INTERCULTURAL ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

The Social Organizing of Interaction in International Encounters

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Intercultural communication has mainly been described in terms of national differences disturbing the sending and receiving of messages. In this article, it is argued that the local organizational context has to be taken into account. By linking Bourdieu's theories on the social organization of differences to recent theories of organizational communication, the focus of the article is directed at describing the impact of informal and power-related aspects in intercultural communication. The usefulness of a theory on intercultural organizational communication is illustrated by the results of an ethnographic field study on Danish expatriates in a Saudi subsidiary.

Keywords: *intercultural communication; social organization; expatriates; international management; ethnography*

The rise of the internationalized business environment and the intensification of global competition have led to an increasing number of people traveling across cultural and linguistic boundaries (Griffith, 2002). As a result, dealing with the full complexity of human diversity has become a daily task for a substantial part of the business community. Due to this recent development, the understanding of intercultural communication has gained importance in using advantages connected to doing business internationally (Jameson, 2007). In fact, future successful international managers may be the ones that are able to manage communication in culturally and linguistically diverse contexts (see Beamer, 1998; Henderson, 2005; Varner & Beamer, 2005).

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In the literature on international business and management, the success of multinational corporations is frequently linked to the work of expatriates sent by headquarters to ensure the communication to subsidiaries (Harris & Kumra, 2000; Harzing, 2001). Ideally, this should be a two-way interaction where both parties learn from each other (Brewster, 1995; Edström & Galbraith, 1977). Therefore, expatriation has often been viewed as an effective way to bridge communication and maintain knowledge sharing between the different parties in a multinational corporation (Bennett, Aston, & Colquhoun, 2000; Boyacigiller, 1990). However, it is argued that differences in culture and communication styles are important obstacles to expatriate communication management (Dowling & Welch, 2004; Welch, Welch, & Piekkari, 2005). As an example, Rao and Hashimoto (1996) describe how cultural differences made Japanese expatriates change their influence strategies communicating with local Canadian employees. When identifying communication issues in a U.S. subsidiary in Korea, Park, Hwangt, and Harrison (1996) found that U.S. expatriates felt that cultural differences and language affected their managerial abilities. Similarly, Peltokorpi (2007) showed how differences in communication styles and cultural values created barriers between Nordic expatriates and local employees in Japan. These empirical studies all perceive intercultural communication in the frame of general national cultural differences. Thereby, considerations of the local organizational context are not included in the understanding of expatriate communication management. However, Osland (1995) and Cohen (1977) have observed that the local organization of the expatriate community is sometimes responsible for excluding other nationalities from interaction. Similarly, recent research has described the importance of social network in understanding expatriate behavior (Hutchings, French, & Hatcher, 2008; Osman-Gani & Rockstuhl, 2008; Wang & Kanungo, 2004). Such findings direct attention to the local organization of the workplace as an important variable to be included in the understanding of intercultural communication in international corporations.

Hence, there is a need for developing theories that link the micro-level interaction patterns of the workplace to intercultural communication (Søderberg & Holden, 2002). This, however, calls for a more nuanced and dynamic conception of culture than is seen in much literature on intercultural communication and international business and management (e.g., Gudykunst, 2004; Hofstede, 1991). Most research in this field still focuses almost unitarily on nationality as representative of cultural differences when analyzing communication failures (Jameson, 2007; Shenkar,

Luo, & Yeheskel, 2008). Hence, Bargiela-Chiappini and Nickerson (2003) call for an understanding of culture as something created through interaction in the context (see Brannen & Salk, 2000; Sackmann & Phillips, 2004).

Expatriation has often been viewed as an effective way to bridge communication and maintain knowledge sharing between the different parties in a multinational corporation.

In this article, it is argued that cultural differences should be understood as negotiated and socially organized in the local setting rather than being something a priori. The informal social organization of cultural differences is the local coordination of group relations negotiated among individuals and groups in a continuous process of interaction. Consequently, a model of intercultural communication should not only include national cultural differences but also the relations between communication practices and the social organization of differences in the workplace. Hence, the research questions to guide this article are as follows:

Research Question 1: What is the relation between the social organization of the workplace and cultural differences in international corporations?
Research Question 2: How does the local context and relations between differently positioned national groups, such as expatriates, locals, and third country nationals, affect intercultural organizational communication?

The implications of these questions are illustrated by empirical data from an ethnographic field study of Danish expatriates in Saudi Arabia.

