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To act or not to act: Cultural hesitation in the multicultural hospitality workplace

Anne Keizer-Remmers* , Vasilena Ivanova & Anja Brandsma-Dieters 

Hotel Management School, NHL Stenden University of Applied Sciences, Leeuwarden, The Netherlands

*Correspondence: anne.keizer@nhlstenden.com

ABSTRACT: This article aims to describe the behaviour, feelings and emotions of hospitality professionals regarding the phenomenon of *handelingsverlegenheid* (which we translate as “awkwardness to act”) in intercultural professional settings. The overall purpose of this study is to understand how middle management employees of the rooms division department of a small-scale commercial learning hotel in Leeuwarden in the Netherlands lead their team in a cross-cultural working environment. *Handelingsverlegenheid* is strongly related to anxiety/uncertainty management (AUM) theory and implies a professional's lack of proficiency in responding to a multicultural situation at work. This article describes how hospitality professionals experience this phenomenon. Seven semi-structured interviews were conducted with middle managers who were asked to share their feelings, thoughts and emotions about topics such as cross-cultural communication and leading a diverse team to provide an insight into *handelingsverlegenheid* and their personal experiences of it. The results suggest that low levels of cultural proficiency and lack of experiences communicating with others from a different culture are the main causes of the manifestation of *handelingsverlegenheid* in the workplace. Implementation of training to increase cultural sensitivity is important to develop required skills and capabilities of the employees. For further research, it is recommended to broaden the focus on *handelingsverlegenheid* in staff and guest interactions from one small-scale hotel to different types of hospitality organisations. For management practices, it is recommended to support operational staff and the experiences they have dealing with awkward situations stemming from cross-cultural situations at work.

KEYWORDS: anxiety and uncertainty management, cross-cultural communication, cultural diversity, *handelingsverlegenheid*, hospitality industry

Introduction

This study focuses on hospitality managers' sense of awkwardness due to cultural hesitation. It started with a situation in which a female Bulgarian hospitality management student involuntarily experienced *handelingsverlegenheid*. Her starting point was a casual, well-intentioned, initially pleasant conversation with a male Bangladeshi peer on culture and religion. However, it soon evolved into an upsetting situation:

I experienced feelings of uncomfortableness, awkwardness, guilt, and regret. I felt apologetic for the situation I put both of us in. I also noticed that my inability to cover such an essential topic made him feel uncomfortable. I observed that he changed his posture, started looking around and avoided eye contact. All these signs made me realize that instead of showing interest and appreciation, I left him a feeling of being examined or even maybe being judged (Ivanova, 2021, p. 5).

Handelingsverlegenheid (literally: action-shyness in Dutch) is a concept originating from (social) health care and is also known in education. It indicates a sense of awkwardness

which hampers confident acting. There is no straightforward, unambiguous translation for this Dutch composition of two words in English, hence we will use the Dutch term in this article. *Handelingsverlegenheid* means that the professional does not act or does not know how to act despite being worried or concerned in intercultural interactions. For example, a professional may worry that a staff member from another cultural background will misinterpret well-intended feedback yet does not know how to resolve this dilemma. It arises from the inability to act adequately and is rooted in hesitation in the professional self (Van der Meer, 2010). The Bulgarian student's experience of *handelingsverlegenheid* did not occur in the context of health care, but in a multicultural hospitality company, a commercial learning hotel with staff and students originally rooted in Dutch culture. Although her description clearly illustrates *handelingsverlegenheid*, it also matches well with anxiety and uncertainty management theory (AUM; Gudykunst & Nishida, 2001; Gudykunst, 2004; Duronto et al., 2005; Samochowiec & Florack, 2010; Ni & Wang, 2011; Neuliep, 2012; Logan et al., 2015). Despite the considerable body of theoretical knowledge on AUM and limited literature on *handelingsverlegenheid* (Van der Meer,

2010; Jonkers & Machielse, 2012; Van der Meulen, 2016; Spieker, 2019), little is known about how hospitality professionals such as (middle) managers experience *handelingsverlegenheid* in the increasingly globalised and diversifying workplace.

This article therefore aims to explore how *handelingsverlegenheid* is experienced by professionals in the context of professional hospitality, where diversity might trigger cultural hesitation in (often) young managers. Thus, we seek to advance the understanding of perceived *handelingsverlegenheid* and intend to contribute to both theory and practice. We deem this important, as diversity is still increasing in hospitality (Gong, 2008) and integrating cultural diversity into an organisation is difficult (Devine et al., 2007). The purpose of this qualitative study therefore was to understand how managers in the rooms division department of a small-scale hotel experience *handelingsverlegenheid* in intercultural settings at work.

