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Beyond culture or beyond control? Reviewing the use of Hall's high-/low-context concept

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Abstract

This paper reviews Edward T. Hall's influential concept of high-/low-context communication and its use in cross-cultural research. Hall's concept suggests that individuals combine preprogrammed culture specific context and information to create meaning. The use of context is argued to vary across cultures and country classifications have been attached to Hall's concept. These country rankings have evolved over time classifying (national) cultures as 'high-context' (HC) and 'low-context' (LC). Since future studies employing Hall's context idea as an underlying framework in cross-cultural research need to rely on a valid and reliable country classification, our study analyses literature related to Hall's HC/LC concept. Based on a systematic review, we particularly question whether the country classification attached to Hall's concept is built on rigorous and substantiated findings. Our study shows that most previous research that utilized HC/LC country classifications is based on seemingly less-than-adequate evidence. Mixed and often contradictory findings reveal inconsistencies in the conventional country classifications and show that they are flawed or, at best, very limited.

Keywords

communication, Hall, high-context, low-context, national culture

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Introduction

Culture is a 'powerful social construct' (Boyacigiller et al., 2004: 99) and a central issue with which organizations need to contend, e.g. resulting from an increasingly diverse and multicultural workforce (Doney et al., 1998). The prominent role of (national) culture has become increasingly important (Leung et al., 2005). Communication can also be seen as another vital issue for organizations as functioning communication contributes significantly to sustainable, long-term success (Barney, 1991; Carmeli and Tishler, 2004; Smidts et al., 2001). The results of miscommunication 'are needless, usually unproductive, and can cost organizations dearly' (Axley, 1986: 17). Various aspects of culture eventually cause members of different cultures to 'see, interpret, and evaluate things differently, and consequently act upon them differently' (Adler, 2003: 250). In consequence, culture-specific facets of communication can be argued to play a significant role in cross-cultural research.

Prominent conceptualizations of cultural variation across nations such as the works of Hofstede (1980, 2001), the GLOBE-project proposed by House et al. (2004), Trompenaars (1993), Hall (1976) and Schwartz (1992) all acknowledge the relevance of communication across cultural borders. However, except for Hall's work (particularly the elements relating to his idea of context), most conceptualizations of national culture and national cultural differences do not explicitly relate culture and communication in the first instance. Hall instead offers a communication-oriented perspective on culture and justifies this focus: 'We believed that culture is communication and no communication by humans can be divorced from culture' (Hall, 1992: 212).

Work on different communication patterns across cultures place Edward T. Hall in the group of the most influential authors in intercultural research (Hart, 1999). Hall's work is acknowledged to have popularized and conceptualized the idea of intercultural communication (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1990; Rogers et al., 2002). According to Hall (1976) cultures differ in their use of context and information to create meaning. Hall illustrates his concept using a number of nationalities (e.g. US Americans, Germans and Japanese). In addition to these exemplary nationalities in Hall's original work, other authors classify further national cultures as high- or low-context. While a stock of literature has developed which uses the context idea, the country classifications attached to the concept seem (in simple terms) to be less than rigorous in their development.

The objective of this paper, therefore, is to critically analyse literature on Hall's high-/low-context idea and to identify gaps or inconsistencies of research employing this concept. Based on a systematic review, this paper particularly questions whether the country classification attached to Hall's concept is built on rigorous findings. This question is particularly relevant for future empirical research employing context as a central variable and attributing context-levels to national culture. By challenging the applicability of this concept, our paper provides a theoretical contribution to cross-cultural research. To attain this research objective, our paper introduces Hall's concept and clarifies the central constructs of context, information and meaning. The methodology section then justifies our use of a simplified systematic review and describes the sample analysed in this paper. In the next step, results of the systematic review are presented and discussed, analysing the use of the high-/low-context idea in published empirical research and identifying potential inconsistencies. Our paper closes with a conclusion of its central findings, the limitations attached to our systematic review and implications for research and practice with a particular focus on future research questions and challenges arising from the findings of this study.

High- and low-context communication

We first introduce Hall's idea of cultural variation in the use of context when constructing meaning and the importance of the concept for cross-cultural management research as perceived by the academic peer group. We then point to advances or attributions from other authors substantiating what we know about high and low context to date.

Edward T. Hall, 'Beyond Culture'

According to Hart (1999), the work of the anthropologist Edward T. Hall can be considered of major influence in the field of intercultural research. From the mid-20th century, Hall published a series of monographs which evolved to an extended framework of culture over the years. The first piece of Hall's work that received popular attention was 'The Silent Language' (1959). Based on Freudian psychoanalytic theory, Hall argues that individuals tend to be partially unaware of elements of their non-verbal communication behaviour. This first major publication of Hall relates to three dimensions: time, space and context:

1. Time refers to how members of different cultures orient towards time and the way they perceive it (monochronic vs polychronic).
2. Space refers to differing cultural frameworks for defining and organizing space, with frameworks internalized in all individuals at an unconscious level.
3. Context refers to the nature of how meaning is constructed differently across cultures using different ratios of context and information.

Hall's three dimensions of culture are further elaborated in his later works. As the three dimensions time, space and context are interrelated, Hall – despite tending to emphasize one of the three dimensions in each of his earlier monographs (1966, 1976, 1983) – always points to the other two dimensions when elaborating any one in more detail. For instance, Hall assumes that members of monochronic cultures are low-context and need information, whereas members of polychronic cultures tend to be high-context and preprogrammed to a larger degree.

The concept of high-/low-context communication was originally introduced in 1959 but elaborated in *Beyond Culture* (Hall, 1976). The latter is also considered to be the more influential contribution (Harman and Briggs, 1991). Hall (1976) argues that the human potential is strictly limited by an underdeveloped ability to get 'beyond culture' in order to achieve a more creative, expansive and responsive use of our capacities to think and communicate (verbally and non-verbally) and resolve problems (Tool, 1977). In consequence, he introduced the idea that individuals combine preprogrammed elements (culture-specific context) and information to create meaning. The use of context is argued to vary across cultures. The high-/low-context concept is presented in more detail in the following section.