LITERATURE REVIEW: CULTURE AND COMMUNICATION

Since the statement by Edward Hall (1959) that culture is communication and communication is culture, there has been a strong and persistent tradition in business studies to distinguish between national cultures on the

basis of the role of communication. Especially Hall's (1976, 2000) dimensions of high and low context culture concerning styles of expression have been repeatedly referred to by authors on intercultural business communication (e.g., Chen & Starosta, 1998; Varner & Beamer, 2005). Another cultural dimension that is closely related and much cited in communication studies is Hofstede's (1991) description of variations of individualist and collectivist cultures (e.g., Buchan, Johnson, & Croson, 2006; Kim, 2005). Although individualist cultures, according to these authors, tend to believe that personal goals and interests are more important than group interests, collectivist cultures consider themselves first and foremost as part of an extended organization (Triandis, 1995).

As the above-mentioned theories indicate, culture has often been described as creating differences in the way messages are sent and received (e.g., Freeman & Brown, 2004; Kim, 2005; Loosemore & Lee, 2002). Thus, most authors in intercultural business communication argue that culture determines how individuals encode messages, what mediums they choose for transmitting them, and the way messages are interpreted. This implies that when transmitting a message in an international setting, culture might function as a kind of disturbance, which can distort the intended meaning. As Gudykunst and Kim (1997) state, individuals cannot accurately interpret or predict the behavior of strangers without first understanding their cultural filters. Similarly, Beamer (1992) argues that problems arise when receivers interpret a message according to their own cultural frame of reference, which may cause a different interpretation to what the sender had intended (e.g., Hall, 1976; Varner & Beamer, 2005). In other words, intercultural communication is hindered when signs are not recognized because individuals are using values and norms of one culture to explain the behavior of individuals from another. To counter such a dysfunctional result, it has been contended that communication difficulties can be overcome by the knowledge and understanding of cultural factors that are subject to variance (Beamer, 1992). The argument is that the more one learns about another culture, the more one can adapt to the stranger's frame of reference, and the closer one comes to understanding the message the way it was intended (e.g., Marcus & Lin, 1999; Torbiörn, 1982).

While acknowledging the importance of the general national cultural differences in intercultural communication, several weaknesses to the described use can be mentioned. First, when culture is conceived as a determining force that affects communicative behavior, there is a tendency to ignore the fact that culture itself is created in communication—actions are

coordinated through interaction (Gumperz, 1965; Hymes, 1996). Second, when culture is perceived to be the disturbing force that distorts the dispatched messages, there is a danger of forgetting that neither sender nor receiver may be particularly motivated to establish the communicative act (Bourdieu, 1991; Strecker, 1988). Third, since communication implies not only the transfer of information but also relationship building and social organization, it cannot be conceived as a neutral act separated from power relations (Cooren, 2006; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Based on a review of extant theories on intercultural communication, it can be argued that there is a need for more research on the micro-dynamic interrelation between culture and the communicative act in the local organizational setting (e.g., Søderberg & Holden, 2002).

TOWARD AN OUTLINE OF A THEORY OF INTERCULTURAL ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

Varner (2000) argues that too few researchers recognize that intercultural communication does not take place in a vacuum but is tied to the business context (see Perkins, 1999; Suchan, 1998). Hence, Varner's model on intercultural business communication strategy links business strategy to intercultural strategy and communication strategy. Although this model is extremely useful for designing intercultural business communication strategies, the model focuses less on informal, implicit, and power-related aspects of intercultural communication. However, micro-level strategic actions may have great implications for the outcome of intercultural communication. Thus, there is a need for a model that also includes these informal aspects of communication that are not directly accounted for in Varner's framework.

To develop such a model, one may take inspiration from the thinking of Bourdieu (1977). Although Bourdieu's theories were not originally developed for a business context, a number of authors have successfully adapted them to business areas such as entrepreneurship, business planning, and career progression (e.g., Iellatchitch, Mayrhofer, & Meyer, 2003; Oakes, Townley, & Cooper, 1998; Wilson, Carter, Tagg, Shaw, & Lam, 2007). In a similar way, Bourdieu's (1990) theories can be helpful in understanding communicative encounters in international corporations.

Bourdieu outlines a theoretical framework in which he understands social structures (such as culture or communication styles) as embedded

in the active individual. This way, social structure conditions the actions of individuals but are also themselves, over time, formed by those actions (Bourdieu, 1990). Culture, then, not only determines the actions of individuals but is also created by those (individual) actions. This dynamic view provides room for changes in social structures as a result of negotiations and "struggles" over resources and recognition between individuals and groups (see Oetzel, 2002).