This article is in five sections. In the first section, starting from a generic point of view, we review literature on increased diversity in organisations, its characteristics, management and challenges before we zoom in on AUM theory and *handelingsverlegenheid*. We then contextualise the theory in the second section and place it in a hospitality environment in professional hospitality education and focus on *handelingsverlegenheid* that is experienced by hospitality managers. In the third section, we present our data collection method and subsequent thematic data analysis, followed by the fourth section, in which we discuss our emergent findings in the context of the existing literature. We then identify both a theoretical and a management practice gap in the final section, for which we offer our theoretical contribution and recommendations for management practice before we indicate avenues for further research.

Literature review

Increased diversity in the workforce

Over fourteen years ago, Devine et al. (2007) identified that it is a complicated process to integrate cultural diversity into an organisation. They concluded that it must be part of a long-term strategy to be effective. A more recent article in a Dutch newspaper (De Ruyter, 2020) described the challenges associated with having a diverse workforce, and the fact that in this specific company, staff with a non-Western background and females are less satisfied, drop out more often and have less career growth than male Dutch natives. Even though the importance of diversity in the workplace is understood, the integration of people with diverse backgrounds is still challenging.

For this research, it is important to consider the concept of diversity. Diversity is a multidimensional concept and has many definitions. Shin and Park (2013) use three categories to define workforce diversity: demographic, organisational and socio-cognitive diversity. Demographic diversity refers to easily recognised attributes such as age, gender or ethnicity; organisational diversity refers to the context of diverse perspectives based on seniority and functions, and socio-cognitive diversity refers to aspects like cultural values and personality characteristics. Lambert and Bell (2012) make a distinction between surface-level and deep-level diversity. Surface-level describes the visible attributes such as demographic and organisation diversity, and deep-level diversity refers to the category of socio-cognitive diversity as defined by Shin and Park (2013).

It is also important to consider general misconceptions about diversity. The misconceptions are that diversity is culture, or it is affirmative action or an absence of standards (Bates et al., 2006). By considering diversity as culture, and teaching what other cultures are like, stereotypes may be reinforced. As diversity is a human characteristic, it cannot be defined as affirmative action, which is imposed by law and organisations. Lastly, diversity management is about creating boundaries within which all employees can do their work.

Research has been conducted on the effectiveness of diverse teams in multinational corporations, less so in national organisations where diversity also plays a role (Adler & Gundersen, 2008; Shin & Park, 2013; Virzi, 2018; Wang et al., 2020). With continuing migration worldwide, diversity will penetrate every profession. Hence, dealing with diversity will become important for the whole of society, yet even more so for team leaders and senior management. Virzi (2018) stated that one of the major challenges for multinational corporations was organisational leadership in the field of relationship building, which could be regarded as one of the success factors for multinational corporations.

Challenges of managing a diverse workforce

"The productivity of a team does not depend on the presence or absence of diversity, but rather on how well diversity is managed" (Adler & Gundersen, 2008, p. 140). The impact of hiring a diverse workforce can be either positive or negative on organisational performance and productivity. It requires careful management of both differences and similarities (Raithel, 2016; Elshaer & Marzouk, 2019). A benefit of a diverse workforce is that the organisation is better equipped to deal with the needs of a diverse clientele (Raithel, 2016). Humanitarian, economic and social migration will lead to an increasingly multicultural workforce (Devine et al., 2007). Seymen (2006) claims that migrants are beneficial for organisations in terms of knowledge transfer and competitiveness, increases in productivity, and a better image. This is confirmed by Adler and Gundersen (2008), who contend that cross-cultural teams can potentially be highly effective as diversity stimulates creativity, yields more alternatives and better solutions and encourages a wider range of perspectives if synergy can be achieved. However, even though there are highly skilled non-nationals, the tendency is for them to be hired in low positions (Cummins et al., 2004). While Lim and Noriega (2007) defined workplace diversity as a unique action where different features and similarities of individuals are combined, Devine et al. (2007) claim that managing cultural diversity might be challenging since it goes beyond accepting differences. Adler and Gundersen (2008) found that diverse teams also run the risk of being highly ineffective due to miscommunication, mistrust and stress, and thus face substantially greater challenges than monocultural teams. Managers should recognise their own cultural context and bias (Elshaer & Marzouk, 2019), as diversity is about differences between individuals rather than groups. Özbilgin and Tatli (2008) add that people should also be given the opportunity to show their unique skills.