High-/low-context cultures

In his original concept illustrated by cross-national examples, Hall (1976) suggests that cultures can be characterized according to their communication styles by referring to the degree of non-verbal context used in communication. Hall (2000: 37) argues that 'the level of context determines everything about the nature of the communication and is the foundation on which all subsequent behaviour rests'. He noted earlier that 'the system I have in mind is one that relates information in a context to produce something man calls meaning' (Hall, 1973: 18).

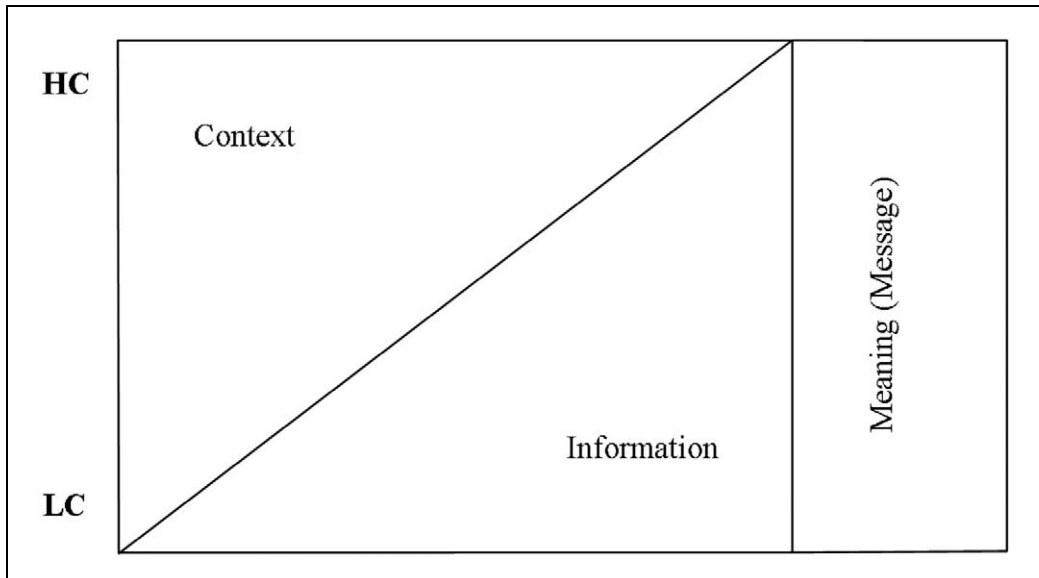


Figure 1. High- and low-context

Source: Hall (1976: 102)

Contexting, a form of preprogramming, allows individuals to screen data and avoid information overload, thereby increasing individuals' capacities to cope with higher amounts of complex information. 'Internal contexting also makes it possible for human beings to perform the exceedingly important function of automatically correcting for distortions or omissions of information in messages' (Hall, 1976: 105). Cultures provide their communal members with different propensities to employ preprogramming or contexting in their everyday communication, thus compensating for any relative inaccuracy in language.

Essential for the understanding of Hall's concept and the construct of context is a clear definition of the two key terms 'high-context culture' (HC) and 'low-context culture' (LC). According to Hall (1976: 101) 'HC transactions feature pre-programmed information that is in the receiver and in the setting, with only minimal information in the transmitted message. LC transactions are the reverse'; i.e. in LC communication most of the information is vested in the explicit code. As context use varies across cultures, any transaction transferring meaning can be characterized somewhere on a continuum from HC to LC. The ratio of the two elements information and context can vary depending on culture (see Figure 1). Consequently, HC and LC are to be understood as two poles in a continuous scale of meaning with nearly all possible combinations of context and information but without both extremes (HC: only context; LC: only information) themselves (Hall, 2000).¹

First reviews of *Beyond Culture* commended its 'non-technical style and the many illuminating real-life illustrations make it a delight to read' (Pattison, 1976: 799) and its appraisal as a 'useful book for economists' (Tool, 1977: 901). The context-model can help to give a better understanding of how members of different cultures might perceive similar messages in a different way. Even critics acknowledge the concept as a doorway to enter the room of intercultural understanding (Starosta and Chen, 2003). As the need for understanding affects most areas of international business, Hall's (1976) concept has been used as an underlying framework in cross-cultural research.

Although the concept is acknowledged and applied in intercultural research, Hall's (1976) idea has been subjected to criticisms like bipolarization, overgeneralization, or lack of a solid empirical foundation, to name just three major points (Chuang, 2003; Holden, 2002; Starosta and Chen, 2003). Furthermore, Hall and Hall (1987: 364) refer to 'the practice of dichotomizing virtually everything' as a basic underlying characteristic of the US American culture. Criticism could also be applied to the 'oldness' of the concept and particularly to the attempts at classifying *national* cultures as HC or LC in a globalizing world in which any approach based on national cultures might not be appropriate any more (Craig and Douglas, 2006; Fang, 2005; Gerhart, 2008). Even more concerning is the fact that few authors have hitherto challenged the frequently used classification of countries (as documented in the following review) not queried the lack of clear constructs of the concept's key terms of context, information and meaning the latter constructs are discussed in the following section.

Context, information and meaning: a definitional approach

Context, information and meaning are central terms to Hall's concept. Similar to other scholars like Bateson (1979), Hall argues that there is no meaning without a combination of information and context. In consequence a concept-specific definitional approach is necessary to 'yield a more interpretable and theoretically interesting pattern than any of the factors would show in isolation' (Rousseau and Fried, 2001: 4). While Hall acknowledges the importance of defining key terms such as context, which 'is always important and frequently difficult' (Hall, 1983: 56) and presenting a clear concept in which context is embedded with information to create meaning, Hall remains somewhat fuzzy on the level of the operational definition of the three key constructs (1973, 1976).