By situating the communicative act within the constraints of social structure, Bourdieu (1991) introduces a model of communication that takes the local context into account. Particularly relevant for this project is Bourdieu's argument that when cultural distance reduces understanding in the communicative encounter, the disturbance of communication may be more than just a matter of misunderstanding (Bourdieu, Passeron, & Martin, 1994). Thus, the understanding of culture as merely a neutral filter of disturbance is a simplification that does not take into account the micro dynamics of human interaction. Rather, communication is a mechanism through which groups are created, maintained, and modified (Scott, 1997). To dominate the production and reproduction of communication structures is to dominate the legitimized access to recognition and resources. In other words, not only the level of comprehension but also the intentions and positions of groups and individuals affect the sharing of information and the building of relationships that could be the outcome of a communicative encounter (see Battilana, 2006). Accordingly, effective communication depends not only on the skills of organization members but also on group and intergroup dynamics (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). This adds power as an important variable in the understanding of intercultural communication.

Communication is a mechanism through which groups are created, maintained, and modified.

Although Bourdieu takes little interest in interaction across national boundaries, his theories of the social organization of difference can be highly informative to studies on intercultural communication. Bourdieu (2004) argues that individuals in general are motivated to distinguish themselves from each other. To be a social being means to categorize and thus to embody socially constructed principles of vision and "di-vision"

of the social world. This is related to general societal principles of group-based divisions of labor. As Bourdieu (2004) argues, "those aspiring to or holding a position may have an interest in redefining it in such a way that it cannot be occupied by anyone other than the possessors of properties identical to their own" (p. 151). Hence, we might conceive of the social organization of differences as mutually constitutive dynamics of individual positioning and group making (Bourdieu, 1991). Forms of interaction become loaded with symbolic significance and thus contribute to the stratification of social groups (Lawrence, 2004).

With Bourdieu's optic one could argue that embodied differences, such as ethnicity, can become "naturalized" in the local context. This naturalization of ethnic differences draws heavily on tacitly taken-for-granted assumptions from the everyday practices in the global division of labor (Brubaker, 2002; Herzfeld, 1992). Thus, historically, some nationalities and ethnic groups connote less positive qualities. Differences and the division of labor are naturalized by inscribing them in a system of differences. And since they appear normal and inevitable, over time they develop into schemes of perception, thought, and action (Wilson et al., 2007). This way, the fact that differences make a difference is an active accomplishment. These notions may help explain why communication in international corporations can sometimes be unfavorable territory for locals and third country nationals.

In developing a theoretical model of intercultural organizational communication, the intentionality in the communicative act described by Bourdieu is important. Similarly, the idea that differences, cultural or other, are naturalized with a purpose is useful. This provides us with a theory that relates intentional communicative actions with the social organization of differences. Furthermore, the social informal organization of the workplace can be linked to both the internationality found in the communicative act and to the perception of human differences.

Bourdieu's ideas can easily be related to recent thoughts on organizational communication. Similar to Bourdieu's conception of a dynamic relation between social structures and individuals actions, Taylor and Cooren (1997) argue that organization is both conditional on communication and the frame within which it occurs. Put differently, organization has its basis in communication (Taylor, 1999) and organization cannot be perceived independently of communication since communication is where the organization is produced (Taylor, 2006). This happens because human actions and perceptions become organized and ordered through processes of interaction (Weick et al., 2005). In consequence, Taylor and Van Every (2000) argue that communication is an ongoing process of

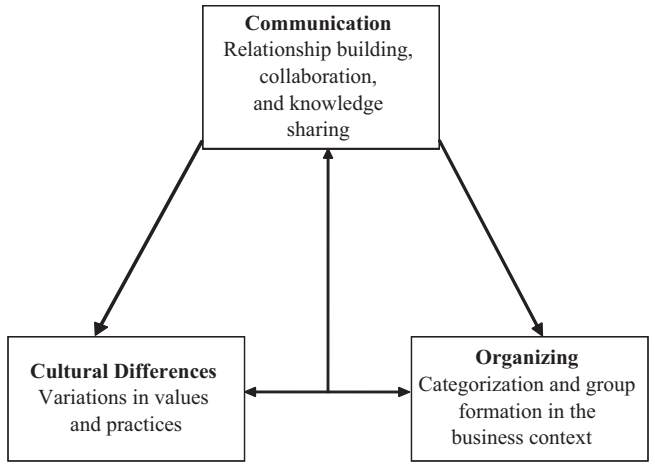

Figure 1. Intercultural Organizational Communication

making sense of the circumstances in which people collectively find themselves and each other. Organizing through communication then becomes the talking into existence the situation that is the basis for action. This dynamic view on the link between communication, organization, and human differences can be used in developing a theory on intercultural organizational communication (see Figure 1).