Although techniques on how to manage cultural diversity have not been agreed upon, there are several authors who share similar thoughts. According to Gong (2008), executives need to be aware of the cultural differences and be sensitive to the nuances which may affect the relationship with others.

Executives must be aware of the differences among cultures which will enable them to set the right perceptions and minimise conflicts. While Devine et al. (2007) claim that conflicts may be caused by prejudice or stereotyping, others believe that friction is a result of cultural differences and people's perspectives regarding right or wrong statements (Sy et al., 2005). This suggests that diversity training is essential at all levels and should be part of the overall strategy of the organisation.

Anxiety and uncertainty management

Research indicates that intercultural interactions may lead to anxiety and uncertainty (Logan et al., 2016). Anxiety and uncertainty management (AUM) theory postulates that if individuals can manage their levels of anxiety successfully and predict the behaviours of others correctly, they can communicate more effectively (Gudykunst, 1995; 2004; 2005; Gudykunst & Nishida, 2001; Logan et al., 2016; Presbitero & Attar, 2018). Anxiety is an affective phenomenon (Stephan et al., 1999; Duronto et al., 2005; Presbitero & Attar, 2018) which can evoke emotions like apprehension, misgivings and disquiet and, moreover, discomfort, fear, resentment, or even indignation and disgust in an individual (Stephan & Stephan, 1985). Anxiety can manifest itself between minimum (low) and maximum (high) levels. Samochowiec and Florack (2010) report two types of anxiety: integral (intergroup) anxiety and incidental (trait) anxiety. Integral anxiety is provoked during an encounter with an out-group member in intercultural settings, whereas incidental anxiety "resides" in the individual — it is not provoked by the intercultural situation, but rather "brought in" by the anxious person (intrapersonal).

Uncertainty is a cognitive phenomenon pertaining to the perceived inability to predict or explain other people's behaviour and attitudes (Gudykunst, 2004). Uncertainty influences how individuals perceive and think about others, and how they make sense of their behaviour.

In situations of uncertainty, there are often mismatches between "what one intends" (intention), "what one can put into practice" (implementation), and "what emerges and how one perceives" (realization), which block and hinder effective cross-cultural interaction (Presbitero & Attar, 2018, p. 36).

Whether the individual perceives uncertainty as "threatening or challenging" depends on personality traits and "their tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity between situations" (Samochowiec & Florack, 2010, p. 508). Both anxiety and uncertainty influence the willingness to interact, depending on the manifestation levels in an individual. High anxiety and uncertainty may lead to individuals trying to avoid intercultural interaction or to withdraw from such interaction as soon as possible, whereas low anxiety and uncertainty may limit the motivation to engage (Duronto et al., 2005). Gudykunst (2005) refers to this as thresholds. Effective communication can only take place within the minimum and maximum threshold, and these thresholds differ across cultures (Gudykunst, 2005; Neuliep, 2012). Logan et al. (2015, p. 41) contend that ethnocentrism can also predict the (un-)readiness to engage in intercultural encounters due to "intolerance of uncertainty in intercultural interactions".

As the hospitality industry is international by definition, fostering diversity is a strategic endeavour, since the industry is labour and capital intensive and customer satisfaction is crucial for survival (Manoharan & Singal, 2017). Elshaer and Marzouk

(2019) state that hospitality organisations need to secure workforce diversity to maintain a competitive advantage. As a result of demographic developments, which indicate that the population in Europe is set to decline in the next three decades, and growth is predicted in Africa, North, Latin and South America, Oceania, and Asia (PricewaterhouseCoopers [PwC], 2020) diversity in the workforce is also needed to fill all job vacancies (Gong, 2008). Nowadays, most hospitality organisations operate internationally, which creates challenges in terms of interaction and effective intercultural communication. According to Grobelna (2016), intercultural communication is an issue that has recently had an increasing impact in the industry. Diversity management research in the hospitality industry is still limited and has not yet informed managerial practices (Manoharan & Singal, 2017), which may result in professionals failing to act, feeling inadequate to act, or wanting to abandon the situation, and thus experience a sense of *handelingsverlegenheid* (Jonkers & Machielse, 2012). Only limited academic research is available on *handelingsverlegenheid*, mostly stemming from pedagogics, sociology or (social) health care (Van der Meer, 2010; Sieckelink & De Winter, 2015; Van der Meulen, 2016). However, *handelingsverlegenheid* and *handelingsvaardigheid* (awkwardness to act versus ability to act) are frequently used in these academic fields.