Context. Beyond its everyday usage the word 'context' is widely used in scholarly publications but frequently employed without an appropriate definition. However, defining the term context seems to be essential when referring to Hall's ideas as context is the central component in the HC/LC concept. The term 'context' comes from a Latin root meaning 'to knit together' or 'to make a connection' (Rousseau and Fried, 2001: 1). In Hall's concept, context is 'knit together' with information and thus inextricably associated with the meaning of a message. The most frequent notion is that of 'external' context (which Hall does not neglect but refers to as a situational frame: see e.g. Hall, 1973: 22–6). However, Hall's conceptual idea of context can be understood in line with the classification of context proposed by Harrington and Rogers (1988) as conventionalized use or – arguably more appropriate in relation to information and meaning – as a *vantage point*, i.e. 'a transparent vantage point around which individuals orient meaning' (Harrington and Rogers, 1988: 7). Defined as a vantage point, context describes preprogrammed, rather culture-specific cues that only need minor activation (through) information to establish meaning. The nature of context in this understanding is usually (but not exclusively) non-verbal reflecting implicit content.

Information. Like context, information can be considered a frequently used term which often lacks a precise definition. In information theory a message is informative, i.e. carries information to the degree that it conveys something which is not already known by the receiver(s). According to Shannon and Weaver (1949), information is a phenomenon that reduces uncertainty and fosters entropy. However, this basic definition is not appropriate to define information in terms of Hall's concept. In his autobiography Hall (1992: 212) refers to a higher degree of complexity of

information than in the basic notion of the information theorist: 'The information human beings are required to process, because they have evolved themselves, their cultures, their theories, their technologies, and their languages, is of a different sort of complexity than physical phenomena.' Information in the scope of Hall's concept can then arguably be understood as elements of meaning that are explicitly transmitted by the sender and need no preprogramming beyond the common code of transmission (language). The nature of information in this understanding is usually (but not exclusively) verbal, providing explicit content.

Meaning. According to these definitions of context and information, implicit and explicit elements of meaning can be distinguished. A further distinction applies for the two components of meaning (context and information) and the construct 'meaning' itself. For instance, Weaver has accepted the distinction between meaning and information and argued for the use of information in Shannon's rather technical model that 'the word information . . . must not be confused with its ordinary usage. In particular, information must not be confused with meaning' (Shannon and Weaver, 1949: 8). Meaning then is considered as the result of a synthesis of context and information. Beyond the scope of information theory, it can be argued according to Radford (1994: 36) that 'the notion of meaning has a subjective aspect' which goes beyond the idea of information processing. As Hall (1973: 19) remarks: 'In a context model the same information together with altered context yields different meaning'. Consequently, meaning can be understood as the result of a cognitive combination of context and information.

Methodology

Context use in communication is employed and amended in various studies. Theoretical assumptions about the nature of meaning as a composition of context and information allowed a limited number of countries to be instanced by Hall (1976). Various authors classified further countries as HC or LC – often not substantiated by any empirical data and (if at all) based on anecdotal evidence. This resulted in an open classification which appears to lack consistency and seems to be rather freely chosen. There is no comprehensive list of countries classified. Previous attempts by Rösch and Segler (1987), Demorgon and Molz (1996) or Mehta et al. (2006) to categorize a larger but not a comprehensive number of countries also remain unclear on the sources of their classification and require scrutiny. In addition, the visualizations of these classifications might add confusion by being ambiguous. For instance, Rösch and Segler (1987, see Figure 2) could also be interpreted for Japanese being senders of implicit 'information' (i.e. HC) but addresses of explicit information (i.e. LC).

To apply the country classification attached to Hall's (1976) concept, it is important to review attempts previously made to support his assumptions and/or extend the original country classification. The following section will describe the method used and the sample of publications reviewed.

A simplified systematic review

An appropriate approach to exploring literature is identified in the instrument of a systematic review (Cooper and Hedges, 1994; Petticrew and Roberts, 2006). A systematic review is a widely accepted instrument to give an overview of research on a particular subject in fields such as healthcare research and has recently found broader acceptance in social science research. A meaningful and rigorously conducted meta-analysis – a popular and publishable instrument introduced by Glass (1976) and advanced by Hunter and Schmidt (2004) – was deemed not possible as a result of the