Although some of the general elements of culture vary across nations, it is important to recognize that in the meeting of different nationalities in the local organizational context, the outcome of communication processes can be difficult to predict (Baily & Spicer, 2007; Brannen & Salk, 2000). It can therefore be argued that the effect of cultural differences in intercultural interaction is better left as empirical questions to be explored in the organizational context rather than just assumed based on generalizable out-of-context models.

> Organization has its basis in communication and organization cannot be perceived independently of communication since communication is where the organization is produced.

METHOD

Recently, it has been argued that qualitative research in international business and management has been too heavily influenced by demands of objectivity and generalization (Marschan-Piekkari & Reis, 2004). Although such positivistic influence can also be traced to recent qualitative studies in business communication (e.g., Burgess, 2005; Pal & Buzzanell, 2008; Turner & Reinsch, 2008), a more ethnographically oriented tradition is also developing within the field (e.g., Bird, 2007; Carter, 2002; Prasad & Mir, 2002).

Drawing on the results of a 3-month ethnographic field study and based on anthropological theories, this article can be seen as a contribution to the ethnographically oriented position in business communication research. The ethnographic approach is well suited for describing and analyzing human interaction in dynamic and complex surroundings, because the context itself is included in the continuous asking of questions in the field. Furthermore, the openness of the approach is highly necessary for registering informal and implicit elements of social interaction. By using such an approach, the researcher can avoid the tendency to identify only what people think rather than what they actually do (Graham, 2006).

Data Collection

Central to anthropological research is the assumption that we can often observe a discrepancy between ideals and practices: what informants express and how they actually act (Holy & Stuchlik, 1983). This means that participant observation is an invaluable part of the data collection.

During participant observation, the anthropological ideal is for the researcher to assume a so-called third position between the view of the informants and the view of the research community (Hastrup, 1986). This way, participant observation can be perceived as a paradox of data collection. It requires the researcher to be emotionally involved with informants while at the same time being a dispassionate observer (Tedlock, 1991). Participant observation has taken place at the workplace as well as in the compound of the expatriates. For a period of 3 months the researcher lived his life in a way that was similar to the life of the expatriates. During the working days much time was spent walking around the workplace making "small talk" with all the employees in an attempt to gain their confidence. Observations were made by following the daily life and conversing with informants in every work situation. This provides an opportunity to register

processes producing and reproducing social categories applied at the scene (Brubaker, 2002). In this particular fieldwork, these processes could be observed in daily dialogues between organizational members, where the negotiation of internal and external categories was debated in a way that would not have been registered in a more formal interview situation. Furthermore, participant observation also allows registrations of implicit group behavior, such as socialization or boundary creation, which are not directly available through other data collection tools. Altogether, the degree of observation and participation that occurred depended on the different activities. During meetings it was mostly observation that took place, and in the compound it was mainly participation, and so on. Field notes were continuously taken in a small note book that the researcher carried with him at all times. Based on these observations, questions evolved that could be explored further and debated in interviews.

All key informants were interviewed—all expatriates (16) and all middle managers (4). Other informants among the workers (12) were selected on the basis of their openness to the researcher and their availability for interview time. The actual interviews took place in offices or empty meeting rooms. Informants were mainly asked about their perception of and interaction with other nationalities. In the beginning, the interview guide contained a number of general questions about preparation, adaptation, formal communication strategies, and advantages and disadvantages of working with other nationalities. However, after a while more locally grounded questions developed that dealt with themes such as power relations and social categorization. The investigation was thus designed in an open, iterative fashion, allowing for the continuous processing of incoming information and subsequent addition of new questions to the interview guide (see the appendix; Kvale, 1996; Spradley, 1980). In practice, this meant that the researcher was able to develop the subjects proposed by respondents (Alvesson, 2003) and thereby combine respondents' views with a systematized data generation (Fontana & Frey, 1994).

