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# **Cultural politics and the role of the action learning facilitator: Analysing the negotiation of critical action learning in the Pakistani MBA through a Bourdieusian lens**

## **Abstract**

This empirical study contributes to critical action learning (CAL) research by theorizing the role of an action learning facilitator from a cultural perspective. Our paper adds to CAL by conceptualizing the dynamics of facilitation in managing interpersonal politics within action learning sets. Employing Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* as a theoretical lens, we explore both participant and facilitator accounts of action learning at three Pakistani business schools, shedding light on the culturally influenced social practices that shape their learning interactions. Through a critical interpretation of our data, we illuminate the challenges of facilitation by revealing how deeply ingrained power relations, within the context of gender and asymmetric relationships, influence participants' ability to organize reflection. We contribute to CAL by theorizing the critical role of facilitator mediation in managing interpersonal and intra-group relations within the Pakistani MBA context, outlining the implications for the dynamics and facilitation of action learning.

## **Keywords**

Critical action learning, facilitation, Bourdieu, gender, power relations

## **Introduction**

The notion that action learning participants should take responsibility for their own learning, with facilitators adopting a 'passive role', has long been at the heart of classical action learning (Revans, 1983). Yet as Trehan (2011) has observed, as new forms of critical action learning (CAL) have developed – embracing a more reflective approach and acknowledging its political and psychological impact – questions have been raised regarding the need for a facilitation approach which is more engaged and pro-active.

Through an empirical study exploring both student and facilitator reflections on action learning at three Pakistani business schools, we add to debates of CAL by challenging the passivity of Revans' (1983) method. We suggest that his approach affords insufficient recognition of the culture, gender and power relations which complicate both facilitative and participatory processes in action learning. By contrast, we show how a CAL approach offers greater potential in enabling facilitators to manage intra-group politics because it both recognises and illuminates power relations in action learning sets. Our paper contributes to CAL literatures through highlighting the potential complexities of facilitation, and identifying the importance of negotiating learning set responsibilities among and between facilitator, and participants.

In so doing, we add to the growing body of debate regarding the role of facilitators, and of facilitation, within CAL literature (Vince, 2012; Author 3, 20xx; Rigg and Trehan, 2004). Through our empirical study, we conceptualize the positionality of a facilitator (the lead author) within an action learning programme designed to facilitate MBA students in Pakistan, in a situation where a newly introduced dissertation module precipitated a more considered approach to learning. We reflect upon the lead author's experience of managing intra-group politics on an action learning programme over a four month period with four sets of MBA students, at three Pakistani business schools.

As part of their new dissertation module, students engaged in critical reflection about their interpersonal relations, learning practices and the content, approach and analytical nature of their MBA dissertations. Building on ideas of CAL concerned with the understanding of power dynamics (e.g. Vince, 2012a; Author 3, 20xx), we offer insights to inform the practice of action learning (AL) facilitation, outlining the role of asymmetrical relations with reference to gender, family and teachers that predispose action learners to engage in particular behavioural practices.

Our paper uses part of Bourdieu's theory of practice to inform our analysis, drawing particularly on his notion of 'habitus' (or the way in which people embody, interpret and respond to their social world), to provide a nuanced understanding of participants' power relations and their political agency in action learning sets. Bourdieu's theory suggests that individuals are constrained, and predisposed to act in certain ways, through the underlying schemes of culture that relationally position them with one another (Bourdieu, 1998). The participants' accounts of practice within action learning sets are, in fact, reflections of their interpersonal interactions, illustrated through the interplay of embodied gender and asymmetric relationships, providing insight into what are often taken-for-granted relations of power. The notion of embodiment, or the ability to internalize the social, is critical in unpacking the ideological system regulating these practices and specifically those that enable the acceptance of hegemonic relations in everyday lives (Jenkins, 1992). Bourdieu's work (e.g. 1977, 1984, 1990), on habitus in particular, enables us to theorize the interrelationship of practice and the cultural logic of practice which manifested between Pakistani MBA action learners within each set, making facilitation challenging.

This study takes into account the complexities of working with critical pedagogy at the MBA level (e.g. Sinclair, 2007; Currie and Knights, 2003). It proposes that AL facilitators adopting a critical angle (e.g. Ram and Trehan, 2009) are required pro-

actively to manage group dynamics (Vince, 2012) when participants engage in reflective practice, and especially in contexts where action learners are fairly inexperienced in organizing reflection (e.g. Vince, 2002). Our observations have wider application beyond the context of this study, extending and enriching perspectives on CAL theory by conceptualizing power dynamics in relation to the facilitation of interpersonal and group politics within action learning sets, not only within a non-Western cultural context but also more broadly (see Rigg and Trehan, 2004).

The paper first reviews the literature on action learning, CAL and facilitation, before moving on to discuss our understanding of criticality and the Bourdieusian notion of habitus as a lens to conceptualize set dynamics. Second, we outline the programme and research design and introduce our analytical approach. Finally, our discussion presents and integrates the findings emerging from key themes to construct a meta-narrative which recognizes the challenges of the cultural, symbolic, forces which shape the participatory and facilitative process of action learning. We suggest, in turn, that such challenges problematize Revans' approach to facilitation (see Revans, 1983) requiring a CAL approach.