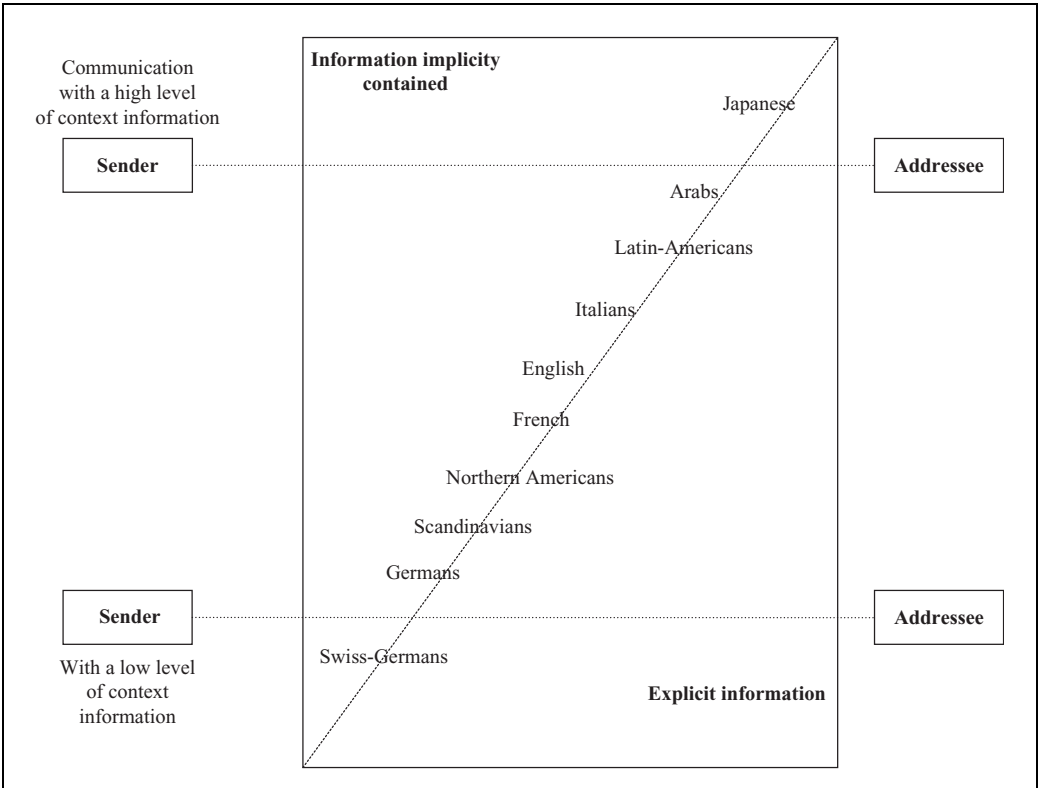


Figure 2. Example of a (flawed?) country classification attached to the context concept
Source: Rösch and Segler (1987, p. 60)

diversity of the studies to be expected. The standard stages of a simplified systematic review, adopted from Harden and Thomas (2005), are discussed in the following section with a particular focus on how the studies are assessed and how the findings of the systematic review are synthesized.

The first steps in a systematic review are the generation of user-driven research questions and the development of a suitable review protocol followed by a comprehensive search for publications which are filtered according to their appropriateness for the research questions. Remaining studies are analysed according to the user-driven research question and findings are synthesized and presented in the result section. The basic research questions for this study are (a) whether and to what extent Hall's HC/LC concept and the country classifications attached to it have been tested empirically and (b) whether existing classifications are consistent. A lack of consistency would raise doubts about previous empirical research based on unsubstantiated HC/LC classifications and would indicate a significant gap that needs to be addressed by future cross-cultural research relating to Hall's HC/LC concept.

A prerequisite for answers requires that the research methods are clearly identified as well as the results for the countries analysed. Where academic work does not actually *test* the HC/LC concept, it should *apply* Hall's ideas as a theoretical framework or as an underlying assumption in culture-

focused research of single cultures (emic) or comparisons of different cultures (etic). The HC/LC concept should thus play an essential role as a filter process and not just be one of many cultural facets employed in a research paper. Where a study qualifies for further assessment it is necessary to find out *how* the HC/LC concept is applied and with what method and results. The methods are categorized as quantitative methods (QUANT_1=survey using questionnaire; QUANT_2=content analysis, coded data; QUANT_3=simulation/ experiment ; QUANT_4=secondary data), qualitative methods (QUAL=Interviews and qualitative analysis) and theoretical contributions (THEO=Conceptual/Theoretical work). Furthermore, our review will be presented with regard to the particular topic (e.g. intercultural marketing, communication) and other theories or concepts (e.g. individualism/collectivism) to which the studies relate. Furthermore, the review results are synthesized with regard to the geographical scope of the study (i.e. which cultures are assumed to be HC or LC) and are analysed regarding their unit of analysis.

Sample

Assuming the impact of earlier work on the most recent studies, the analysis is restricted to studies which used Hall and were published from 1991 until 2007. Studies referring to Hall were identified using the EBSCO database 'Business Source Premier' and the academic internet tool 'scholar.google.com'. The research was restricted to studies in English. Publications were identified using multiple search processes in all combinations of the key words 'high-context', 'low-context', and 'Hall'. It has to be mentioned here that the term 'Hall' is often referred to with different meanings (e.g. Prentice Hall, Hall of Fame) and therefore was not used as a single key word but as a limiter for the other key words. If available, abstracts were filtered applying a number of inclusion criteria. In addition, a snowball-system was applied and references of identified studies were tested for the inclusion criteria as well.

Inclusion criteria were applied in order to filter all academic work quoting and referring to Hall as identified in the stage of comprehensive search. The filters first tested whether the study provides academic work with the objective to empirically test Hall's assumptions and/or categorization, and second whether the study applies Hall's basic assumptions as an underlying theoretical framework and/or essentially employs this concept or classification to generate further hypotheses. After applying the inclusion criteria, the remaining and accessible studies were subject to further analysis. As a result of the comprehensive search and using both filters, 26 studies were identified for the period from 1991 to 2007. The remaining non-accessible publications were screened on the basis of the information available but the marginal utility of including these studies was considered to be negligible and therefore was not pursued any further (see also limitations of the study). The thematic priority of the studies in our sample is mainly cross-cultural marketing and communication issues. Ten of the 26 studies (38.5%) focus on marketing issues. Regarding the field of communication, studies focus on testing Hall's assumptions (6 studies, 23.1%) or on aspects of negotiations across cultural borders (4 studies, 15.4%). The remaining studies consider a wide variety of topics and assess the impact of cultural (contextual) differences on aspects as ethics, work vs leisure time use, or IHRM-issues such as expatriate adjustment. The studies are further analysed and discussed in the remainder of this paper. An overview of the studies can be found in Table 1.

