

Title:

Cultural sensitivity in exporter-importer relationships:

A multi-dimensional concept

Abstract: The aim of the paper is to develop an analytical approach to researching the impact of cultural sensitivity on relational qualities characterising rewarding exporter-importer relationships: trust between business partners and information exchange. On the basis of a literature review this paper proposes a multi-dimensional concept consisting of four kinds of competence indicating a salesperson's cultural sensitivity as follows: open-mindedness, country experience, an adaptive business style and language skills. By developing the cultural sensitivity concept further, this article identifies competencies viewed to be of critical importance to managing cultural differences that are likely to pervade business relationships crossing national borders. In contrast to psychic distance and cultural distance, which are two concepts reflecting cultural gaps and impediments between two business entities, cultural sensitivity brings to the light how cultural differences are bridged and transcended. Cultural sensitivity can be viewed as an asset, situating an export firm at an advantage in terms of performing effectively in competitive international markets. Previous studies have investigated the impact of a one-dimensional concept of cultural sensitivity. A multi-dimensional concept of cultural sensitivity is a better method than a one-dimensional concept to identify areas that should be paid careful attention by management in order to enhance personnel's cultural sensitivity.

Keywords: culture sensitivity as a multi-dimensional concept, exporter-importer relationships

Article type: Conceptual paper

1. Introduction

Cultural distance and psychic distance are two concepts that have been frequently used within international business and international marketing research (e.g. Batonda and Perry, 2003; Bello *et al.*, 2003; Kogut and Singh, 1988). A literature review shows that cultural distance and psychic distance are not necessarily appropriate measures to study how cultural differences between business partners impact the way in which business is achieved in foreign markets (XXX). Studies show that being prepared to deal with differences is an important key to success in foreign markets (e.g. Batonda and Perry, 2003; Evans and Mavondo, 2002; O'Grady and Lane, 1996). Rather than emphasising measures reflecting cultural gaps and impediments between two business entities, one should propose measures that help bring to the light how cultural differences are bridged and transcended. A few studies use the concept *cultural sensitivity* in the study of how to manage cultural differences.

The cultural sensitivity concept has attracted some interest among researchers whose interests include non-equity strategic alliances (Johnson *et al.*, 1996; Voss *et al.*, 2006), international marketing (Holzmüller and Stöttinger, 2001), cross-cultural training of expatriates (Zakaria, 2000) and selling-buying cross-border contexts (Harich and LaBahn, 1998; LaBahn and Harich, 1997; Skarmeas *et al.*, 2002). LaBahn and Harich (1997) and Skarmeas *et al.* (2002) have offered an investigation of the role of cultural sensitivity in a selling-buying cross-border context. In these studies cultural sensitivity is viewed as a one-dimensional concept and refers to a partner's sensitivity to national business culture. Although these studies show that cultural sensitivity has a positive impact on relational qualities, which in turn influence relationship performance in a positive way, researchers have raised their voices to suggest that cultural sensitivity is still an inadequately developed concept (Harich and LaBahn, 1998, p. 87; LaBahn and Harich, 1997, p. 30; Skarmeas *et al.*, 2002, p. 773). Skarmeas *et al.* (2002, p.

773) point out that cultural sensitivity, in the way it is defined by them, may not fully capture its intended conceptual domain. LaBahn and Harich (1997) propose that future research could identify other dimensions.

The objective of this study is twofold. First, on the basis of a literature review a multi-dimensional concept of cultural sensitivity is developed. A multi-dimensional concept of cultural sensitivity is more informative than a one-dimensional concept, and consequently also a better method to identify areas which management could focus on in order to enhance an individual's cultural sensitivity. Second, hypotheses are generated to show how dimensions of cultural sensitivity – open-mindedness, country experience, adaptive business style and language skills - are related, and to show how the concept of cultural sensitivity can be integrated with two important variables characterising ongoing and rewarding business relationships: trust between business partners and information exchange. Previous research shows that these relational characteristics are important for ongoing and rewarding business relationships in export marketing channels (e.g., Aulakh *et al.*, 1996; C. Zhang *et al.*, 2003; LaBahn and Harich, 1997). Advancement of the concept should not only contribute to theory development, but also help managers in export firms to identify capable salespeople as well as work out individual plans to enhance salespeople's cultural sensitivity.