### **Action learning, CAL and facilitation**

Action learning (AL) is a pragmatic approach to developing people, organisations and society (Zuber-Skerritt and Teare, 2013), mainly through the interplay of reflection and action (Marsick and O'Neil, 1999). The key driver underpinning AL's philosophy, originally coined by Revans, maintains that 'there can be no learning without action and no action without learning' (Revans, 1998: 83). Action learning participants, metaphorically known as 'comrades in adversity' by Revans (1983), work collectively in small groups, called sets (Pedler, 2016), on real-world problems through collective reflection rather than passive acceptance of expert knowledge. Amongst his 'gold standards', as Willis (2004: 11) puts it, Revans limited the role of the expert (or

facilitator) in the learning process to someone who ‘induces curiosity’ and kept their ‘hands-off-the-set’ (Pedler, 2016: 79).

What strikes us as important is the role and agency of the facilitator in managing the power dynamics in the set, which we believe is lacking in the Revansequé version. Revans’ approach rests on assumptions that the voices of set members may be heard and treated equally within the active questioning process, and that facilitators do not hold responsibility for managing inequalities within group interactions.

We demonstrate how, for our situation, the adoption of a critical action learning (CAL) approach was crucial because this enabled the facilitator to support the MBA sets in collectively exploring the ‘underlying power and control issues, [among themselves by] actively engaging in an examination of political and cultural processes’ (Trehan and Pedler, 2009: 405). We highlight the suitability of CAL due to its capacity for shedding light on ‘the tensions, contradictions, emotions, and power-dynamics that inevitably exist both within a group and in individuals [learners] lives’ (Ram and Trehan, 2009: 306). In particular, we observe how CAL affords a higher visibility to power relations and the political dimensions of learning (Vince, 2004b) enabling sets to challenge the ‘taken-for-granted’ attitudes and beliefs, making these an object of reflection and a subject for learning (Rigg and Trehan, 2004: 150).

The employment of CAL, given its purpose of questioning taken-for-granted assumptions can be demanding in cultures where high student/teacher power distance or notable gender differences influence action learners in their quest for learning (e.g. Vince, 2004a). Yet at the same time the advantages of a CAL approach outweigh the challenges in contexts where understandings of underlying social practices are important in ensuring that voices within learning sets are heard equally (Dilworth and Boshyk 2010). Power inequities in an Asian context, for example, can create friction amongst individuals requiring AL facilitators to mediate such group tensions. (Dilworth

and Boshyk, 2010: 205). Further, research by Brook (2012: 6) stresses facilitators, from a cultural perspective, ‘must be prepared to address and interpret the collective [psychological and political] impact of the learning’, which may go unnoticed in the classical action learning.

CAL foregrounds the significance of power as a key construct in determining learning relationships, illuminating how power-relations can create tensions amongst learners yet may simultaneously provide opportunities for learning (e.g. Rigg and Trehan, 2004). This notion of power relations throws light on issues such as gender, asymmetries and situatedness that could either pose barriers to, or facilitate learning (Vince, 2008; Rigg and Trehan, 2004). At present, however, limited attention is given within the CAL field to facilitation in relation to gender (for exceptions see Author 3, 20xx) and interpersonal relations (for exceptions see Rigg and Trehan, 2004; Ram and Trehan, 2010, Vince, 2012). The contribution of our study to this literature is to provide a more nuanced understanding of the facilitator *role* by developing appreciation towards ‘power-relations’, such as gender and asymmetries (e.g. Author 3, 20xx; Vince, 2012; Rigg and Trehan, 2004); and facilitator *agency* in managing relational politics in action learning where set members’ struggles in group working may be visible and a source of anxiety among learners.

### **On being critical in action learning: Reflective practice and MBA education**

MBA pedagogies have attracted significant criticism. MBAs have been censured as overly directive, insufficiently reflective (Mintzberg, 2004; Connolly, 2003), and stifling of individuality and reflexivity (Currie and Knights, 2003). Revans was especially critical of the MBA format describing it as ‘moral bankruptcy assured’, due to the correlation of business success as synonymous to standardized, case study based MBA education in classroom settings (Pedler et al. 2005: 49).

Given these critiques, the MBA offers an interesting site for the introduction of learning interventions that encourage critical reflection. This was a particular challenge in Pakistan where teaching is typically class-room based, with little or no opportunity for reflection. However, the notion of an AL approach was attractive to the Deans of the three leading Pakistani Business Schools which took part in this study, as a possible means of encouraging reflection to cope with changing MBA curriculum (NCRC, 2012). National imperatives resulted in Pakistani business schools introducing a dissertation module on MBA programmes, and teacher-led pedagogies were poorly positioned to manage this new demand (NQF, 2015). The notion of facilitated action learning sets offered a means of operationalising this curriculum change. As we show, however, the classical action learning approach was unable to account for the innate group, cultural and situational dynamics, in terms of ‘who has the power and influence’ to decide the course of action in the learning sets (Lawless, 2008: 119). Specifically, it did not offer sufficient flexibility to accommodate the needs of Pakistani MBA learners, where value systems are embodied (for example, in relation to gendered practices) and are culturally specific to both student and teachers (e.g. Skeggs, 1997).