Results and discussion

This chapter intends to provide an overview of the scholarly use of Hall's HC/LC concept with a particular focus on the extent to which the concept and the country classifications attached to it have been tested empirically and with what results. In a first step, the studies overviewed are classified

Table 1. Overview of research findings

Study	Field	Method	Use/ test	Other theories	Classified HC	Classified LC	HC nationals	LC nationals	Unit of analysis
Adair, 2003	Negotiation	QUANT_3	U/T	ADAPT	'typically nations in the East'	'typically nations in the West'	Japan (24), Hong Kong (16), Thailand (26), Russia (35)	US (29 dyads), Sweden (24), Israel (17), Germany (23)	Communication dyads of MBA students
Arunthanes et al., 1994	Marketing	THEO	U		Japan, China, Arabic & Mediterranean cultures	US, Canada, Germany, Switzerland			
Biswas et al., 1992	Marketing	QUANT_2	U		France	US	France (90)	US (90)	Print ads
Callow & Schiffman, 2002	Marketing	QUANT_1	U	I/C	Philippines	US	Philippines (85)	US (96)	Students
Dozier et al., 1998	Communication	QUANT_1	U	–	Latin-Europe/Amer. Far East	Anglo, Nordic, Germanic cultures	Mexico (96) ^A	US (150) ^A	MBA students
Djursaa, 1994	Cross-cultural	QUAL	T		Japan, Arab & Mediterranean cultures	US, Germany, Switzerland, N. Europe	UK (25)	Germany ^B (as reported by 55 respondents from Denmark and UK)	Business professionals
Dsiva & White, 1998	Conflict	QUAL	U	I/C			Vietnam (13)	US (not quantified)	Refugees
Gudykunst et al., 1996		QUANT_1	T	SELF_CON, I/C, Values			Japan (192), Korea (168), India (251)	US (283), Australia (110), US (184)	Students
Kapoor et al., 2003	Communication	QUANT_1	T	I/C					Students
Kim et al., 1998	Cross-cultural	QUANT_1	T		China, Korea, Japan	Switzerland, countries such as Norway & Sweden ^C	China (96), Korea (50)	US (50)	MBA students
Kitayama & Ishii, 2002	Communication	QUANT_3	U/T	–	East Asian cultures	Western cultures	Japan	US	Students
Knutson et al., 2003	Communication	QUANT_1	U	I/C	Mostly Asian, South American cultures	European, North American cultures	Thailand (316)	US (182)	Students
Koeszegi et al., 2004	Negotiation	QUANT_3	U	–	Latin & Asian cultures	Anglo Germanic, Nordic, Slavic cultures	Ecuador (155), Hong Kong (80), India (209), Taiwan (58)	Austria (66), Canada (338), Germany (73), (Switzerland (39), Finland (143), Russia (91), US (231)	MBA and other students

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

Study	Field	Method	Use/ test	Other theories	Classified HC	Classified LC	HC nationals	LC nationals	Unit of analysis
Leets, 2003	Communication	QUANT_1	U/T		Asian countries (e.g. China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam), African	Germany, Scandinavia Switzerland, Australia; US	US (Asian ethnic group)	US (European ethnic group) ^{D)}	Students
Manrai & Manrai, 1995	Miscellaneous	QUANT_1	U	Gender; acculturation	Asia, Latin America, Middle East	Western Europe, US	not specified	not specified	Foreign students
in the US									
Mintu-Wims & Gassenheimer, 2000	Negotiation	QUANT_1	U	–	China, Korea	Canada, US	Philippines (98)	US (100)	Employees of industrial
Miracle et al., 1992	Marketing	QUANT_2	U	I/C; HARMONY	Korea	US	Korea (867)	US (1228)	TV commercials
Oguri & Gudy- kunst, 2002	IHRM	QUANT_1	U/T	SELF_CON			Japan (62), China (31), Korean (39), Taiwan (46)	no LC participants	Foreign students in the US
Okazaki, 2004	Marketing	QUANT_2	U	I/C; MESSAGE	Eastern comm. systems	Western comm. systems	Japan (50)	US (50)	Product-based websites
Rosenbloom & Larsen, 2003	Communication	QUANT_1	U	–	Argentina, Brazil, China, Israel, Italy, Japan, Korea, Mexico, Spain, Turkey	Australia, Austria, France, Belgium, Britain, Canada, Germany, New Zealand	not specified	US (54 cases); other LC participants not specified	US based exporters & their foreign distributors
Shao & Hill, 1994	Marketing	QUANT_1	U	DC/LDC	Asia, Middle East, Latin America	Latin America, parts of Western Europe	Japan, China, Korea, etc. (not specified) ^E	Canada, Scandinavia, Germany (not further specified) ^E	Foreign affiliates of US advertising agencies
Simintiras & Thomas, 1998	Negotiation	THEO							

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

Study	Field	Method	Use/ test	Other theories	Classified HC	Classified LC	HC nationals	LC nationals	Unit of analysis
Takada & Jain, 1991	Marketing	QUANT_4	U	TIME	Japan, S. Korea, Taiwan	US, some Europ. countries	Japan, S. Korea, Taiwan	US	Country, longitudinal domestic unit sales data Students
Taylor et al., 2000	Marketing	QUANT_1	U	I/C	Japan	US	Japan (107)	US (99)	Students
Thomas, 1998	Communication	QUAL	T				S. Korea (38)	US (29)	MBA students
Wansink et al., 2002	Marketing, agricultural studies	THEO		Found in Asia & Lat. Amer.; Colombia	Anglo-Saxon cultures & E. Europe; Russia				

^A Spain (138 respondents) is considered to be medium context.

^B Denmark (25 respondents) is considered to be medium context between Germany and Britain.

^C Toward the middle Kim et al., 1998 further categorize France Spain, Africa and the Middle Eastern Arab countries as middle context.

^D The US (82 respondents) was divided into four ethnic subgroups with European-Americans and Asian-Americans at the poles. Hispanic and African-Americans were found between the two extremes.