As described earlier, *handelingsverlegenheid* occurs in intercultural situations, affecting the willingness to engage in the interaction or avoid it altogether. Given the stated affective, behavioural and cognitive aspects of *handelingsverlegenheid*, we have therefore connected it with Gudykunst's AUM theory (1995; 2004). Moreover, Burch's notion of conscious incompetence, albeit developed for training purposes and in that sense not "academic", is also related to *handelingsverlegenheid*. The professional's awareness of (their own) conscious incompetence — the third phase of the conscious competence ladder model Burch developed for Gordon Training International in the 1970s as described by Aguilar (2018) — undoubtedly shares characteristics with *handelingsverlegenheid*.

Case description

The awkward situation experienced in this case study in the rooms division department at a small-scale hotel is an example of interaction problems that may occur in a team. The hotel is a commercial learning company run by students: first-year students with no previous experience in the company as operational staff; second-year students with 10 weeks of experience in the company fulfilling the role of supervisors; and third-year students with at least 10 weeks experience in a supervisory position in the company as managers at department level. The hotel is a highly diverse company, and the rooms division employees often deal with different nationalities. Even though the hotel is run commercially, it is well known for its concept of being run by young professionals. Students are supported by practical instructors (PIs) who are employed by the hotel. Their main task is to lead all students in their department. The PIs fulfil the role of middle management and are responsible for planning, delegating and leading the students in the department and helping them throughout the learning process. Additionally, PIs work closely with the front office department, revenue team and reservations and are responsible for the deployment of personnel. Due to the nature of education, every two weeks new trainees are assigned and every five weeks the student

management team (supervisors and managers) is changed. This changing environment challenges the PIs to develop skills which ensure effective communication in teams and a favourable work environment. On the other hand, the frequent changes entail a high risk for the occurrence of *handelingsverlegenheid* as the groups are diverse and communication might be challenging. For this reason, it is essential to have the right abilities and skills to effectively manage the multicultural workforce (Grobelna, 2016). Raithel (2016) found in her research that the cultural background of the leader of diverse teams plays a key role in the success of a team, and that team performance is better when the leader is non-native to the host country, although this effect diminishes when team leaders are longer in place and local leaders have more experience in cross-cultural interactions in the team. Foreign team leaders have the advantage of their own experience as a foreigner in the host country, and as such part of a minority with a diverse cultural background. They can use this experience in the management of a diverse team.

Handelingsverlegenheid is a concept that is still unknown in the hospitality industry. There is a gap in literature regarding the experience of *handelingsverlegenheid* and AUM in hospitality. This was the reason to further investigate to what extent this phenomenon is experienced by hospitality employees. Reviewing the existing literature, the assumption was that management employees are the ones mostly experiencing *handelingsverlegenheid*. As a result, the focus of this research is on the middle management employees of a small-scale hotel with the aim to try to understand whether they experience *handelingsverlegenheid*, what feelings and emotions they have and how they deal with them. In short, to understand when and why hospitality professionals feel awkward and shy in a cross-cultural environment. Some similar studies on *handelingsverlegenheid* experienced by hospitality professionals were performed by undergraduate students, from which we will also use some findings (Jonk, 2021; Van der Schuit et al., 2021).

Research approach

In this interpretative qualitative study, we explored the experiences of practical instructors of the rooms division department of a small-scale commercial learning hotel as well as of some other hospitality professionals. In line with Merriam and Grenier (2019, p. 33), we acknowledge that "qualitative research is embedded in a worldview that sees meaning constructed by individuals in interaction with their world". Given the starting point for the research, initial heuristic inquiry inspired semi-structured, in-depth qualitative interviews with individuals sharing similar positions. The focus of the study was to understand what feelings and emotions the rooms division management employees (PIs) of the hotel experienced towards *handelingsverlegenheid* and how they responded to it. The main questions were: (1) Do the PIs experience awkwardness to act or feelings of anxiety and insecurity in working with a diverse and regularly changing workforce?; and, if so, (2) can this be attributed to *handelingsverlegenheid*? Moreover, (3) how do these PIs manage evoked feelings; (4) what kind of incidents caused awkwardness; and finally, (5) how do they behave in situations of *handelingsverlegenheid*?