Where our study builds on CAL scholarship is in its focus on the relational rather than the individual in the reflective process of AL, which can bring to fore the primacy of relationships (Reynolds and Vince, 2004). Revans’ philosophy however, offered little direction to manage the organizing of reflection and relational dynamics, bringing into question the facilitator’s role and agency. This becomes more significant in the light of research (e.g. Reynolds, 1999a) warning practitioners about the pitfalls of reflection, including the potential isolation of learners who challenge the prevailing cultural order, or the silencing of some voices among set members who lack confidence or are discouraged from speaking (e.g. Reynolds, 1999b). The passivity of the facilitator, as emphasised by Revans, was problematic in the Pakistani MBA culture, particularly when personal values were subject to question and learners were required to construct



arguments that critique the expert and theory in relation to personal experience (e.g. Vince, 2004b). CAL in this sense was useful in understanding the empowering and disempowering effects of reflection (Vince, 2008) within a certain cultural, social and historical context (Lawless, 2008), and contributed towards understanding the complexities of facilitation.

### **Social reproduction in action learning: A Bourdieusian perspective**

Applying a critical angle to study action learning practice in the cultural context of Pakistani MBA invites an extension of concepts that essentially view learning and education as sites for reproducing social inequalities (e.g. Sullivan, 2002). Bourdieu's philosophy of social reproduction is particularly useful in the context of this study as it enables us to construct a deeper understanding of social practices e.g. gender, class, race, identity etc. that regulate interpersonal relations (e.g. Brown, 1997). Bourdieu's ideas challenge the relevancy of 'doing' in everyday lives, without discounting the transformative effects of culture in which the social practice is situated (Jenkins, 1992). He theorizes the gap between the situated and embodied culture, through his theory of practice, to expose dispositions (or tendencies) that 'reproduce and legitimize social structural relations' (LiPuma, 1993: 18). This theorization transcends the dualism of agency and structure to view practice as simultaneously structuring and structured, having power to shape individual and group behaviour (e.g. Bourdieu, 1990; Obembe, 2012).

Bourdieu's theory of practice offers three perspectives to explain the reproduction of social practices. First, through the conceptualization of habitus, described as 'a system of embodied dispositions which generate practice in accordance with the structural principals of the social world' (Nash, 1990: 432). Second, through the symbolization of capital as power that distinguishes and determines an agent's position within a social

space (Moore, 2008). Third, through the relational construction of a network of positions in an ‘objectively defined space’ called fields (Wacquant, 1989: 50).

In this paper, we employ habitus as our theoretical lens for two reasons: to explore the system of meanings that organize inter-action; and to understand the constitution of ‘the person-in-action through a system of dispositions that is both objective and subjective’ (Postone et al. 1993: 4). Nash (1990) suggests that the logic of practice emanating from the habitus is firmly grounded within cultural norms, rules and homologous relations that provide meaning and order to an individual’s social life. We believe an understanding of participants’ habitus can enable agency and redefine facilitator role in engaging with the group, providing a broader understanding of the social context in which learning is situated.

### ***Habitus as a theoretical lens***

Habitus can be explained as a principle for ‘organizing action’ (Bourdieu, 1977: 214) that ‘predisposes [agents] to act out’, in certain ways but ‘does not determine them to do so’ (Swartz, 2002: 63S). Our use of habitus is to theorize learner inter-actions and relations to demonstrate the complexity of facilitating action learning in the Pakistani MBA culture (e.g. Bourdieu, 1977: 107). This is accomplished by conducting an examination of participants’ predispositions (e.g. gender identity) to explore how certain actions and relations are internalized during upbringing and exteriorized as culturally influenced social practices in action learning sets (see Lovell, 2000). These practices, as constructs of power relations, reveal the complexities and challenges of the cultural system in breaking with orthodoxy, as in the case of CAL, especially in ‘high power-distance cultures’ (e.g. Gabriel and Griffiths, 2008: 514).

Research on culture and education indicates that certain learning behaviours, embodied at an earlier stage in life, are reproduced and rewarded by means of arbitraries responsible for intergenerational transmission (Sullivan, 2002; Nash, 1990). The

arbitraries, bestowed with ‘pedagogic authority’, make possible the perpetuation of culture, through its agency, within the lives of individuals in a society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990: p.54). Hence, stripping the facilitator of her/his agency in the action learning sets can be seen as an act of abandoning authority, potentially triggering group dysfunctionality (e.g. Rigg, 2006).

This aspect of reproduction has relevance for the facilitation of AL and CAL as it demonstrates the dimensions of culture and power in structuring the individual and the group habitus within the learning process (e.g. Obembe, 2012). Knowing the structuration of the habitus can enable facilitation in recognizing the legitimisation and misrecognition of dominant cultural beliefs (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1997: 119), which in the case of power relations are predisposed through ‘nominal construction of social categories’ (Skeggs, 2005: p.5). Habitus, thus, reveals ‘the links between various forms of power, domination and social positioning within different social fields, and how these are negotiated by [agents] and mediated through acts of symbolic control’(e.g. Tomlinson et al. 2013: 83). The susceptibility of the habitus to symbolic relations during upbringing is a major source of misrecognition of power relationships i.e. symbolic violence – a key social mechanism that imposes and legitimizes symbolic control.