^E Other W. European countries are between the HC/LC poles: France, Spain and Italy are considered to be high medium context, Britain and Holland are low medium context.

Instruments and Measures: QUANT_1=survey using questionnaire; QUANT_2=content analysis, coded data; QUANT_3=Simulation/Experiment; QUANT_4=Secondary Data: QUAL=Interviews and qualitative analysis, THEO=Conceptual/Theoretical work, Besides from QUANT_1, the other methods might also employ questionnaires for further user characteristics. Other theories concepts: I/C= Hofstede's individualism/collectivism dimension; DC/LDC=Developed and developing countries; ADAPT=Interpersonal adaptation (Gudykunst, 1985; Patterson, 1983); TIME=Time effect SELF_CON=Self -construals (Markus and Kitayama, 1991); MESSAGE=Message systems; HARMONY= tendency to avoid confrontation in communication and seek harmony

and summarized. In line with the filter of the systematic review, the papers analysed can be classified in three (partially overlapping) groups. The papers analysed were found to be

- empirically testing the classification (7 studies), or
- empirical studies employing the classification (19 studies) or
- theoretical studies basing their assumptions on Hall's concept and/or the country classification (2 studies).

Two of the 26 studies overlap and are listed in categories (a) and (b) of the typology as they empirically assess *and* use the tested HC/LC classification within the same paper. Findings relating to all studies are synthesized in Table 1 and major observations are discussed in the following section. After general patterns of HC/LC related research are discussed, the studies actually assessing the HC/LC country classification are assessed in more detail.

Insights from empirical studies relating to Hall's concept

The systematic review reveals some common patterns in the studies analysed regarding the (dichotomous) use of the concept, methods employed and samples used. The geographic scope of the studies shows far less heterogeneity than the thematic scope presented. An overview of the findings of this systematic review according to scope, method and results is presented in Table 1.

A first insightful observation is the dominance of research relating LC to the United States. Almost all of the empirical studies include the US – either as LC-country in the sample (18 studies, 78.3%), as a country in which foreigners are assessed from a US perspective (Manrai and Manrai, 1995; Oguri and Gudykunst, 2002; Shao and Hill, 1994) or focusing on different ethnic groups of natives within the US (Leets, 2003). An exception is the study of Djursaa (1994), which exclusively examines different northern European business cultures. The country selection appears less homogeneous on the HC-side but still with a dominant country scope. Sixteen from the 23 empirical studies (69.6%) directly employ subjects from Asian countries, another study employs Asian-Americans in the US (Leets, 2003) and two further studies (Manrai and Manrai, 1995; Rosenbloom and Larsen, 2003) do not specify their LC-sample and are likely to employ Asians in their samples as well. Only Kapoor et al. (2003, India), Dozier et al. (1998, Mexico), Biswas et al. (1992, France), and Djursaa (1994, UK) do not employ Asian countries. An overview of how national cultures are classified is presented in Table 2.

Because of this US/Asian dominance in the samples, other countries or regions like Arab and particularly African countries remain 'blind spots' on Hall's categorization map. Only Leets (2003) explicitly refers to Africans when comparing US ethnic groups and finds African-Americans also tending to be LC. Results for Arab countries are hard to find. Despite the claim that research on Arabic communication style has been heavily influenced by Hall's ideas (Nelson et al., 2002), and the fact that Hall himself (1979) claimed that Americans do not understand the Arabs' 'highly contexted' language, empirical research that goes beyond anecdotal evidence remains scarce.

In addition to the geographic dominance of the US versus Asia reflected in a large number of studies, the results of the systematic review also indicate an almost exclusive use of context as a dichotomous variable (while LC and HC were intended merely as poles in a context-continuum in Hall's original work). In consequence, the criticism of unnecessarily polarizing cultural traits (e.g. Holden, 2002) is supported by this systematic review. Only three of the 26 studies (11.5%) employ the idea of medium context in their analysis and refer to positions 'somewhat in the middle'. The

Table 2. An inconsistent dichotomy: national cultures and their HC/LC classification in empirical studies

HC	Argentina	Rosenbloom & Larsen, 2003
	Brazil	Rosenbloom & Larsen, 2003
	Britain	Djursaa, 1994 (+)
	China	Rosenbloom & Larsen, 2003; Kim et al, 1998 (+)
	Colombia	Wansink et al., 2002
	Ecuador	Koeszegi et al., 2004
	France	Biswas et al., 1992
	Hong Kong	Adair, 2003; Koeszegi et al., 2004
	India	Koeszegi et al., 2004; Kapoor et al., 2003 (-)
	Israel	Rosenbloom & Larsen, 2003
	Italy	Rosenbloom & Larsen, 2003
	Japan	Adair, 2003; Taylor et al., 2000; Kitayama & Ishii, 2002; Rosenbloom & Larsen, 2003; Okazaki, 2004; Gudykunst et al., 1996 (-)
	Korea	Miracle et al., 1992; Rosenbloom & Larsen, 2003; Thomas, 1998 (-); Kim et al, 1998; (+) Gudykunst et al., 1996 (-)
	Mexico	Dozier et al., 1998; Rosenbloom & Larsen, 2003
	Philippines	Mintu-Wimsatt & Gassenheimer, 2000; Callow & Schiffman, 2002
	Russia	Adair, 2003
	Spain^A	Rosenbloom & Larsen, 2003
	Taiwan	Koeszegi et al., 2004
	Thailand	Adair, 2003; Knutson et al., 2003
	Turkey	Rosenbloom & Larsen, 2003
	Vietnam	Dsilva & Whyte, 1998
LC	Australia	Rosenbloom & Larsen, 2003; Gudykunst et al., 1996 (-)
	Austria	Koeszegi et al., 2004; Rosenbloom & Larsen, 2003
	Belgium	Rosenbloom & Larsen, 2003
	Britain	Rosenbloom & Larsen, 2003; Djursaa, 1994 (-)
	Canada	Koeszegi et al., 2004; Rosenbloom & Larsen, 2003
	Denmark	Djursaa, 1994 (°)
	Finland	Koeszegi et al., 2004
	France	Rosenbloom & Larsen, 2003
	Germany	Adair, 2003; Koeszegi et al., 2004; Rosenbloom & Larsen, 2003; Djursaa, 1994 (+)
	Israel	Adair, 2003
	New Zealand	Rosenbloom & Larsen, 2003
	Russia	Koeszegi et al., 2004; Wansink et al., 2002
	Sweden	Adair, 2003
	Switzerland	Koeszegi et al., 2004
	US	Adair, 2003; Mintu-Wimsatt & Gassenheimer, 2000; Miracle et al., 1992; Taylor et al., 2000; Kitayama & Ishii, 2002; Koeszegi et al., 2004; Dozier et al., 1998; Rosenbloom & Larsen, 2003; Okazaki, 2004; Kapoor et al., 2003 (-); Thomas, 1998 (-); Knutson et al., 2003; Callow & Schiffman, 2002; Leets, 2003 (°); Kim et al., 1998; Biswas et al., 1992; Dsilva & Whyte, 1998; Gudykunst et al., 1996 (-)