Sample and method

The population consisted of 15 employees from the rooms division department. A sample of six PIs was chosen with the purposeful convenience sampling method. In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted in October and November 2020. Additionally, an intern who researched her own *handelingsverlegenheid* in an autoethnographic approach while among cultural others during her practice in Curaçao as a junior manager was interviewed in March 2021 as this further contributed to the findings of this article (Jonk, 2021). During the face-to-face interviews, which allowed observation of facial expressions and other body movements, the concept of *handelingsverlegenheid* was not introduced to the participants to permit genuine emotions, responses and assumptions. The additional interview was held online and this participant was familiar with the concept of *handelingsverlegenheid*. Participation in the interviews was voluntary and participants gave their informed consent.

Data analysis

The interviews were captured in verbatim transcripts and observation notes in English, which allowed us to interpret the data and look for patterns. The main tool for data analysis was reflective thematic analysis. Following an inductive approach and by constantly comparing the data, we developed themes based on the content of the data and their relationships. After an initial familiarisation phase, we coded the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Saldaña, 2015) and, via a pattern-seeking process, developed four major themes: (1) emotional responses in situations of *handelingsverlegenheid*; (2) behavioural responses to *handelingsverlegenheid* including stereotyping; (3) attributed causes of *handelingsverlegenheid*; and (4) presumed qualities to successfully manage *handelingsverlegenheid*.

Findings and discussion

Emotional responses to *handelingsverlegenheid*

Emotional responses formed the first major theme when it comes to *handelingsverlegenheid* of middle managers in cross-cultural settings in hospitality environments. Practical instructors reported feelings of frustration, anger, nervousness, awkwardness, fear, sadness and confusion, as illustrated by Interviewee 1: *I was a bit nervous and scary and then you feel also getting warm*, and Interviewee 7: *I was just really surprised by what had happened and felt very sad*.

Other feelings that were articulated and associated with *handelingsverlegenheid* were embarrassment, insecurity and agitation, stemming from the uncertainty of why people react in a specific way. For example, a practical instructor felt thrown in a situation where he unintentionally made an inappropriate joke with his colleagues, causing an awkward situation. At that moment, the individual felt anxious and insecure as he did not know how to get out of the situation: *"This situation was so embarrassing. I really did not know what I should do to bring the nice atmosphere back"* (Interviewee 6). Unconsciously, he offended his colleagues and as a result an uncomfortable situation was observed: *"I felt embarrassed, I felt awkward, and I was afraid that I really offended them"* (Interviewee 6). Berger and Calabrese (1975) consider uncertainty to be a cognitive phenomenon related to the (in-)ability to predict "others'

attitudes, feelings, beliefs, values, and behaviours" which, in turn, can lead to anxiety, "the affective (emotional) equivalent of uncertainty" (Gudykunst & Nishida, 2001, p. 59). As stated by Duroto et al. (2005), anxiety is a stage where individuals may feel worried, insecure and uncomfortable in an environment. Our findings not only support AUM theory, the reported inability to act typifies *handelingsverlegenheid* as well.

Another example reinforcing this is a situation experienced by Interviewee 7, who felt excluded due to her nationality while leading a team of employees. A situation in which one of the team members raised her voice and accused her of lying regarding a certain situation made her feel insecure and unhappy: *I was very insecure to be honest and a bit sad too* (Interviewee 7). This situation is an example of integral anxiety which occurs when an individual engages in conflict with a member from a social group with which they do not identify (Samochowiec & Florack, 2010). Gudykunst and Nishida (2001) state that communicating with members of different groups leads to more uncertainty than communicating with members of our own groups. As noted by Virzi (2018), a big challenge experienced in multinational organisations is relationship building. Even though strong relationships among employees with cultural differences is essential and a success factor, they cannot be achieved easily as illustrated by Interviewee 7 who observed that there was limited contact between her and her colleagues due to her nationality. Since the team consisted of local employees, Interviewee 7 was left out of the daily conversations and interactions: *you just have to work really hard to be part of their group* (Interviewee 7). In the beginning, limited contact and no desire for any interaction could be seen from the local team members:

They weren't asking any questions, they weren't interested. They would just answer if I would ask a question about their weekend, or their family or what they do in their free time. They would just answer and that was it, there was no question back to me (Interviewee 7).

As a result, Interviewee 7 experienced feelings of sadness and unhappiness:

They wouldn't let me in or agree with what I said because they just felt like I was coming along for three months, and I would leave again. So, if I just asked them to do something they would just be like no, whatever.