This redirects us towards the possibility of actively facilitating action learning sets to encourage reflection on, and identification of the ‘processes whereby power relations are perceived not for what they objectively are but in form which renders them legitimate in the eyes of the beholder’(Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977: xiii). The reflective practice of AL, however, can expose the habitus to others, creating a revelatory effect on participants (e.g. Obembe, 2012: 360). We believe that reflection in AL, undertaken with others collectively or in public, has the tendency of making ‘authority relationships an integral aspect of the reflective process’ (Vince and

Reynolds, 2008: 1), consequently exposing the underlying doxa – i.e. the unquestionable dispositions through which the power relations are mis-recognized as legitimate (Bourdieu, 1977). The doxa, which modulates the habitus, resists any challenges to the culture of orthodoxy prevailing, thus pushing back the limits of critical thought or heterodoxy, i.e. ‘the awakening of political consciousness’ (Bourdieu, 1977: 170). Heterodoxy, akin to action learning’s questioning insight, draws attention to the ways in which dispositions are structured through cultural and social upbringing, norms and taken-for-granted practices of daily life (Fram, 2004: 556). Therefore, the critical thought emerging from heterodoxy has the capacity to break with doxa given that the arbitrariness of orthodoxy is exposed (Wacquant, 2004), possibly subjecting learners to political and psychological vulnerability in action learning (Vince and Martin, 1993).

### **Setting-up the programme: Action learning in the Pakistani MBA**

The purpose of our study was to encourage Pakistani MBA students to think more critically about both their studies, and group relations among and between themselves. Initially, we envisaged a Revansequ style of facilitation as appropriate for this task, allowing students the space to reflect on research experiences as they progressed through their dissertation. We quickly realised, however, that a more engaged approach was required, drawing parallels with Reynolds and Vince’s (2004: 11) concept of ‘organizing reflection’: a structure which ‘supports a shift from a view of reflection as a key element of individual learning and the application of learning, towards a view of reflection as an organizing process, one that takes account of social and political processes’ and relations among and between set members. Our methods for facilitating the action learning programme thus move towards a CAL approach.

### ***Research site and sample***

The MBA students were recruited from three leading Pakistani business schools i.e. East-city (EBS), Mid-city (MBS) and West-city (WBS) business school. The EBS was

part of a large public-sector university, whereas both the MBS and WBS were part of well-reputed private-sector universities operating in the city of Islamabad. The public sector universities, in Pakistan, usually attract a larger cohort from different social classes and regions as compared to the private, which due to higher fee structures appeal to specific classes resulting in smaller class sizes. Two action learning sets were formed with MBA students at the EBS, while one each was established at the WBS and MBS. The action learning sets included a total of 31 Pakistani MBA students (27 full-time and 5 part-time, and 22 male and 9 female). Students were divided in mixed gender groups between four sets. The age of participants ranged from 23 – 34 years. Regional representation in the sets was mainly from the provinces of Punjab and the KPK, with some students from the province of Sindh, while only one student had roots in the Balochistan province. The students were recruited through purposive sampling. Our findings draw upon reflective accounts of these students in the action learning sets, qualitative interviews with individual students conducted by the facilitator, and the facilitator's own, written reflections.

### *Action learning programme*

Prior to setting up the programme, a 4-week pilot-study was organised in which the lead author conducted a learning needs analysis in the form of an open action learning set – a space inviting Pakistani MBA students to participate and share their experience of MBA education in Pakistan. Key design considerations emerging from the pilot-study included: dissatisfaction over MBA's exclusive pedagogy versus the need for an inclusive approach, and the existing MBA's content-based approach versus the need for pragmatic learning. The pilot informed the design of a 16-week action learning programme to provide an additional form of support to Pakistani MBAs in their research dissertations. Participation in the sets was voluntary. Participants had already been allocated a dissertation supervisor based on their specialization prior to

commencing the action learning sets. After establishing ground rules, set meetings were thematically organised by the facilitator to encourage discussion on a broader topic with participants feeding in with their dissertation problems. Discussions within the sets ranged from technical challenges around researching to more sensitive matters like working in groups or supervisor-student relations – aspects that participants claimed were never previously discussed in an academic context. The action learning programme and the fieldwork comprised of startup workshops, set-meetings and facilitator's observation of those meetings, and post-programme interviews with the participating MBA students.

The action learning programme was designed to run parallel to the term-time studies (classes) of MBA students and had to be fitted in with participants' busy semester schedule. The programme began with an introductory workshop about AL. The premise of the action learning programme was based on the degree to which reflection can become a 'stable and self-sustaining' feature of Pakistani MBA education (e.g. Vince, 2004b: 72). The action learning sets met frequently over a period of four months, with a meeting scheduled every alternative week during which participants discussed the challenges of managing and conducting organizational research for their MBA dissertation. The participants were observed by the lead author during the set meetings and interviewed at the end of the action learning programme to document their experience of participation via audio-recordings.