The data analysis was done manually, coding the field notes and interview transcripts (Miles & Huberman, 1994). During the analysis, the statements and observations were categorized and thematized in indexes with subcategories (Bernard, 1995; Spradley, 1980). From these pieces of data, an extensive initial case narrative of more than 300 pages was created. This article is developed from a part of this narrative material related to intercultural communication. In addition, the Nvivo program was used to identify text bits in the material related to intercultural communication and group formation searching across codes. The selected material was recoded

to form a single case narrative that described the relationship between differences, communication, and group processes (Boyatzis, 1998).

The Setting and Context

The setting for the fieldwork was a Saudi subsidiary of a Danish corporation. The subsidiary employed around 400 individuals of 14 different nationalities—mainly from India (251), Egypt (80), and the Philippines (37). In addition, 16 Danish expatriates were stationed in Saudi Arabia.

The company was selected because the personnel department shared an interest with the researcher in regard to how knowledge was communicated from the parent company to the subsidiary units. The corporate management had formulated a policy describing the company's aim to use the potential of international transfer to promote intercultural communication and understanding. In other words, the idea was for employees from the company to develop international competencies while being stationed overseas.

The researcher aimed to find out what was communicated to the subsidiary and how communication facilitated knowledge sharing within the subsidiary.

The researcher is Danish and therefore he had access to becoming at least a partial member of the expatriate community. However, the researcher's role in the field often changes over time—it depends on his own and the informants' definitions and identification (LeCompte, Schenshul, Week, & Singer, 1999; Spradley, 1980). In this project, the researcher's role changed back and forth, from being an outsider to being a participant in different communities of informants. Suspicious informants became friends and, in some instances, went back to being suspicious again. That would happen if the researcher had too much contact with a rival group? Nonetheless, the researcher tried to assume a role as the independent listener who had the time to listen to the informants' problems and frustrations as well as their successes.

RESULTS: INTERCULTURAL ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

Intergroup Differences

In international subsidiaries, differences in styles of communication are inevitable and are often argued to slow down the process of decision making and working processes and they may weaken social ties. In this case,

the expatriates were particularly focused on creating measurable results, such as improved sales numbers and market shares. Problems with communication were perceived as significant obstacles to achieving this. One of the Danish managers described communication as he saw it in the subsidiary as a one-way activity:

> In some ways it is easier to work with Indians, Filipinos, and Egyptians, and in some ways it is more difficult. Here you can also make demands–just on a different level. The only problem is communication. It is quite difficult to communicate across cultural barriers. It becomes a very staccato-like communication. It is a lot like—I want it this way! And then they do it like that until I want something different. So a totally different management style is required down here. (Manager, Denmark)

The above quote indicates that it was not only the direct communicative act that caused the problems but rather differences in perception of positions and responsibilities. The Danish managers saw the other nationalities as being in need of firm management due to inherent norms and values within their national cultures. However, a number of third country nationals argued that the relationship between managers and subordinates was quite different from what they were used to in Egypt or India:

> I think there is a big difference between the managers in India and the managers in Saudi Arabia. It is not to offend the managers here. But we had managers who were more like coworkers, like our own colleagues. Here, a manager is a manager. There, it was just a title because it was a group working. But here we have "break-ups." Because the managers have their own national group and subordinates have their own group. I find a lot of difference. (Employee, India)

Hence, the Danish expatriates expressed a different perception of communication problems compared with other employees. Although the Danes focused mostly on differences in styles of communication and cultural values, the Indian employee actually perceived the organization of the workplace as an obstacle to interaction.

The negative categorization of locals and third country nationals by the expatriate managers could be observed directly in the use of harsh language and militaristic vocabulary when speaking of and to the other nationalities, often referring to them as "the monkeys." This can be illustrated by a quote from an agitated Danish manager:

> As I usually say—Indians are stupid or they perhaps make themselves stupid because they have no self-esteem. But Egyptians they are god damn stupid. The problem with both Indians and Egyptians is that none of them will admit when they have made a mistake. So one of my great pleasures down here is in fact to tell them when they have made a mistake—and get them to admit it. (Manager, Denmark)

Such verbatim recorded comments express an ethnocentric perception of other nationalities. Although they in no way represent the author's own views they are illustrative of the development of intercultural relations at the location. As it can be seen cultural differences clearly had an effect on intercultural communication in the subsidiary. However, there was no general consensus about the interpretation of the differences, and negative expressions were used by expatriates and others to accentuate negative emotions toward other nationalities while at the same time promoting a positive in-group perception.