Behavioural responses to *handelingsverlegenheid*

Once middle managers in hospitality experience *handelingsverlegenheid*, they behave in different ways. One of the findings derived from the interviews is related to stereotyping as a supportive tool when interacting with others from a different culture. While PIs see stereotyping as a supportive tool to deal with integral anxiety, the literature describes stereotyping as a potentially negative aspect which can affect interaction. Otaye-Ebede and Akobo (2019, p. 18) view stereotyping as "biased generalisations" which, if based on negative assumptions, can lead to stereotype threat (Spencer et al., 1999; 2015). Stereotype threat can hinder the performance and ambitions of those stigmatised, especially when the stereotype is negative. Devine et al. (2007) believe that conflicts in a team can occur because of prejudice or stereotyping. Stereotyping — a common human response to the unknown — involves social categorisation and is a cognitive construct. Stereotyping can induce prejudice, an affective state from which

negative emotions such as "anger, fear, dislike, discomfort, and even hatred" can emerge (Otaye-Ebede & Akobo, 2019, p. 19). Bates et al. (2006) believe that there are general misconceptions about diversity which can reinforce stereotypes. From the interviews, it could be seen that PIs perceive that shared beliefs regarding cultures help them to find the right approach and ensure smooth and effective communication: *"Dutch people are direct"* (Interviewee 5); *"I am Dutch, I am Frisian, and I am maybe a bit direct"* (Interviewee 4). Most of the participants are convinced that stereotyping makes them feel more aware about others' behaviours: *"I thought I knew the [Curaçao] culture because I always based it on the Dutch people"* (Interviewee 7). Indeed, most of the participants standardise and label different behaviours per culture based on repetitive, selectively seen behaviours which help them reduce levels of uncertainty and anticipate possible situations and reactions: *"What also is very difficult with the Asian culture is that people very quickly say yes and then they do the opposite"* (Interviewee 2). This shows that cultural stereotyping can be detrimental. Even though some of the statements are not proven to be right, the participants believe that such standardisation can prevent the presence of *handelingsverlegenheid*. Shared beliefs regarding certain cultures often serve as social expectations too. The PIs experience that such paradigms help them to find the right approach when interacting with others from a different culture. They believe that being aware of behaviours can prevent or minimise awkward situations.

Additionally, during the interviews, it was observed that stereotyping boosts the confidence of employees as they feel more secure judging others. This indicates a false sense of security to help them deal with uncertainty. The PIs experience that social categorisation helps them to choose the right approach when interacting with individuals with different cultural backgrounds:

They see me as someone way above them, so they do everything I say and I believe it has to do with their culture (Interviewee 2).

In our front office team, we have employees from Asia and from South Africa. And yes, you need to have a different approach to them. You need to check them more often and make sure that yes is a yes and no is a no (Interviewee 4).

Avoiding confrontation was another behavioural response retrieved from the interviews. PIs observed students who would only speak up if someone else approached them. Such behaviour could signal uncertainty to interact with others from a different culture. It is unclear whether this observation is an example of *handelingsverlegenheid*, or whether other factors are at play, and whether the PIs use this observation to enrich the learning environment of students. As stated by Duroto et al. (2005), high levels of anxiety and uncertainty may result in individuals avoiding intercultural interactions. Jonkers and Machiels (2012) noted a sense of *handelingsverlegenheid* is experienced by individuals when they fail to act or salvage a situation. In the abovementioned example, the professional felt excluded, unhappy and insecure in her role, which had an influence on her actions and made her feel *handelingsverlegen*:

*I got very *handelingsverlegen* because I did not even know what was appropriate to do in that situation* (Interviewee 7).

Prevention of awkward situations was another theme which surfaced in the interviews, such as avoiding certain situations (Interviewee 7), or holding back on the jokes (Interviewee 6).

Attributed causes of *handelingsverlegenheid*

Interviewees articulated several reasons that can be attributed to *handelingsverlegenheid*: language barriers; the unawareness of others and their cultures; poor cultural sensitivity; and lack of experience interacting with others from a different culture. Van der Schuit et al. (2021, p. 23) identified language barriers and miscommunication as reasons for *handelingsverlegenheid* to occur: "Sometimes...some conflict or miscommunication can happen. One says this and the other one interpreted it differently, so it can cause misunderstanding or that sometimes leads to, for example, miscommunication between me and them because they would speak in their own language". The same authors mentioned non-verbal communication issues as causes for cultural hesitation: "One of the interviewees mentioned the cultural difference of the head shaking gesture 'in Bulgaria, we have this weird thing where we have the head gestures. So, when we say yes, we move our head from left to right and we say no, then move our head up and down', which is opposite of the standard interpretation, this leading to an uncomfortable situation".