### **Our approach to the study**

This study draws on principles of design-based research (DBR): a methodology which aims to empirically explore learning (design and practice) as it occurs in complex educational settings (Cobb et al. 2003; also see Barab and Squires, 2004). A data-driven approach to analysis offered flexibility to thematically arrange findings in allowing culture to be presented as meaningful, storied, accounts of practice (Ritchie and Lewis,

2004; Braun and Clarke, 2006). Through this strategy, we were able to examine the cultural character of power relations amongst the Pakistani MBA students in order to voice their experiences (e.g. Bourdieu, 1977): describing their ability to deal with newer forms of learning such as critical reflection (e.g. Currie and Knights, 2003). The data was audio-recorded in 'Urdu' language, which was further transcribed and translated into the English language for making sense of participants' accounts of action learning. The translated data was reduced and codified to formulate themes in three cycles (Saldana, 2013): the first cycle consisted of making analytical memos and inscriptions; the second cycle involved assigning of codes to each of the transcripts; while the third cycle comprised of collapsing and recoding of data codes into superlative categories in light of our study questions. Code categories were then converted into themes by clustering similar concepts, keeping in view Bourdieu's notion of habitus, which enabled us to make sense of participants' social upbringing, their power dispositions, the pedagogic authority of arbitraries, and the cultural notions surrounding their learning relations and practices in the action learning sets

### **The findings: Beyond facilitation – the embodied power relations in action learning**

The analysis generated two broad themes:

- (a) Challenges of gendered relations to facilitation;
- (b) Challenges of asymmetrical relations to facilitation;

We present each theme and analyse our findings with reference to Bourdieu.

#### ***Challenges of gendered relations to facilitation***

Facilitating a socially inclusive approach in action learning sets in the Pakistani MBA, which consisted of mixed gender groups was significantly challenging. Author 2 (20xx)

describes gender as socially constructed phenomena in which identities are developed around social and cultural perceptions. These perceptions do not surface from an individual's biological state, but from the 'set of expectations about the body, which are [...] deeply socialized' (Author 2, 20xx: 27). The positioning of gendered bodies in a social space, such as the action learning set, within its entirety (i.e. social conditions, historicity and relations) produces an explicit cultural *habitus* thought to be internalized as *dispositions* by the learners during their social upbringing (Laberge, 1995). Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992: 139) argue that the habitus is structured by the twofold nature of 'historicity' i.e. accumulation of history through socialization processes; and intergeneration historicity embodied within cognitive structures.

These gendered dispositions were visible in Khan's interview, a participant of the EBS action learning group, who presented himself as coming from a 'backward area', a rural setting situated in the KPK (north-western) province, having strong regional-cultural values, and cut-off from the modernised culture of Pakistan. His description of growing up, schooling and societal interactions depict a segregated upbringing where male and female are distanced from one another. When Khan was asked to reflect on his conservative behaviour with female set participants' during a post-set interview, he said:

I have already told you about my background. It is non-relative to what I'm doing today. It's my first time in co-education. I come from a remote area. My area is backward so there even a man cannot freely talk to women, let alone developing a learning relationship with women in the classroom [...] There are culture barriers. You can talk to your cousin but that even in limit. You can't talk to her smiling [...] it's been two years and yet I am not adjusted to this environment and keep struggling. I am happy to do things on my own, but I feel uncomfortable (Khan, EBS, Group II, Interview)



Prior to this, Khan described, how, in his home town, educational institutions and even households are segregated between males and females. He described females as wearing full veils (i.e. burqa) to cover their bodies and faces and explained that direct interaction was prohibited in public, and even within households. Khan depicts a distanced disposition which Bourdieu (1984) suggests is confined within binary symbolic forms of social constructions (e.g. male/female; strong/weak etc.). The entitlement of a gendered prefix over the body is 'culturally determined', for example notions about 'what women's bodies and women's work ought to be and do' are inherent in the bodily expectations that a society constructs (Author 2, 20xx: 27). The expectations arising out of the binary symbolic classification of gender shapes 'social agents' practical knowledge of the social world' (Laberge, 1995: 134), thus structuring the dynamics of facilitation and the limits of reflective practice.

Attempting to passively facilitate the group, other members of which shared Khan's structuring of the 'habitus', and seeking to encourage them to engage in reflective practice was difficult, and was usually met with silence. Khan is a classic example of Pringle's (1998) fish out of water, a metaphor used by Bourdieu to suggest the discomfiting feeling of being out of place. Silence as a form of conformity, or appropriate behaviour in this case, stands in opposition to the ideals of critical management education, given the doxa that structures the habitus tends to resist any 'competing discourse' (Bourdieu, 1977: 168). Yet among group members the lack of communication between themselves was in keeping with social norms. Studies in CAL demonstrate that participants are usually diverse and belong from 'specific identity groups', where identity shaped through power relations organizes action (Trehan and Ram, 2009: 307). Silence, engendered as action and embodied through upbringing in Khan's case, has the power to mask hegemonic relations, in situations where reflection can create 'an awareness of the primacy of politics' (McLaughlin and Thorpe 1993: 25).