This paper is structured as follows: Section 2 presents a literature review of the cultural sensitivity concept. Given the aim of the paper, I developed a conceptual model to structure the discussions in section 3. Figure 1 presents a multi-dimensional concept of cultural sensitivity, how the various dimensions relate to each other and how they relate to trust and information exchange. The paper ends with concluding remarks and suggestions for future research in section 4.

2 Cultural sensitivity

LaBahn and Harich (1997) were the first to offer an investigation of the role of cultural sensitivity in a selling-buying cross-border context. Cultural sensitivity was defined as “...a firm’s understanding of and adaptation to its exchange partner’s domestic business practices *as perceived by its partner* p.31, original italics” (LaBahn and Harich, 1997). They developed a measurement scale; a one-dimensional construct, composed of four items. Three items report the perceptual characteristics of the partner: understanding, awareness and sensitivity to a partner’s way of conducting business. The fourth item reports the partner’s willingness to adapt. In the discussions LaBahn and Harich (1997, p. 44) emphasise the ability to adapt: “...high levels of sensitivity to national business culture can be achieved by selecting salespeople who are prone to adapt to their customers...” These researchers emphasise the behavioural aspect in an article published in 1998. The essence of cultural sensitivity is to what extent the salesperson accommodates the customer’s buying process needs in matters such as business etiquette and business procedures. Such accommodations are expected to reduce the distance between the exchange parties and to facilitate a rewarding business relationship (Harich and LaBahn, 1998, pp. 87, 89). Knowledge about a business partner’s culture and business practices is viewed to be essential in order to succeed with such accommodations (Harich and LaBahn, 1998). This type of knowledge can primarily be acquired on the basis of experience: through interactions with business partners in international markets (Holden, 2004, p. 567). A diverse set of experiences acquired on the basis of involvement with business partners in a specific market leads to in-depth knowledge about this market (Chetty *et al.*, 2006, p. 701). Repeating interactions provide the basis from where the code of social tact is acquired. That is, he or she acquires understanding of how to behave in that specific situation (Magala, 2005, p. 30).