Organization

To solve potential problems of communication, the management of the subsidiary had decided to maintain the traditional Saudi Arabian organizational form. Therefore, the organization was stratified in what could be called an ethnically segregated hierarchy in which nationality defines all positions. Hence, one had to be European to be a manager and Egyptian to be a supervisor. The Philippine employees often had good technical skills and they were therefore generally employed in technical positions or vehicle maintenance. The Indians were the lowest in the hierarchy and worked mainly in production or sales. As one of the expatriates put it:

> To have an Indian boss for a Saudi worker, that is almost impossible. Same thing with an Egyptian worker and an Indian boss, that is difficult in many cases as well. There exists some sort of informal class division which divides people hierarchically dependent on where they come from. That is the general case for Saudi Arabia. (Manager, Denmark)

Although the segregation was mainly implemented to ease the daily communication, it also fostered a certain discrimination of particular groups. As an example, the Egyptian supervisors would often give the best-selling products to Egyptian salesmen, making it more difficult for other nationalities to collect their sales bonus.

> The Egyptian salesmen get all the good products, all the products that are easy to sell. But the Indian salesmen are better workers because they are afraid of being fired. The Egyptians cannot be fired because they have Egyptian supervisors. (Employee, India)

Some of the non-European employees told the researcher that they felt that there was a kind of "apartheid" in the company. However, the behavior of exclusion occurred not only between Danes and other nationalities. Each group was defined by nationality, and the segregation was reproduced in daily practice. This can be illustrated by a description of advancement procedures.

> If I take the production staff, some of them are very efficient people, but the opportunities are given to some other people. But the senior supervisors, when they are supposed to recommend someone, they will recommend from their own interest according to their culture. And the managers, they are always very, very busy. They have no time to look at these kinds of things. If the target is OK then the managers don't care about anything. So they are quite happy. Above all, they do not have time to care about this. They have a lot of jobs to be done. The recruitment is normally to the cultural taste of the supervisors. They are not looking at the qualifications and the efficiency independently. They are looking only at the culture and their taste. (Employee, Philippines)

Through observations and interviews the researcher registered that communicative enclaves were enforced by the social organization of the workplace and reproduced in interaction. Since the Danish managers felt that their effort was measured through decisive and fast actions, communicating with other nationalities would only slow down their work. However, the limited interaction between the different nationalities had some immediate side effects that generated a sort of vicious circle, which widened the social gap between the groups and developed immense barriers to intercultural organizational communication.

Power Relations

The one-way communication style of the management created an unfriendly atmosphere between the nationalities. Hence, the way the Danes treated the other nationalities made some of the workers act in quiet opposition, doing very little work without being told directly. This resulted in the managers reacting with even more contempt and distrust. As an example, the management applied a system of fines, allowing managers and supervisors to deprive workers of a day's pay if they acted against

regulations. From time to time, the Danes would also deny middle managers the privilege of having their families move to Saudi Arabia as pressure or as a punishment for low sales targets. This happened even though the family reunion was of no additional expense for the company. The harsh treatment made some of the workers attempt shortening their employment by stealing from the company. It could be drivers cheating on the gas mileage or salesmen running off with the week's earnings. The occasional thefts and tricks incited the managers' suspicion toward their subordinates. And as the general manager expressed, "I mean, if somebody steals from the company, we punish them real hard." As an example of the distrust, the non-Danish office staff was always asked to leave the room when promotion lotteries were drawn.

While some of the Danes were more open to other nationalities to begin with, the encounter with the actual situation and the socialization with other managers rapidly changed their perception:

> I have tried to be flexible, but already after two months I find that I really distrust some of my coworkers. Also, therefore, it is by no means possible to be too soft-hearted. Then you can choose to call it a racist attitude, but what is racism actually? Am I a racist just because I distrust a black person? I think there are some concepts with which I have become more flexible since I first arrived. (Manager, Denmark)

All the talk about theft led to much suspicion toward the third country nationals. An example is when a salesman suffered from a heart attack and one of his coworkers explained that for quite a while he "had been taking some drugs." Even though it was, in fact, medication for his heart condition, his Danish manager immediately mistook it as the use of narcotics. This assumption was guided more by the general mistrust of the subordinate than of an actual misunderstanding of the words formulated.

As a result of rumors and personal experiences with criminal acts, the Danes developed a practice of withholding information from their subordinates. They deliberately spoke Danish when other nationalities were in the room, and the non-Danish secretaries were prohibited from reading incoming fax messages. When asked about the reasons for this practice, the managers only responded that they had grown increasingly annoyed with the curiosity of their employees. Finally, the mistrust peaked when some of the managers proposed setting up video surveillance not only in the production areas but also in the workers' home quarters to prevent illegal activities. Such suggestions, however, were met with criticism from other Danes.

