PILOT IS A PILOT IS A PILOT?:
Exploration Of Effects Of National Culture In Helicopter Pilots

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Introduction + Aims

- Culture relates to shared **norms**, **values**, and **practices** associated with a nation, organization, or profession.
- **National culture** is based on a person's geographic country of origin.
- It has been identified to **influence the way people communicate and behave** through these shared norms and beliefs.

Why is culture important?

- Culture types (organisational, national and professional) identified as input factors affecting crew and mission performance (Helmreich, 2000).
  - In fixed-wing aviation.
  - In space missions.
- However, most of the research is 20+ years old.
- Helicopter flight crews are often comprised of **multicultural teams that fly as part of multinational companies**
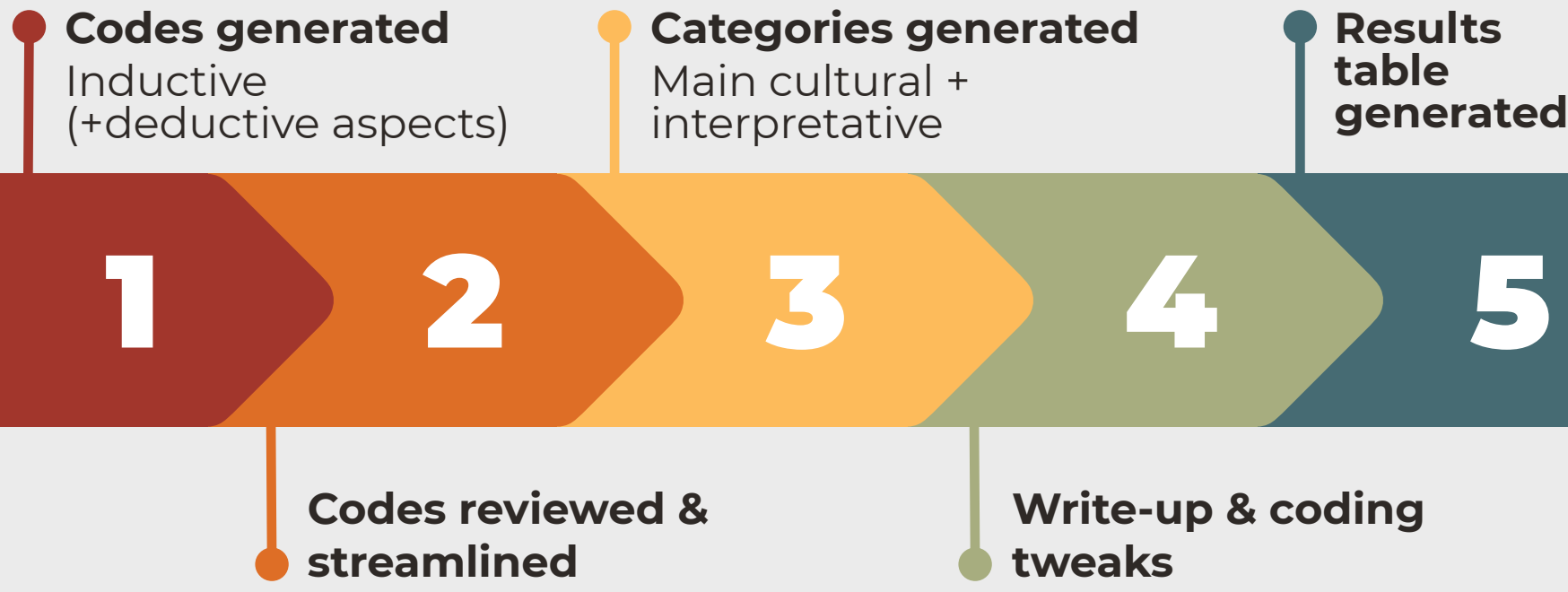
Aims:

- Explore pilots'/managers'/trainers' views on the effects of national culture on in-flight safety behaviours.
- Determine which aspects of national culture are perceived as potential factors that might influence **in-flight safety behaviours, performance and training.**

Methods

- 15 in-depth semi-structured interviews with helicopter pilots, trainers and managers. All but 1 trainer were active pilots.
- Ex-military/civilian
- UK & other
- UK base of an offshore transport operator

Inductive content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005)

1 Codes generated — Inductive (+deductive aspects)
2 Codes reviewed & streamlined
3 Categories generated — Main cultural + interpretative
4 Write-up & coding tweaks
5 Results table generated

Results

- **National culture categories:**

Working with other people irrespective of culture

Content analysis generated two overarching themes relevant to working with others.

Individual character exerts bigger influence than culture. Half of the pilots (*n* = 7) mentioned that rather than a culture influencing the way a person behaves, they only had issues with certain individuals.

> *You can have problems with people from the UK… it's irrelevant.* — (Participant #8)

Importance of standardisation for elimination of cultural influences. Many pilots (*n* = 6) observed that numerous cultural issues that could come up are eliminated by strong internal standardisation procedures within the organisation.

> *When the company has little or no, um, standardisation or very little standardisation, it ends up being up or down to each individual culture.* — (Participant #6)

Language barriers can present difficulties:

Here people mostly talked about how **language can lead to misunderstandings, issues become apparent in emergencies**, speaking slower and clearer with non-native speakers. Pilots also pointed out that **standardisation in language mitigate some of these issues.**

Minimal differences in the Western world:

Here it was mentioned that pilots from European/Western countries are very similar due to **standardised Western training**, low power distance in European cultures, and higher power distance in southern and eastern countries.

Pilots from outside of EU are different:

Here pilots mentioned various **anecdotal impressions** of American, Arab and African pilots. However, the **number of those experiences was rather low.** Multiple pilots mentioned that non-European flying can be riskier.

Discussion

Extensive insight into:
- pilot's perception of culture; and
- it's influence on performance, safety behaviours and training

Key themes discussed:
- importance of standardisation (to eliminate or reduce impact of culture)
- international differences
- language barriers

National culture previously found to have a negative effect on flight safety (Helmreich & Merritt, 1998; Soeters & Boer, 2000)
- Not the case in our sample
- Potentially due to limited (if any) experience of interacting or flying with non-Western pilots
- Additionally – **very small differences between pilots from European countries** (and most of the Western world) because of the standardised Western training styles and techniques, along with similar routes to becoming a pilot.
- Largely in line with previous literature suggesting that many Western pilots (European, US and Australian) have similar characteristics (Helmreich & Merritt, 1998).

Main differences when flying with non-Western pilots come down to team interactions, not flight skills
- the higher power distance when flying with Middle Eastern pilots
- 'saving face' culture in Eastern countries
- In line with previous literature (Soeters & Boer, 2000)

Key influence of national culture on flight safety – language barrier
- faced by some non-native English speakers
- that standardised language in the cockpit helps to a certain extent
- but can also hinder communication in some instances – due to specialised terminology and 'difficult words' that can be harder to pronounce

References

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