Mourik Broekman (2021, p. 24) also mentioned uncertainty about the expected response to negative feedback: "it can result in *handelingsverlegenheid* as the floor managers are hesitant to approach the employee who gave a negative reaction", thus leading to avoidance. Gudykunst and Nishida (2001, p. 59) contend that "[w]e avoid others because it allows us to manage our anxiety. When we are experiencing anxiety and cannot avoid others, we often terminate the interaction as soon as we can". A separate study on *handelingsverlegenheid* of managers in a local restaurant described similar situations of cultural hesitation, for example: "The next interviewee was hesitant to disagree with the other person [an employee from another culture], due to the awkward situation created 'so sometimes there was a point, I was not agreeing with that...but still, I couldn't disagree with her'" (Van der Schuit et al., 2021, p. 23). The perceived inability to act, namely, to disagree with the employee was also identified by Logan et al. (2015), who mentioned that managers who experienced high anxiety are more prone to acts of cultural hesitation and less willing to act in those situations.

Presumed qualities enabling successful management of *handelingsverlegenheid*

The participants in this study described some capabilities that supposedly enable managers of a diverse workforce to communicate and act effectively and appropriately, such as cultural competence and cultural intelligence (including empathy and self-management).

To effectively manage a highly diverse team, it is important to have the right abilities and skills (Grobelna, 2016). According to the interviewees, mutual respect and openness to different situations will contribute to the better management of *handelingsverlegenheid* in the workplace. They mentioned that being conscious, open-minded and using the right approach will minimise the presence of *handelingsverlegenheid* in the workplace:

The approach needs to differ per employee...you also need to have an eye for the people who do not speak

up and try to find the right approach to them, so you make them feel comfortable (Interviewee 4).

Asking for clarification or letting team members repeat what has been said is a tool that confirms for leaders that the message has been received accordingly. This is identified by Interviewee 3, who stated that "*not every conflict is necessarily a conflict and maybe I perceive it differently, maybe I see it in the wrong way*". He believes it is essential as a leader to be conscious and have an open discussion with both parties before jumping to conclusions. This is also the behaviour that most of the PIs demonstrate when dealing with *handelingsverlegenheid*: have a conversation with the people involved in the situation and identify the source of the problem. This is done from their frame of reference, rooted in their cultural values and, while well-intentioned, may not always be the right way to handle the situation. Even though people appear to be confident when *handelingsverlegenheid* occurs, it is not guaranteed that what is seen are the real feelings and emotions being experienced. Individuals try to demonstrate confidence while feeling anxious and as a result, in some cases, situations cannot be handled effectively. Actions such as mutual respect and open-mindedness can accelerate effective interaction among cultures and if uncertainty as well as intention, implementation and realisation are maintained sufficiently, cross-cultural interaction can be achieved (Presbitero & Attar, 2018). For example, Interviewee 4 claimed that individuals need to be sensitive when meeting a person from another culture and should be open to the way others perceive things. She believes that conversations related to personal life and culture should stay on the surface. People should not go into detail as they might touch a sensitive area which can result in an awkward situation. Raithel (2016) believes that the cultural background of leaders in a diverse team plays a significant role and contributes to better team performance. For instance, foreign leaders have their own experiences being non-native in the host company which is to their benefit when managing a diverse team. Moreover, they are predisposed towards interacting with others from a different culture and therefore perhaps can better understand their needs. Inversely, Interviewee 5 takes for granted that having intercultural experience does not necessarily mean that an individual went abroad: "*An international experience can also be in Amsterdam, working with internationals, you know you do not have to necessarily go abroad*" (Interviewee 5). Thus, intercultural experiences are essential when working in a cross-cultural environment, yet it is perceived to be less important where they were obtained.

On the other hand, Interviewee 5 believes that being culturally sensitive is a skill every leader in the company should have to be able to deal with *handelingsverlegenheid*. Low levels of sensitivity are perceived as potential causes for awkward situations. According to Devine et al. (2007), to become a culturally diverse organisation, companies should implement a long-term strategy to achieve success. Numerous interviewees believe that levels of sensitivity and awareness as well as open-mindedness and mutual understanding are crucial when leading highly diverse team: "*It comes from lack of knowledge about the other people's culture*" (Interviewee 5); "*The approach needs to differ per employee*" (Interviewee 4). Rød (2012) identified that an essential element is knowing what one's triggers are and to develop strategies to manage reactions more skilfully, without losing ourselves. Presbitero and Attar (2018) contend that knowledge sharing and cultural