Khan's internalisation of the habitus, as seen from his behaviour in the set and reflective account, seemed incongruous with the AL approach and the MBA context. Khan's avoidance of the women in the sets has been embodied during his upbringing. His struggle to engage in cross-gender reflections, given his cultural upbringing, could possibly be associated with the ethos surrounding the practice of reflection, a particularly important element in how the action learning process unfolded for participants. This challenges the Revaneseque approach to facilitation, suggesting the need for an engaged facilitator role in eliciting participants' taken-for-granted assumptions. Similarly, CAL encourages facilitators 'to recognize, surface and actively engage with the social, emotional and political processes associated with power relations' (Ram and Trehan, 2009: 3011).

These cultural dispositions not only influenced men's behaviours, but were also foregrounded in women's accounts. Sarah, a participant in one of the EBS sets, explained how gender power relations had been normalized for her in the Pakistani society during her upbringing. In her account, she recalled how her family environment had been critical in her development as a woman. Sarah suggested that a secure and comfortable environment for a Pakistani female to study in is one in which interaction with other people (especially unknown males) is minimal. She also observed how her upbringing was focused on 'mostly staying at home' and 'going to a girl's only school'. This may explain why she understood a secure environment to be one in which she was distanced from others (especially men). She explained her situation as:

Like I said earlier, I am a bit slow in understanding things around me, because I think the way I was referred to at home, I was kept in a fairly secure environment. I wasn't able to interact much with other people. I stayed mostly at home and studied in a girl's only school. [...] Even at home I always gotten to hear this that I am slow, or I don't need to be super-active as it doesn't go with the stature of a girl. For me the boundaries were set pretty early on in my childhood. I think that is why my confidence wasn't

established earlier on and that is why I got anxious when it came to interacting in the group, especially with people I don't know (Sarah, EBS, Group-I, Interview)

### ***Challenges of asymmetrical relations to facilitation***

Gender was not the only area where power-relations were observed in the action learning sets. The shifting context of power-position from the facilitator to participants in the sets highlighted asymmetrical power-relations between participants and the facilitator, observed not only in the facilitator's field notes but also in participants' accounts (which indicated difficulty in understanding the purpose of AL). Revans' (1983) notion of neutral or 'passive' facilitation is particularly challenging in a cultural context where asymmetric power relations (with strongly teacher-led classrooms) have been embodied within the habitus of participants.

The relationship depicted by the participants between themselves and their arbitraries, having the power to influence, especially in the classroom was one of dominance by the teachers – making passive facilitation problematic. Participants indicated how they were accustomed to following instructions without question. This relationship, as noted by Bourdieu, can be perceived through a:

‘[...] theory of pedagogic action [which] distinguishes between the arbitrariness of the imposition and the arbitrariness of the content imposed, only so as to bring out the sociological implications of the relationship between two logical fictions, namely a pure power relationship’ (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990: 9)

Our findings indicate that the dispositions among participants, inculcated by these cultural arbitraries result in participant perception of the role of the facilitator (or a teacher) as ‘roohani baap’ – in Urdu language, a name for spiritual or surrogate fathers. When asked about the importance of the role of a facilitator in the action learning sets as compared to the MBA teacher, Sarah – a participant from the EBS replied with the following:

I think the MBA classroom is different to the action learning set. The focus is more on the teacher there, as they possess more knowledge. We listen to them and try learning from their knowledge. [...] Personally speaking, I take inspiration from my [...] teachers, as their value is also equivalent to our parents. (Sarah, EBS, Group I, Interview)

Student compliance within classroom settings, with authoritative teachers having power delegated by virtue of their families and society, was critical in orienting MBA participants' habitus. During action learning sets, participants sought a lead from the facilitator in describing, explaining and working out student problems, leading to awkward silences and frustration among participants when he delegated to them the responsibility for group interactions. Spencer-Oatey's (1997: 295) study of teacher-student relationships in high and low power cultures, observes how students in non-western countries are accustomed to a model of teacher as authoritative and knowledgeable, a father figure. Jasmine, from the MBS, explained how it would be seen as acceptable for a teacher to insult students, even at the MBA level, so long as s/he took the lead in the classroom.

### **The facilitator's perspective**

Resisting the status of 'Roohani Baap' was a challenging aspect of AL facilitation in the Pakistani MBA, where participants were accustomed to teacher-led classroom activities. Studies in CAL also suggest that the role of the facilitator intensifies in attempts to mitigate relational tensions which exist between the participants themselves and their facilitator (e.g. Rigg and Trehan, 2004). Arguably, the task of the facilitator becomes challenging in situations which are power-driven and demand an active engagement with 'emotional and political dynamics' of the set (Ram and Trehan, 2009: 309). Facilitation was thus a difficult process to manage, as delegation of power to participants within a learning setting tended to fall outside the purview of the Pakistani

MBAAs, who expressed reluctance to take responsibility. Participants' interview conversations reflected a consistent preference for teacher-directed learning activities. For example, Ibrahim, from the EBS, during his interview said that:

I've never experienced such a learning activity before in which we were put in-charge of what we wanted to do instead of the teacher. It is unusual because the teacher is always in authority and in-charge of what is happening around you. (Ibrahim, EBS, Group I, Interview).