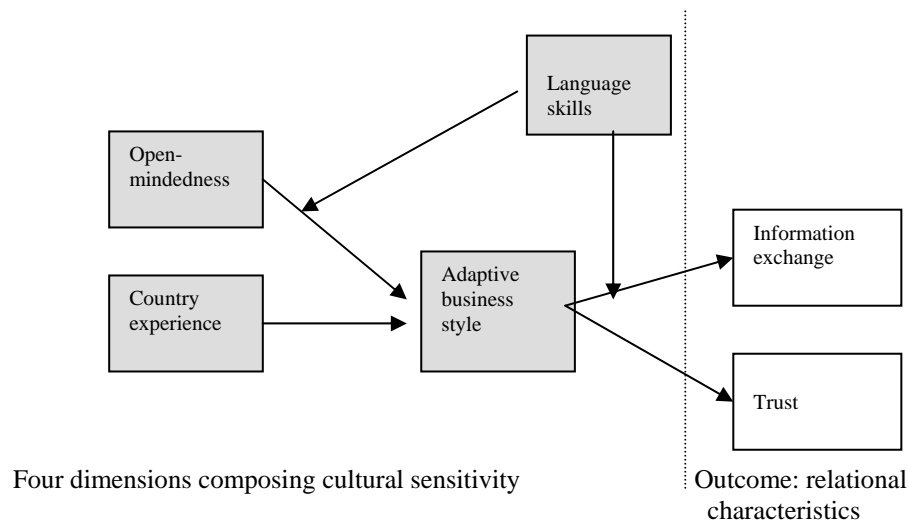
Holzmüller and Stöttinger (2001) argue that non-cognitive skills – affective abilities – are the critical dimension of cultural sensitivity. The affective dimension can be associated with an individual's cross-cultural attitude and open-mindedness toward new ideas and experience (Hammer *et al.*, 1978). Open-mindedness and non-judgemental attitude are viewed as important characteristics of cultural sensitivity by Chaisrakeo and Speece (2004). These researchers also emphasise sensitivity to the verbal and non-verbal cues of people from foreign cultures as important characteristics of cultural sensitivity (Chaisrakeo and Speece, 2004). Sensitivity to the verbal and non-verbal cues of people from foreign countries can be enhanced by language skills (Hofstede, 2001; Terpstra and David, 1985). Culture includes language, and language is not neutral (Hofstede, 2001, p. 21). Language influences our world-view (Usunier and Lee, 2005, p. 166), and is the means by which cultural understanding can be communicated (Hofstede, 2001, p. 21; Terpstra and David, 1985, p. 18). To conclude, the review shows that cultural sensitivity is a varied concept. This indicates that a multi-dimensional approach is a better method than a one-dimensional approach in order to grasp the conceptual domain of cultural sensitivity. The cultural sensitivity concept proposed in this article is composed of the following key dimensions: open-mindedness, country experience, adaptive business style, and language skills. The theoretical definition is as follows: Cultural sensitivity refers to the competence of a salesperson who has the attitude, the skills and the experience required to deal with cultural differences in the export markets.

3. Multi-dimensional concept of cultural sensitivity

The conceptual model is described in figure 1. The shaded constructs represent the dimensions composing the cultural sensitivity concept. Two relational characteristics - trust between exchange partners and information exchange - are viewed as the consequences, influenced directly by an adaptive business style which is one dimension of cultural

sensitivity. Two dimensions of cultural sensitivity – open-mindedness and country experience – are hypothesised to influence trust and exchange of information through adaptive business style. The fourth dimension of cultural sensitivity, language skills, is viewed as a moderator variable. It is hypothesised that language skills improve a person’s receptiveness and perceptual ability to detect verbal and non-verbal cues: the relationship between open-mindedness and an adaptive business style is strengthened. Similarly, it is hypothesised that language skills enhance communication between business partners in a positive way, which means that the relationship between an adaptive business style and information exchange is strengthened.

Figure 1. Cultural sensitivity: a multi-dimensional concept.



Open-mindedness, country experience, an adaptive business style, and language skills are crucial factors to ensure a high level of sensitivity to a business partner’s way of conducting business. Interactions with business partners are an important prerequisite to develop a high level of cultural sensitivity, which means that a salesperson’s cultural sensitivity is the result of a process, acquired over time. However, the conceptual model is static, and can only describe the level of cultural sensitivity that a salesperson holds at a certain point in time. Various streams of literature have been used to develop a multi-dimensional cultural sensitivity concept including literature focusing on inter-organisational business relationships

in cross-border contexts, adaptive selling, international business, and marketing. The following section presents the intervening variable: an adaptive business style.

An adaptive business style

A salesperson's skill to adapt is viewed as a critical factor to succeed in selling the firm's products in international markets (Chairsrakeo and Speece, 2004, pp. 269, 276; Kalé and Barnes, 1992, pp. 118, 119). Adaptation is about making connections, and essential to succeed is the ability to be flexible (Bird *et al.*, 1999, pp. 159-60; Kalé and Barnes, 1992, p. 119). Spiro and Weitz (1990, p. 63) consider flexibility an important aspect of adaptive selling. Accommodating sales behaviours to the specific sales situation is fundamental to adaptive selling. The practice of adaptive selling can be defined as "...the altering of sales behaviours during a customer interaction or across customer interactions based on perceived information about the nature of the selling situation". Salespeople have a high level of adaptive selling when they adjust their sales approach to a wide range of selling situations and make quick adjustments in response to their customer's reactions (Spiro and Weitz, 1990, p. 62). Salespeople serving international markets must be prepared to accommodate customers with various cultural back ground. Sales representatives dealing with business partners in international markets are faced with a wide variety of selling situations in which the ability to be adaptive should be valuable.