> There has been some talking about setting up video cameras in the production. I have considered whether this company ought to be renamed "Auschwitz Company." There are some people in this company who should not be working with people and who, hopefully, will not when returning home. (Manager, Denmark)

Thus, even among the Danes, some expressed the clear opinion that the outspoken segregation had gone too far and no longer served any real business purpose. And certainly, the exclusion of other nationalities by the Danish group led to great frustration among the third country nationals, creating more theft and further barriers between nationalities. This can be expressed by a remark made by an Indian employee:

> I don't like any of the Danish managers. If you ask the assistants, they will tell you they can't stand the managers. People don't like to be in this company, but you just try to shut everything out and think of your own problems. You just can't take any more. If managers were like this in India, people would run them over with their cars and just bang them up because in India we know how to be humane. We know how to treat people. (Indian employee)

As illustrated above, group oppositions developed in a way that was detrimental to intercultural relationship building, collaboration, and knowledge sharing. This could also be observed among the expatriates when members of the Danish community scorned a newly arrived trainee for trying to speak Arabic with subordinates, or when Danish sales staff referred condescendingly to the marketing team as the "women's group" when they showed an effort to understand the world view of Saudi consumers. Thus, the practice of intercultural communication was closely linked to the local organizational context.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In this article, it has been argued that obstacles to intercultural communication are not always restricted to cultural misunderstandings. We also have to take into account the intentions of individuals and groups in the social organization of relationships.

The empirical material has outlined how individuals of the managerial team attempted to simplify communication in the subsidiary by segregating the different nationalities. The reason for doing this was to maintain fast decision making and prevent any disturbances and hindrances that could be the outcome of intercultural communication. When Danes only needed

to engage in dialogue with Danes, and Egyptians only needed to engage in dialogue with Egyptians, cultural and linguistic barriers did not complicate the daily work procedures. Intercultural dialogues and knowledge sharing were perceived as slowing down decision making, as the understanding of cultural differences was perceived as unnecessarily complicating the path to action. In addition, by excluding other nationalities from the lines of communication, the position of the Danish managerial group, their controlling of all processes of decision making and all information, could not be questioned formally. Apart from direct orders, no information was shared with third country nationals. The perception of other nationalities as untrustworthy and in need of firm management made the managers exclude them from the dialogue. This creation of social barriers only reproduced the segregation and maintained the ethnical hierarchy as the organizational principle that guided communication. Finally, a vicious circle was observed when mistrust and exclusion exercised by the management led to counteractions by the subordinates.

Research Question 1

The article set out to describe the relation between the social organization of the workplace and cultural differences in international corporations. As the case illustrates, communication in international corporations is not affected only by differences in culture and communication style. Rather, although interaction patterns among employees are guided by the perception of differences, the perception of differences is developed and organized in interaction. In other words, the social organization of the workplace is both conditioned of and conditioned on communication. Consequently, a one-way link between general cultural and communicative differences is a too static representation of intercultural organization communication. From this point of departure, it has been suggested that a theory on intercultural organizational communication can take shape in the combination of theories on the social organization of differences (Bourdieu, 2004) and theories on the interrelation between organization and communication (Taylor, 1999; Taylor & Cooren, 1997). This will provide a theory of intercultural organizational communication that takes intentionality and organizational context into account in the understanding of how cultural differences are categorized, used, and maintained in international corporations. This differs from the mainstream conception of intercultural communication that is mainly based on the assumption that cultural differences are general, nonnegotiable, and static entities (e.g., Gudykunst, 2004; Kim, 2005; Triandis, 1995).