Ibrahim's account shows how the facilitation he experienced in the action learning sets challenged his previous perceptions of classroom learning. The facilitator's attempt to democratize the action learning sets was met with resistance and experienced as abrogation of authority. CAL redirects our attention to facilitative approaches which can cause political vulnerability and emotional discomfort, often leading to incapacitation and disempowerment (e.g. Vince, 2008). Self-directed learning was difficult for MBA participants to handle and was viewed (by both participants and facilitator) as a frustrating experience.

Post-reflection notes from the facilitator indicated tensions posed by students accustomed to treating the teacher as expert (with an expectation the facilitator would take the lead in learning sets) and the type of 'passive' facilitation advocated within Revans' philosophy. In his notes, author 1 recounts:

Previously, I had noted that some of the participants were re-routing their queries and thoughts through me. I may have naively redirected these to the concerned set members, but I guess it dawned upon me later that what they were doing was quite strategic in enticing the facilitator to take the heat of how relationships (in particular between the opposite sex) progressed while their position remained neutral during the critical engagement phase (Facilitator's Post-Set Reflection, Meeting 3)

Elsewhere (see Author 1, 20xx), the facilitator makes a note about his own habitus as a facilitator and also a product of the same cultural system. Through CAL, the facilitator was able to address the tensions of a passive facilitative approach by taking into account his own preconceptions to learning and organizing in the Pakistani MBA. This triggered a reflection over the role reversal, from being a Pakistani educated MBA and an academic teaching on the Pakistani MBA to experiencing Western education and becoming a facilitator of CAL. It also challenged his personal thinking and brought him closer to viewing his own practice as a struggle to disengage from traditional, embodied, modes of learning.

As I prepared to [... engage] with the Pakistani MBA participants about their experience of working as action learners in a learning set, I expected that my position as a male academic who knew the MBA process would aid in acquiring data from male participants, but [likely to struggle in connecting] with the females. My expectations were grounded in the assumption that individuals with similar identities connect well (e.g. Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). However, what I found was the opposite: the female participants were forthcoming in their interviews about how they were treated as individuals and learners, while the males generally described events and process without digging deep to connect with their emotions. Here my assumptions about positionality both as a facilitator and researcher were indeed reversed, as I was taken aback at times when the females discussed their family, social and personal lives. (Author 1, 20xx: 324)

The previous classroom experiences of both the MBA students and facilitator (from schooling through to their master's degree) had dominated their own ability to either assume or relinquish responsibility for their learning. The classroom culture, as described by participants and also experienced by the facilitator from his MBA education, was one of 'overwhelming control' (Freire, 1993: 261). In contrast the set culture was expressed collectively as 'unusual' by participants and raised questions of

how to negotiate the effects of power and transformation in tightly knit cultures in relation to CAL.

## **Discussion**

Our analysis highlights two key challenges for managing, engaging and facilitating AL in the Pakistani MBA context. First, the challenge of addressing male members' reluctance to engage directly with women, and vice-versa, in the sets was particularly overwhelming. The findings attribute this challenge to familial and institutional habituses (Reay, 1998) embodied by participants during upbringing. Bourdieu suggests that power arises from culturally created symbolic values (Wacquant, 2004) that impose gendered power-relations. Gaventa (2003: 6) further explains that cultural ideologies 'provide the means for a non-economic form of domination and hierarchy'. In the case of the Pakistani men and women in the MBA learning sets this stemmed from cultural upbringing that legitimized the predominance of men within a segregated society, in which men are not allowed to directly engage with women but rather look down upon them (Malik, 2012). Those men, who did manage to engage in direct communication with female participants in sets, nevertheless respected gendered boundaries by avoiding critical questioning in their dialogue. This particularly led towards questions which could be categorized as red herrings – strategic in avoiding gender differences (e.g. Vince, 2012). The Pakistani MBA action learning programme presented itself as a form of social space where men and women occupied different positions based on the nature of gendered capital they had acquired while growing up at home, challenging the facilitator to break the silence of cross-gendered interactions in the set.

Second, the findings direct our attention towards the reflexive dualism created by action learning, which can often be disorienting for participants i.e. reflective practice versus what is predisposed as routine practice. Bourdieu argues that 'social order is progressively inscribed in people's minds' through 'cultural products' including

systems of education, language, judgements, values, methods of classification and activities of everyday life' (Bourdieu, 1986: 471). This explains how such symbolic inscription, evident in the accounts of and behaviour among learning-set participants, results in the unconscious acceptance of those power-relations, resulting in social inequalities, difference and power hierarchies. Earlier we observed that critical thought emerging from heterodoxy has the ability to break with such inscriptions given that the arbitrariness of orthodoxy is exposed (Wacquant, 2004), which in the case of action learning is possible through the organisation of reflection. It was further observed through findings that CAL can create a field of opinion for the habitus, which can be disconcerting for learners in taking responsibility for their own learning.