Much of the time spent by international managers (Adler and Graham, 1989, p. 515), and salespeople (Chairsrakeo and Speece, 2004, p. 267), is spent on negotiating. International negotiations are considered as one of the most challenging tasks in business (Cavusgil *et al.*, 2002, p. 131; Ghauri 2003, p. 5; Reynolds *et al.*, 2003, p. 236). Business negotiations are by Holzmüller and Stöttinger (2001, p. 601) viewed as highly culturally sensitive situations.

Negotiations are based not only on legal and business matters, but also on the quality of social interactions, which involves an understanding of, and subsequently adaptation to, important culturally coded signs (Sebenius, 2002; Usunier and Lee, 2005, pp. 494, 495). Depending on who the business partner is, one should make a conscious effort to adapt the style and expectations (Cavusgil *et al.*, 2002, p. 134). Research shows that negotiators are inclined to adapt their behaviour to the other party in order to balance out the process and improve the outcomes (Adler and Graham, 1989; Fang, 2001; Usunier and Lee, 2005, p. 521). Findings show that some degree of adaptation improves the climate between business partners negotiating in a cross-cultural context (Francis, 1991, p. 416). Partners are inclined to reflect one another's behaviours (Adler and Graham, 1989, p. 531), showing the importance of demonstrating understanding and flexibility in the negotiation process (Ghauri, 2003, p. 5). The ability to perform an adaptive business style is assumed to be partly a result of a person's attitude towards the markets and the customers: open-mindedness.

Open-mindedness

Open-mindedness is the degree to which an individual is receptive to new information and situations, including cultural differences. An open-minded person picks up on the essential signals more easily (Harich and LaBahn, 1998, p. 94). Open-mindedness can be related to the affective qualities of an individual, which implies "...the ability to acknowledge cultural differences, to empathize with the host country's cultural norms and working styles, etc." (Cui and van den Berg, 1991, p. 230). In contrast, ethnocentrism is an undesirable attitude for people working and operating in different cultural settings. An ethnocentric person tries to understand a foreign person as similar to or different from them self rather than understanding the person in the context of his or her own cultural background (Harris and Moran, 1996, p.

31). When this attitude predominates, home-country cultural patterns are transferred to a different cultural setting.

Inappropriate actions and misunderstandings are often the result of un-reflected transfer of home cultural patterns (Holzmüller and Stöttinger, 2001, p. 602). Research shows that “...people from different cultures often misinterpret each other’s behaviour because of learned cultural differences in their perceptions and evaluations of social behaviours” (Mendenhall and Oddou, 1985, p. 42). It is important to recognise the cultural basis of the foreign partner’s perspective in order to ensure effective interactions with customers (Harris and Moran, 1996, p. 3; Skarmeas *et al.*, 2002, p. 763). An open-minded person accepts that “our way and their way differ, but neither is inherently superior to the other” (Adler, 2002, p. 113). Without awareness of the differences between cultures, we are likely to measure others against our own cultural standards (Guirdham, 2005, p. 76).