Bold country name = Country classified HC and LC by different studies; **regular font** = country classified either HC or LC; **bold reference** = study testing the classification, with (-) = no empirical support and (°) = only partial empirical support; regular font = study uses this country

^A Spain, in Dozier et al., 1998 was also considered MC.

vast majority of studies, however, seem to consider HC and LC as two diametrically opposed conditions and as 0/1-value of a dichotomous variable measuring the two sole possibilities of contextual level. While the dichotomization of the context idea in empirical studies (apart from being statistically convenient) might be appropriate for national cultures that are found near the poles of the HC/LC-continuum, it leads to ambiguous results with regard to countries that are more distant from the two extremes. For instance, Shao and Hill (1994: 353) vaguely assume 'middle of the road tendencies among Western-European nations' and consider France, Spain and Italy at the high end of the medium group and Holland and Britain at the low end. Table 2 shows that some of these national cultures when subject to empirical studies on context seem to be used at the convenience of the researchers as either HC or LC (see Table 2), which raises major concerns about previous country classifications attached to Hall's concept.

Two further findings of the systematic review are the dominance of quantitative approaches, and the use of convenience samples which e.g. rely on (business) students or print advertisements as popular units of analysis. The dominance of quantitative research is found to be a major pattern for empirical research employing Hall's ideas. Only three of the 23 empirical studies (13.0%) employ a qualitative design. Two out of these three studies test Hall's framework (Djursaa, 1994; Thomas, 1998). A problematic issue that arises from an over-reliance on quantitative studies is that quantitative methods could be to be close towards the LC pole and might suggest an unintended methodological bias. A possible explanation is that – in accordance with the criticism on Hall's approach above – the HC/LC-continuum is conveniently (mis)used as a dichotomous variable in comparative research. Another tendency towards oversimplification or distortion is related to the samples used in many of the studies. Most approaches use nationality as a proxy for culture. In addition to the inherent heterogeneity of many countries as a result of different subcultures (Ting-Toomey, 1988), the studies also rely on students or advertisements in newspapers. This can be considered to be a highly controversial issue. For instance, Keating et al. (2002) raise questions as to the validity of relying on manager or student samples alone when exploring country internal and cross-cultural themes. The problem of student samples is also picked up by Gudykunst et al. (1996: 530): 'Previous research demonstrated, that when college students are sampled in Japan and the United States, Japanese college students often are more individualistic than college students in the United States.'

Insights from empirical assessments

While three-quarters of the selected studies in our sample base their research on the context idea without providing empirical justification (merely anecdotal evidence or a reference to the conventional use of country classifications) there is little empirical evidence intending to support (or revise) the existing country classification attached to Hall's concept. Only seven publications analysed in this review empirically challenge conventional assumptions and assess if HC is still HC and LC is still LC. These studies are assessed in more detail in the following section.

The majority of studies which are actually trying to empirically assess national cultures regarding their degree of context use in communication rely on a quantitative research design (five out of seven) and does not provide convincing empirical support for the existing country classifications. For instance, Gudykunst et al. (1996) explore the impact of individualism/collectivism together with mediating individual-level factors such as self-construals and individual values on contextual tendencies in communication. The results of this study did not fully support the expected extents of HC and LC attributes for the countries observed (Japan, Korea, Australia and the US) and the

authors conclude that communication styles which are identified as attributed to HC or LC do not completely fit general cultural identities but are more related to individual variables. Kapoor et al. (2003) examining India and the US and Leets (2003) examining ethnic groups within the US, both use the communication measures suggested by Gudykunst et al. (1996) but also find only partial support for the conventional country classifications. While Leets (2003) implicitly supports the existing context differences for Asian vs western cultures, the identification of significant differences within a national setting (US) adds to existing criticism on carelessly using the concept of national cultures (e.g. Gerhart, 2008).

A quantitative approach that tries to avoid the subjective elements of questionnaires is presented by Adair (2003) who simulated the sale of a cartoon series and observed the subsequent negotiation process. Extending a previous study (Adair et al., 2001) she provides one of the few studies to analyse a number of HC and LC countries in negotiation sequences and not just one country for each context dimension. The units of analysis are same- and mixed-culture samples. The analysis provides empirical support for the classification attached to Hall's concept for sequences of integrative behaviour in negotiation. This study seems to be of particular interest, as it derives cultural variation from intra- and intercultural sequences.