Our findings illuminate that reflexivity does not only impact participants when engaging in reflective acts but is equally imposing upon the facilitator, also a cultural agent, in the process. The creation of a field of opinion, i.e. heterodoxy, invites both, participants and the facilitator, to explore together the 'unthought categories of thought that delimit the thinkable and predetermine the thought' (Bourdieu, 1990:178). Deploying reflexivity, at the level of facilitation, requires the ability to bring into question the interests and beliefs which drive the AL process and to manage transitions between the role of facilitator as either passive or active agent of change. Therefore, the habitus of the facilitator should be called upon in CAL to assess their capacity 'to construct practical understandings (workable, everyday models) of the location of self within a social system, to act accordingly (strategically and tactically), and to reflect further and refine understandings in response to events and the consequences of actions taken' (MaClean et al. 2012: 388). The meta-narrative underpinning our findings points towards the centrality of facilitation that recognizes the interplay of embodied dispositions and the politics of culture in organizing reflection in action learning.

## **Implications**



Our study has demonstrated how facilitation driven by ‘idealized version[s] of equality’ among set participants can unconsciously reinforce structural inequalities (Reynolds, 2000: 78). In order to address the potential for action learners to feel constrained about contributing within their set, facilitators need to be acquainted with the cultural politics of organizing reflection (e.g. Vince, 2002) within the context in which they practice AL. Specifically, through the findings of this study, we observe how ‘the power and emotional dynamics provoked within the action learning process’ are contextual (Rigg and Coghlan, 2012: 165). A facilitator seeking to adopt a CAL approach is likely to find their practice impacted by their own, and participants’ experiences of learning, which are often filtered through cultural, social, and political history (e.g. Vince and Martin, 1993; Willmott, 1994; 1997).

In our case, for example, the position of the facilitator as a Pakistani, male academic with a European research background, influenced both his own and participants’ interactions and perspectives regarding who should take lead responsibility for group learning. Thus, the facilitator’s plans for (and his role in) developing student-led debate were challenged within the sets. The complex landscape of gendered, interpersonal and cultural relations obliged him to introduce greater flexibility regarding how he managed set meetings, and learning interactions, among participants.

As a consequence, we suggest that developing facilitation skills to recognize the sensitivity of cultural factors such as gender segregation, class hierarchies, power-positioning and the submissive ‘self’ of individuals could be of fundamental importance in enabling self-directed learning, especially among those new to AL. The implications of our study direct attention towards not only the cultural challenges in the process of reflection, but also the complexities and competing discourses that reflection creates in challenging expectations and norms in AL (e.g. Vince and Saleem, 2004).

Through our findings, we propose three actions to inform practice. First, that facilitator training includes cultural and political awareness. This suggests that facilitators take responsibility for getting to know the context within which they are working including norms, processes etc. Cultural awareness can facilitate deeper ways of engaging with politically sensitive issues which are often embodied as routine and negotiated with avoidance (e.g. silence, red herrings). Developing an ability to detect strategic avoidance of cultural and political differences, which inevitably are mirrored within group dynamics, can enhance the facilitator's agency for pro-actively managing group functionality (Vince, 2012). Second that facilitation needs to be gender aware, an area that has received little scholarly attention (Author 3, 20xx). Our study in particular highlights how gender combines with cultural norms to affect the learning experience. It is therefore important that practitioners and developers include gender awareness in the development of facilitators, not only in relation to group composition but importantly, as revealed in this study, with regard to intra-group relations where cultural norms may dictate certain conventions. Third our findings point to the need for the facilitation process to be adaptive and co-constitutive recognising both facilitator limitations (one person is not able to challenge, and resolve all intra-group tensions) and the responsibility of the group as a whole, that is the facilitator along with the participants, to be responsible for group management and learning. Taking into account the complexity of cultural contexts, we propose that inexperienced facilitators work alongside more experienced facilitators to observe facilitation in action.

## **Conclusion**

This study contributes to CAL research through conceptualizing the dynamics of facilitation in managing group politics within action learning sets among MBA students in Pakistan. Identifying the complexities of facilitation theorizes the position of an AL facilitator, reflecting on the tensions between the cultural preferences among the

students for more traditional, teacher-led forms of facilitation, and the type of self-directed, action learning advocated by Revans (1983). In so doing, the study first identified the challenges of mediating predisposed gendered dispositions embodied by Pakistani MBA students, who had to learn how to communicate with one another before they could inter-act as a group in order to engage in critical reflective processes. Then, it further highlighted the political implications for encouraging self-directed reflective practice among action learning sets where participants have been used to exclusively teacher-led classroom experiences.

The paper, in its focus on group power relations adds to wider debates that are concerned with adopting critical perspectives in management education (Elliott, 2008; Gray, 2007), including surfacing the complexities of the relationship between student and facilitator (Dehler, 2009). The insights from this study also suggest that the Pakistani MBA participants felt uneasy in assuming power and taking responsibility for challenging the facilitator. Our study provides insight into culturally influenced social practices with the intent of illuminating the challenges of action-learning facilitation within a non-Western context (which could, if participant anxiety of reflecting over their social practices is not appropriately mediated, result in ‘inaction’ of learning) (Vince, 2008). Our theorisation highlights the complexities and tensions inherent in developing participants’ critical awareness of their beliefs and practices thus recognizing participants’ inter-actions (through their language, behaviour or practices) should be a responsibility shared among facilitator and participants.

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