Open-mindedness is viewed as one of three organisational values (one of three dimensions composing a second-order construct) in a study carried out by Sinkula *et al.* (1997, pp. 305, 309). They link the open-mindedness of an organisation to the mental models held by individuals, constituting an organisational learning framework. They find support for their view in a study carried out by Day and Nedungadi (1994, p. 41), who find that managers pay selective attention to their environment and define reality in relatively narrow terms. Consequently, they are at risk of ignoring changes and information that does not fit into their current beliefs and practices. In a similar way, the perceptual ability of a salesperson has been emphasised within the adaptive selling literature (Morgan and Stoltman, 1990, p. 44). Information acquisition skills are of major importance to ensure effective interactions with customers (Weitz *et al.*, 1986, p. 175), and the ability to detect verbal and non-verbal cues

(Morgan and Stoltman, 1990, p. 44). In an international setting, this includes among other things cultural signals such as rules of business etiquette, business procedures, greeting rituals, and negotiation style (Ulven, 2004, pp. 20-30). Individuals in an organisation learn by updating beliefs according to changes in the internal and external environments, which imply that assumptions and beliefs must be questioned (Sinkula *et al.*, 1997, p. 309).

An individual's beliefs or preconceived ideas about the characteristics of people affect her/his behaviour (Guirdham 2005, p. 149). An open-minded person recognises a partner's perspective and way of carrying out business, which is fundamental to ensure effective interactions with customers in international markets (Fenwick, *et al.*, 2003, p. 308; Skarmeas *et al.*, 2002, p. 763). A successful negotiator is able to take cues from his or her business partner and adapt accordingly (Cavusgil *et al.*, 2002, p. 141). Open-mindedness enables a salesperson to accept new information more easily, and predisposes him or her to carry out necessary adaptations when dealing with foreign customers (Harich and LaBahn, 1998, p. 94). The research hypothesis is as follows: Greater open-mindedness increases salespeople's ability to perform an adaptive business style.

Country experience

The International Process Model emphasises the importance of market specific knowledge; of the business climate in a specific foreign market, cultural patterns, structure of the market, and characteristics of buyers served in this market (Johanson and Vahlne, 1977, p. 28). This knowledge can only be acquired through experience. Country experience refers to a diverse set of experiences acquired by involvement with various business partners in a specific market (Chetty *et al.*, 2006, p. 701). Dealings with a number of business assignments imply that the person has interacted with various business partners, and thus has learnt about the

variations within a specific country. Experience creates the knowledge required to do business (Lindbergh, 2004, p. 9). Experience can contribute to “objective” knowledge in so far as it can be transmitted to others. But experience itself cannot be transmitted (Penrose, 1995, p. 53). Country experience can be defined as tacit, which means that it has a personal quality that makes it hard to formalise and communicate: “Tacit knowledge is deeply rooted in action, commitment, and involvement in a specific context”. People develop tacit knowledge through direct “hands-on” experience (Nonaka, 1994, pp. 16, 21). Each salesperson can be viewed as a “market research organisation” in the sense that he or she exhibits customer knowledge and understanding. A salesperson gathers information by means of experience, which contributes to better respond to different customer situations (Gengler, *et al.*, 1995, pp. 288-89).

Multiple business assignments in a specific market deepen the salesperson’s knowledge about how business is carried out in that market (Chetty *et al.*, 2006, p. 701). This type of experience facilitates a person’s ability to practice flexibility: to adjust to the type of customer served. Experience of the market targeted enables managers to better understand channel members and customers (Morgan *et al.*, 2003, p. 294). Country experience leads to an improved understanding of the foreign business partner’s culture, which enables the export firm to manage the exchange relationship better (Kalé and McIntyre, 1991, p. 42). Findings show that export marketing management is facilitated by export experience acquired in the buying firm’s country. Such experience leads to improved understanding of the market, and a network of personal contacts; consequently, product decisions, agents/distribution selection, and communication with partners in the market are improved (Madsen, 1989, p. 50). The following research hypothesis has been proposed: Greater country experience increases

salespeople's ability to perform an adaptive business style in the market of the ongoing business.

