Our analysis also demonstrates that a comparative analysis focusing on the meaning of a particular aspect of management, similar to the research approach advocated by d'Iribarne (2000), may reveal important differences that might otherwise escape attention. In particular, concepts that at the surface carry similar meaning or seem equally important in two societies (like consensus in Japan and the Netherlands) may give rise to misunderstandings when in practice they are associated with different kinds of behaviour. We also think that our analysis underscores the fruitfulness of employing cross-culturally informed informants. Because they were working at the Japanese–Dutch interface on a daily basis, our respondents were able to talk about subtle differences between consensus decision-making in the two societies.

At a practical level, the findings can improve the cooperation between Japanese and Dutch managers. Managers working at the Japanese–Dutch interface should be careful not to assume too easily that consensus has been reached. They should also be aware that decision processes that seem dysfunctional in one culture may be seen as essential for

reaching consensus in the other culture. Preparation of managers on cross-national assignments often remains restricted to rather general information concerning the other nationality or culture. We believe that more detailed studies like ours can contribute to a better preparation for such assignments. When it comes to subtleties of consensus decision-making processes, knowledge of only general cultural characteristics of the other country would have been a poor preparation for the managers in our study.

While this advice is particularly relevant for managers operating in the same context as our research – namely the Japanese–Dutch interface, we believe that the lessons we derive from our study also have broader implications. As the results of our study suggest, international management practitioners should be careful not to extend their own taken-for-granted interpretations of business practices to foreign nationals (Tempel and Walgenbach, 2007). This danger is likely to be particularly large when preferences and interpretations at the surface appear to be similar, as in the case of the Japanese and the Dutch with consensus. International management textbooks tend to focus on stark contrasts to bring home the importance of cultural differences. But the more subtle differences, often hidden by the usage of a common terminology, may be more treacherous.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

This study has a number of limitations. As we decided to give prevalence to depth over breadth, we have interviewed only a limited number of managers in an even smaller number of companies. Hence, we should be careful in generalizing our findings, for instance beyond specific organizational contexts. Secondly, we studied something that turned out to be fundamentally a process phenomenon in a cross-sectional manner by asking respondents at one particular point in time to reflect on past decision processes. Recollection and memory imperfections may cause bias in this procedure. With regard to consensus decision making, a further limitation is that we have only looked at the Japanese–Dutch interface. Comparison of other countries (e.g. France and Sweden, see d'Iribarne, 1998) might have revealed other dimensions of consensus and consensus processes. Conversely, focusing on the Japanese–Dutch comparison, it may be seen as a limitation that we have only looked at decision making. A broader comparison might have revealed interesting issues pertaining to, for example, language and communication or power relations (Byun and Ybema, 2005).

Our suggestions for further research follow from the limitations mentioned above. We believe that the advantages of the use of culturally informed respondents are underestimated in international comparative management research. Our respondents pointed at subtle differences between Japanese and Dutch consensus processes that managers operating in a single culture would have been less likely to recognize. The focus on the single issue of consensus decision making also helped us to reach deeper levels of understanding in our interviews. Overall, the approach followed had the advantage of leading to a veritable dialogue between researchers and researched (see also Noorderhaven, 2004), in which practitioners not only give information, but also offer explanations. We think that more of this type of research would form a useful complement to large-scale, often survey-based studies.

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