Research Question 2

The effect of the local context and relations between differently positioned national groups on intercultural organizational communication has also been investigated. Case results demonstrate that groups can use naturalized differences strategically to exclude others from participating in the general corporate dialogue. Thereby local power relations become organized in such a way that differences are employed to make a difference and thereby stratifying groups and individuals. Through interaction in the local setting, group differences and group boundaries are organized and stabilized. Hence, the different national groups' forming of negative opinions of one another should be related to group-based and psychological dynamics of ethnocentrism. The concept ethnocentrism is related to the general belief that one's own ethnic group is not only different but also superior to other groups. Thereby, ethnocentrism can lead groups and individuals to make false assumptions about cultural difference and misjudge other people distorting intercultural communication in the process (Thomas, 1996). Although ethnocentric behavior is argued to satisfy psychological needs in the individual (Hogg & Terry, 2000), it should also be related to intergroup competition and tangible rewards (Jenkins, 1997). Finally, individuals that are under stress have a tendency to show even stronger ethnocentric attitudes (Torbiörn, 1982). This may explain why the Danish expatriate managers that needed to prove their worth in a relatively short time in a foreign environment acted ethnocentrically toward other nationalities in the subsidiary. Although this case has portrayed an exclusive and ethnocentric link between communication, differences, and social organization, an inclusive process might also develop as a positive feedback situation trigged and developed by communication. In that case continuous communication would create and organize shared interaction patterns that would also increase the communication frequency between different national groups (Pelled, 1996; Zenger & Lawrence, 1989). This positive and negative dynamic development in group interaction has been reported in a number of studies on intercultural relations and group contact (e.g., Baily & Spicer, 2007; Lauring, 2008; Yoshikawa, 1987). However, it is often ignored in studies on intercultural communication.

The social organization of the workplace is both conditioned of and conditioned on communication.

Because of the exploratory character of the study, the attempt to provide general practical guidelines may be somewhat premature. However, one can provide an initial outline of some ideas on avoiding the described problems. First, the awareness of the implications of the informal social organization of communicative practices in international corporations may be the first step to deal with potentially negative effects. Strategies for communication and human resources management that do not take into account the informal social organization, may be ill focused or seriously flawed. Second, we need to consider the character and mix of the management group in international corporations. Even in well-trained groups of international managers, mistrust and pursuit of personal interests may hinder intercultural understanding. Consequently, managers should be aware that communicative actions are often related to the processes of maintaining or establishing social positions. Hence, apart from cross-cultural awareness training, other measures may be useful in facilitating interaction across cultural and linguistic boundaries. As a possible solution to avoiding the initiation of vicious circles of antagonistic categorization, cultural diversification of the expatriate group could be applied strategically. This may leave less incentive for the exclusion of other nationalities. As such, a less ethnocentric approach to international staffing may resolve some intercultural organizational communication problems—and hopefully initiate a positive feedback process. One concrete way to open the groups to intercultural communication could be to recruit some members of the managerial team from local personnel of other different subsidiaries. Thereby, the cultural diversity in the management group would promote a more internationalized attitude toward communication.

Ethnocentrism can lead groups and individuals to make false assumptions about cultural difference and misjudge other people distorting intercultural communication in the process.

The generalizability of the results of this article is limited by the exploratory, qualitative character of the study. That said, the chosen methodology has provided novel insight into a field that has been dominated by too generalizing, static models. The advantage of the ethnographic approach is

that it has provided the researchers with a deep understanding of the group dynamics of the local setting. This approach is particularly valuable in the study of implicit or sensitive issues such as informal interaction patterns and power relations. This has resulted in an outline of an interrelation between culture and communication that somewhat differs from much of the extant literature on intercultural communication.

As a suggestion for further research, more studies are needed to place intercultural communication clearly in an organizational context, including variables such as informal interaction practices and power relations. As the empirical material of this article has demonstrated, the local organizational context shapes the perception and use of cultural differences in communicative actions. Future endeavors could relate to questions concerning the role of the organizational environment in developing effective communication management strategies in international corporations. Finally, rather than focusing only on general differences in national cultures, more intercultural business communication studies should engage in investigating the role of group dynamics in intercultural encounters.

APPENDIX

SIMPLIFIED SEMISTRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

Subject	Time
(a) Work background	
Employed by	
Organizational level	
Tenure with the firm	
Current job profile	
What does your current job entail?	
(b) Personal background	
Prior cross-cultural experience	
Language experience	
(c) Communication	
What expectations did you have before entering the organization?	
In which ways have you adapted to the situation? Examples?	
With whom do you share best practices or innovative ideas within the organization?	
When communicating with other nationalities, have you experienced challenges due to differences in language and culture?	
What is the level of language competence of your colleagues?	

What are the typical ways and situations in which you communicate with your foreign colleagues?
Who do you talk to outside your own team? Examples?
Is it difficult or easy? Examples?
What do you do if it is difficult? Examples?
In terms of communication within the firm, are there any areas of improvement that you would like to suggest?

(d) Groups
What is the relation between the different national groups in the organization? Examples?
What is the character of the Danish group, other groups? Examples?
How is the Danish management style expressed? Examples?
How are the different human resources used in the organization? Examples?
In terms of collaboration with other nationalities, are there any areas of improvement that you would like to suggest?

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