Information exchange

Exchange of information can be defined as the extent to which the partners of a business relationship openly share information, formal as well as informal (LaBahn and Harich, 1997, p. 32; Morgan and Hunt, 1994, p. 25). Exchange of information is essential for ongoing business relationships (LaBahn and Harich, 1997, p. 42; Mohr and Nevin, 1990; Morgan and Hunt, 1994, p. 25). Findings show that those who maintain a continuous flow of communication with the market are also likely to succeed with their export ventures (Czinkota and Johnston, 1983, p. 152). However, communication difficulties are a major cause of problems between business partners in distribution channels (Mohr and Nevin, 1990, p. 36), and cross border contexts are no exceptions (Adler, 2002, pp. 73-74; Kalé and Barnes, 1992, p. 126).

Cultural differences are likely to create obstacles to communication, leading to misunderstandings (Adler and Graham, 1989, pp. 517, 519; Kalé and Barnes, 1992, p. 126). A salesperson who is sensitive to the verbal and non-verbal feedbacks from a foreign buyer is more likely to succeed in communications. In order to minimise problems and enhance exchange of information, it is of vital importance to what extent a salesperson is prepared to deal with cultural differences (Kalé and Barnes, 1992, pp. 122-23). Evidence shows that partner awareness, understanding of and adjustments to national business culture lead to more open communication and sharing of information (LaBahn and Harich, 1997, p. 29). Likewise, Anderson and Weitz (1989, p. 321) argue that competent personnel are essential to the achievement of enhanced communication in a cross-cultural context. The following

hypothesis has been proposed: Greater levels of an adaptive business style increase exchange of information between business partners.

Trust between business partners

Trust is defined as a partner's confidence in an exchange partner's reliability and integrity (Morgan and Hunt, 1994, p. 23). Trust is a critical lubricant in ongoing business relationships (Johnson and Cullen, 2002, p. 335). The presence of trust enables the business partners to focus on the long-term advantages of the relationship (Doney and Cannon, 1997, p. 35; Dwyer *et al.* 1987, pp. 22-23; Morgan and Hunt, 1994, p. 24). Salespeople perform an important function in facilitating and developing customer trust (Doney and Cannon, 1997, p. 35; Gounaris, 2005, p. 136). To make current purchase decisions, buyers must determine the degree to which they can trust suppliers and their salespeople (Doney and Cannon 1997, p. 36). In addition to professional expertise, it is of major importance that contact personnel have the competence to interact successfully with customers, thus providing the basis from where trust develops (Gounaris, 2005, p. 136). To adhere to some set of principles that the buyer finds acceptable, signals that the relationship is important. The foreign partner is encouraged to trust the supplying firm (Lovett *et al.*, 1999, p. 241).

Johnson *et al.* (1996, p. 998), who focused on non-equity strategic alliances including US and Japanese partners, found that there is a positive relationship between a higher level of cultural sensitivity, including adaptations, to a partner's cultural characteristics of the focal firm and a higher level of the partner trust of the focal firm. They also found that trust results in trust: when your partner trusts you, you trust your partner (Johnson *et al.*, 1996, p. 998). The existence of trust is assumed to possess a self-fulfilling quality (Bradach and Eccles, 1989, pp. 107-08; Johnson *et al.* 1996, p. 988). Awareness of and adjustments to cultural differences

seem to signal and strengthen trust (Johnson and Cullen, 2002, p. 359), and provide a basis from where mutual trust is created (Johnson *et al.*, 1996, p. 999). The following hypothesis has been proposed: Greater levels of an adaptive business style increase trust between business partners.

Language skills

Culture includes language (Hofstede, 2001, p. 21), and language is the vehicle to pass on information (Terpstra and David, 1985, p. 17). Language can be understood as “...a means of communication *within a particular culture* p. 18 original italics” (Terpstra and David, 1985). Researchers propose that sensitivity to the verbal and non-verbal cues of people from foreign countries can be enhanced by language skills. Language is a guide for coding behaviour, expresses social priorities and provides a frame of reference (Hofstede, 2001; Terpstra and David, 1985). Language influences our world-view (Usunier and Lee, 2005, p. 166) and is the means by which cultural understanding can be communicated. Language is a guide for coding behaviour, expresses social priorities and provides a frame of reference (Hofstede, 2001, p. 21; Terpstra and David, 1985, p. 18).