intelligence are key in reducing anxiety. Moreover, Van der Schuit et al. (2021, p. 24) emphasise patience and openness as desirable qualities: "Another interviewee mentioned that in these awkward situations, one should acknowledge it and be willing to solve it: 'I never faced it before and now it is front of me, so I'm willing to face it'". They also advise individual "one-on-one" talks, as well as a cultural training programme. In the research with the PIs, one of the employees believes that to find the right approach, leaders should be able to identify the differences among students and have an eye for those who do not speak. An observation shared in interview 6 is related to the importance of cultural intelligence levels when being a leader. This claim is substantiated by Devine et al. (2007), who believe that the integration of cultural diversity in an organisation is a complicated process. According to Interviewee 6: "*Cultural intelligence levels are important because the more sensitive you are to other cultures, it might help you prevent such situations*". From a didactic perspective, one of the interviewees believes that "*if we let *handelingsverlegenheid* be part of our environment, it will be so educational for them [students]*" (Interviewee 5). She also thinks that there should be a person who can manage and properly guide the process of letting *handelingsverlegenheid* happen before reflecting on it. She could not say if those who do not have intercultural experiences are more likely to be involved or to create awkward situations, yet she truly believes that individuals who are less experienced will be less capable of managing such situations.

Conclusion

This section summarises the findings and management implications to offer advice for the hospitality industry and for further research. As identified in the findings and discussion section, mismatches between encoding and decoding of messages and between sender intentions and what receivers ultimately perceived lead to feelings of embarrassment, nervousness, uncertainty and anger in the cross-cultural environment of a small-scale hotel and can be associated with *handelingsverlegenheid*. Language barriers, lack of mutual understanding and awareness and low levels of sensitivity and cultural awareness are identified as reasons for *handelingsverlegenheid*. Different perceptions in cultures regarding right and wrong, normal and strange, authority and equality, implicit and explicit communication, and assumptions on concepts like politeness often cause *handelingsverlegenheid*. When the levels of uncertainty are high, individuals react to messages differently. Uncertainty can occur because of reasons identified above and the inability to predict behaviours and reactions. From the shared experiences, uncertainty elicits anxiety which manifests itself in feelings of embarrassment and frustration. When an individual is oblivious to others' behaviour and communication, they tend to feel frustrated or even angry. This case study has shown that *handelingsverlegenheid* is a concept that is not limited to the context of health care and education; on the contrary, it is to be expected in any diverse workforce if the complexity of diversity is not acknowledged, and underlying assumptions and values which drive behaviour are not considered. *Handelingsverlegenheid* presupposes the incapacity of the professional to act appropriately based on intrinsic uncertainty and hesitation. *Handelingsverlegenheid* can be experienced by professionals as conscious incompetence,

the third phase of the conscious competence ladder model that Burch developed for Gordon Training International in the 1970s (see Aguilar, 2018), and the organisation has a duty of care to enable their staff to manage diversity well. This would include reducing the risk of stereotyping, as this is a very risky tool to use because, even though it may boost confidence of individuals, it can also increase the risk of conflicts. The hospitality industry is highly diverse in staff, guests and business partners, and grouping people and having perceptions based on culture, religion or colour can actually cause conflicts rather than prevent *handelingsverlegenheid*. Individuals should not be judged based on their culture but on their potential and personality. Thus, even though self-fulfilling prophecy and stereotyping are considered useful to prevent awkward situations, there are many risks involved which can decrease the full potential of a diverse workforce. The presence of *handelingsverlegenheid* is a stage which individuals do not feel comfortable with, yet it is seen as an opportunity for further personal development of cultural intelligence and organisational development. It can be concluded that the presence of *handelingsverlegenheid* can have a significant impact on the relationships of individuals and effective communication in an organisation. Being conscious of this in awkward situations and having the right skills can contribute to self-efficacy in dealing with *handelingsverlegenheid*. For this reason, it is highly recommended that organisations invest in managing diversity to ensure a safe and financially stable working environment. This requires training for all levels of employees, from interns to senior management, and careful continuous attention to prevent the management employees using tools that carry a high risk, such as stereotyping. A diverse team has the potential to be highly effective, but the risk to management is high if employees are not well trained. Training could include dealing with dilemmas through role playing or informed perspective switching. Also, giving the possibility to the employees to share personal insecurities in peer reviews and working with them towards making sense of incidents may result in personal improvement and confidence. As a result, employees will feel more capable and less afraid of leading international teams and will experience less *handelingsverlegenheid*.

ORCID iDs

Anne Keizer-Remmers — <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5640-7331>

Anja Brandsma-Dieters — <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8337-0100>

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