Another interesting observation can be made when comparing the studies of Kim et al. (1998) and Thomas (1998). While both studies were conducted at a similar time and in a similar regional setting, the results are contradictory. The results of one study seem to support the classification of US Americans as LC members and Chinese and Koreans as HC members (Kim et al., 1998) but the results of the other study suggest that South Korean communication style is not as high in context as is generally assumed (Thomas, 1998). This result is a good indication for the concerns raised with regard to the country classification attached to Hall's concept. The fact that Thomas (1998) using a qualitative design has different results from Kim et al. (1998) using a quantitative method raises further issues about the careless use of the context concept and an overly simplistic classification of countries as HC or LC and a potential bias in the methodology.

The study of Djursaa (1994) differs from most studies employing or testing Hall's framework in two essential ways. In addition to using a qualitative design to assess variation in context use across national cultures, the study focuses on three national cultures which are conventionally considered to be close to the LC pole (Britain, Denmark and Germany). Results show that Danish and German business cultures exhibit tendencies towards LC cultures and the British business culture was consistently described by the respondents in HC terms. While the approach to test for variation in less contrasting samples seems promising, the study might have further benefited from a consideration of ethnic variation within the national samples. A possible explanation for the UK being higher in context than Denmark and Germany is that the UK has high Asian immigration levels in the business sectors which could distort the results.

To sum up, a basic finding of this review is that most of the studies – which empirically analyse whether countries traditionally assumed to be HC or LC actually are HC or LC – do not provide convincing empirical support for the extant country classifications. None of these studies analyses variation in the use of context for more than four national cultures or ethnic groups within a national culture and they do not employ a comprehensive set of countries. In addition, the geographic focus of our sample shows an imbalance, as the studies analysed mainly employ the classic dichotomous US – Asian comparison. The results further point to the problematic issue of using nation as a proxy for culture (e.g. considering the US as low context culture despite the variation regarding context within this national culture). Another interesting finding is that the studies analysed look at communication patterns *within* selected cultures rather than how these

communication patterns are reflected in communication *between* these cultures. In consequence, Henderson (2005: 74) criticizes the value of Hall's concept as an analytical tool in the present form: 'Such analytical tools are of value in interpreting the behavior of individuals in static, monocultural contexts but are less so in dynamic, multilingual situations.' As cross-cultural management goes beyond mere comparative culture studies, the latter aspect would be of particular interest to the field.

Conclusion, limitation and implications

Hall's (1976) HC/LC concept seems to have lost some of its popularity in recent years. An underlying assumption of this paper was that this decline is not related to the concept itself but to dubious country classification(s) attached to the concept. In consequence, the overall aim of this paper was to conduct a systematic review of the country classifications attached to Hall's (1976) HC/LC concept. The initial hope of the authors to find a consistent and empirically well-founded classification was not met. Instead of resulting in a state-of-the-art country classification, the study shows that virtually all studies that utilized HC/LC country classifications are based on less-than-adequate evidence and stem from dated, unsubstantiated claims which can even be traced back to Hall's own anecdotal-evidence-based classification. Mixed and often contradictory findings (see e.g. Table 2) reveal inconsistencies in conventional country classifications and show that they are flawed or, at best, very limited.

Readers may bear in mind that our study is also subject to some limitations. First of all, a pure meta-analytic review could have delivered a clearer picture than the systematic review, but as the studies analysed were too heterogeneous, this method was not applicable. The results of an attempted meta-analysis related to the context-idea (Cardon, 2008) implicitly support this assumption. Furthermore, the number of studies still represents a limited set of research related to the HC/LC concept which restricts the validity of the results. However, from a logic of decreasing marginal utility the inclusion of additional studies is not assumed likely to change our findings considerably especially when we raise concerns over the empirical methodologies deployed by researchers in this field. A more severe concern is that our study was limited to a search for research published in English. The search in English language publications also neglects the use of Hall's conceptualization and further attempts at classification that might exist in other languages. In particular, the Asian research community might respond differently to a rather western concept. This conclusion is well supported by recent calls for advancements in indigenous research (e.g., Holtbrügge et al. 2011) or conferences on 'De-Westernizing Communication Research' as held in Taiwan in 2008. Since the methodological and also the interpretive problem applies to much cross-cultural research of western origin, we hope that conflicting or alternative views published in a language other than English are also addressed and followed up in English-language publications in order to encourage discussion at a truly global rather than merely western/regional level.

Despite some limitations, the contribution of our study is twofold with major implications for future cross-cultural research and practice. The first contribution is that the study unravels persistent myths of existing country classifications and highlights major shortcomings of existing studies. The lack of empirical support for HC/LC classifications is unfortunate given the importance of Hall's concept for cross-cultural management theory and practice. As a consequence of our results, implications for research and practice made in studies relying on such debatable classifications need to be questioned. A second, subsequent contribution is the identification of a major gap in existing

literature which might be interpreted as a call for a large-scale empirical country-comparison project. Furthermore, theoretical and empirical contributions might go beyond a mere comparison of (national) cultures focusing on variations in context use. In consequence, future research should theorize on the role of different context levels in intercultural communication settings and discuss how cultural distance measured by variation in context use might foster undesired results. As communication across cultural borders is a phenomenon of high practical relevance, a more sophisticated empirical approach to Hall's context idea will revive interest in Hall's important context concept among scholars.

Note

1. Similar to other scholars like Bateson, Hall (1973: 21) argues that information out of context is meaningless and cannot be reliably interpreted: 'The separation of information from context, as the two were unrelated, is an artefact of Western Science and Western Thinking. . . . However, it now appears that there may always be an information and context distinction, which may well be a function in which the human brain is organized.' Later Hall also states 'No communication is totally independent of context, and all meaning has an important contextual component. . . . Information, context and meaning are bound together in a balanced, functional relationship.' (1983: 56).

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