Differences in thinking categories are larger for languages that are structurally far apart, as exemplified by the various ways aspects of “time” are distinguished (Hofstede, 2001, p. 21). Language, through tenses and words, forms time-related behaviour, which in turn influences business attitude (when negotiating or dealing with delivery times or engagements) (Usunier and Lee, 2005, p. 71). French is one among several languages that has no adequate equivalent for the English word *achievement*, and Japanese does not have an equivalent word for *decision making* (Hofstede, 2001, p. 21). Translators are aware that texts are not easily translated to another language (Hofstede, 2001, p. 21; Usunier and Lee, 2005, pp. 384-85).

Language plays an essential role in intercultural interactions (Hofstede, 2001, p. 425; Schneider and Barsoux, 2003, p. 44). Because business people share a professional culture with their business partners, they frequently underestimate obstacles that may emerge because of language differences and problems of communication (Usunier and Lee, 2005, p. 394). A person who has limited language skills is tempted to rely on the fallacious assumption that what a foreign person can express in English words is all that this person has on his or her mind. Accordingly, miscommunications are likely to arise.

Having to express oneself in a foreign language implies having to learn about the other's frame of reference. By mastering another language, one gets to know the subtleties of that specific culture (Hofstede, 2001, p. 425). A salesperson who is receptive to the verbal and non-verbal feedbacks from a foreign buyer is more likely to succeed with communications (Kalé and Barnes, 1992, pp. 122-23). Language skills contribute to effective communication and reduce misunderstandings (Evans and Mavondo, 2002, p. 522). It should be in the exporter's interest to reduce communication problems by learning the language of the buyer (Terpstra and David, 1985, p. 36; Usunier and Lee, 2005, p. 393). Researchers argue "...that bi- and even multilingualism have a positive effect on psychological adjustment" (Hofstede, 2001, p. 38, refers to Sarawathi and Dutta, 1987). Those who are aware of language differences are better prepared to adapt (Usunier and Lee, 2005, p. 395). The following hypotheses have been proposed: Mastering two or more foreign languages strengthens the relationship between open-mindedness and an adaptive business style, and the relationship between an adaptive business style and information exchange.

4. Concluding remarks

The article offers two major contributions. First, on the basis of a literature review this paper proposes four dimensions indicating a salesperson's cultural sensitivity as follows: open-mindedness, country experience, an adaptive business style and language skills. Second, the article proposes a conceptual model which integrates the multi-dimensional concept of cultural sensitivity into a relational exchange model of exporter-importer relationships. The relational characteristics of exporter-importer relationships are assessed by means of trust and information exchange. Research shows that these two relational characteristics are important to sustaining rewarding business relationships in the export markets (Aulakh *et al.*, 1996; C. Zhang *et al.*, 2003; LaBahn and Harich, 1997).

Previous research applies cultural sensitivity to the firm level (Johnson *et al.*, 1996; LaBahn and Harich, 1997; Skarmas *et al.*, 2002). Though, LaBahn and Harich (1997, p. 44) argue that high levels of sensitivity to a business partner's culture can be attained by means of salespeople. Accordingly, the cultural sensitivity concept developed in this paper applies to the salesperson. Salespeople have a key role in maintaining business relationships (e.g. Chaisrakeo and Speece, 2004; Doney and Cannon, 1997), and to ensure a firm's success (Brown *et al.*, 1992; Rich *et al.*, 1999). To enhance knowledge with regard to what characterises salespeople who succeed in dealings with customers in the export markets is therefore of current relevance. Cultural sensitive salespeople can be viewed as competent personnel that are well prepared to deal with buyers in the export markets (Chaisrakeo and Speece, 2004, pp. 267, 279; Harich and LaBahn, 1998, pp. 88, 89). The proposed model could provide the basis for future empirical work researching the impact of a salesperson's cultural sensitivity, which may lead to new insights with regard to factors that are important to enhance relational qualities in exporter-importer relationships. The appendix, table 1,

presents the scales that can be used to assess a salesperson's cultural sensitivity. The scales are not new except for language skills. Though, wordings have been changed to accommodate the context to be studied.

The proposed scales can be used as tools in the process to identify capable salespeople and to work out individual plans to enhance salespeople's cultural sensitivity. *Open-mindedness* which refers to a person's receptiveness to new information, facilitates the learning of skills. Openness is a kind of attribute that cannot easily be acquired by individuals who do not already possess it (Johnson *et al.*, 2006, pp. 532, 536). To identify those persons that are open-minded should therefore be a key issue in the recruitment process. In combination with interviews, managers could also consider the use of a questionnaire which aim is to capture a person's cultural awareness and ability to question their own assumption and to update their beliefs about the customers and markets. To perform an *adaptive business style* is of critical importance to succeed in selling the firm's products in international markets (Kalé and Barnes, 1992, pp. 118, 119). In the recruitment process it will be of critical importance to identify those that know how to flex and adjust negotiation style. Simulations of negotiations can be used as a tool to identify those people that have a talent to perform flexibility. Managers could also consider training programs with the objective to improve communication styles and learn how to accommodate business style (Humphreys and Williams, 1996). Mentoring arrangements should be a part of this, which involves that senior salespeople supervise newly recruited people with regard to how to negotiate (Williams and Attaway, 1996). *Country experience* refers to in depth knowledge about how business is carried out in a specific country (Chetty *et al.*, 2006). Country experience is acquired on the basis of dealings with a number of business assignments. This means that management should ensure that salespeople interact with various business partners, and thus learn about the

variation within a specific country. This kind of experience facilitates a person's ability to practice flexibility: to adjust to the type of customer served. To master other languages than English should be obligatory. One approach to enhance *language skills* is to offer employees a stay in a target market. A stay in a target market will also enhance a person's country experience including how business is arranged and practiced.

To conclude, findings produced by an empirical investigation may have implications with respect to human resource policies. Previous research shows that management should exercise a more critical assessment as regard to salespeople's appropriateness to deal with customers in international markets (Bello *et al.*, 2003, p. 12). This article proposes that to emphasise competencies indicating cultural sensitive salespeople is one approach in this respect. However, an empirical investigation is required in order to provide more detailed guidance to managers with regard to the importance of the various dimensions of the cultural sensitivity concept proposed in this article.

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Appendix: Table 1 Cultural Sensitivity: Constructs and items

Items: Anchored by "very poor description" to "very good description" on a 5 point scale.	Adapted on the basis of the following sources:
Country experience Please state the number of customers that you have been serving in this market, previous and current, in this country. ^{a, b} An alternative question is: Please state the number of years that you have been serving customers in this country. ^{a, b}	Chetty, Eriksson and Lindbergh 2006 * Journal of International Business Studies
Open-mindedness 1. I willingly reflect critically upon assumptions that I have about my customers. 2. I constantly try to question my own interpretations of the market. 3. I often question the foundation (information sources and fixed assumptions) of my interpretation of the customers.	Sinkula, Baker and Noordewier 1997 * Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science
Adaptive business style 1. I can easily change to another negotiation style, if I perceive that the style I am using does not work. 2. I like experimenting with different ways of approaching new customers. 3. I am very flexible with regard to which negotiation style I apply. 4. I can apply a wide range of different ways of negotiating. 5. I try to understand how one customer differs from another.	Robinson, Marshall, Moncrief and Lassk 2002 * Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management
Language skills Please indicate the languages that you master moderately and fluently. ^c	New

^a Continuous variable, log transformation.

^b The respondent will be asked to include business relations with a duration of one year or more. The respondent will also be asked to include experience acquired in previous workplaces.

^c Language will be treated as a moderator variable. It will be made a distinction between mastering one foreign language (English) and mastering several foreign languages (two or more).