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Flexible identities and cross-border knowledge networking

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to explore and discuss the use of the flexible, discursive nature of ethnic identity as a means of facilitating the construction and use of transnational knowledge networks.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper examines the influence of "intangibles" on international business (IB), using a case study examining how Taiwanese people in London construct and use their professional networks for knowledge management. The methodology is ethnographic, including participant-observation, interviews and archival research.

Findings – Taiwanese businesspeople in London used their ethnic identity for networking, not only within the Taiwanese community, but also combined different identities to network through different groups. The findings suggest that the flexible nature of identity provides a means by which knowledge networks can be constructed across borders, providing insight into the actual processes through which knowledge is transferred in IB.

Research limitations/implications – An identity approach can add a more nuanced analysis of real-life situations to the more traditional culture-focused approach. Greater methodological variety is needed if IB studies are to incorporate more complex perspectives on cross-cultural management, and to develop this study's conclusions.

Practical implications – Managers who are aware of the complexities of ethnic identity can exploit these among themselves and their employees to seek out new sources of knowledge.

Originality/value – This paper provides insight into the means and processes through which transnational networks are constructed and knowledge shared across borders, and the seldom-analysed role of identity, in this case ethnic identity, in these phenomena.

Keywords Multinational companies, Networks, Ethnography, Identity, Cross-cultural, Mergers and acquisitions

Paper type Case study

Introduction

In this paper, I will consider the use of identity as tool for constructing transnational knowledge networks among Taiwanese businesspeople in London. In particular, I will explore the fact that, although "Taiwanese" identity is used for this purpose, it is often used in concert with other identities, and to construct networks not only within the Taiwanese community, but also ones which extend into other communities, to which ethnicity alone does not permit access. I will argue that the flexible, discursive nature of identity, and the way in which one identity blends into others through the use of shared symbols, is crucial to the process of sharing knowledge across borders in expatriate social networks, by allowing access both to the knowledge of coethnics and to that of other groups.

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The objectives of this paper are, first, to briefly outline the concept of "identity" in organisation studies, with a view to considering how multiple identities might be used to facilitate knowledge transfer and network construction, and to consider what international business (IB) might draw from such research. Second, to fill a crucial gap in the IB literature on how identity is actually used in practice to share knowledge across transnational social networks, which, as Wagner and Vormbusch (2010, p. 218) note, is seldom examined in IB studies, with its focus on variables and its reified definition of identity. In particular, I will consider how the flexible properties of identity, as identified in other business-related disciplines, are essential to this process. Finally, I will discuss the implications of the Taiwanese study for IB more generally, and in particular how we can develop more complex perspectives on the actual practice of knowledge sharing and how it relates to the IB theory.

Literature review and background

Flexible discourses: the identity perspective

Recent years have seen much academic interest in the use of identity in business settings, including international or transnational ones (Alvesson *et al.*, 2008). However, the bulk of the literature exploring this activity and how it actually takes place lies outside of IB studies itself, being largely within organisation studies, and related disciplines such as anthropology and human geography. How IB could benefit as a discipline from incorporating the approach to identity reflected in these studies will be considered here, to better understand the uses of identity in networking practice.

In organisation studies, the issue of how identity is used in business is widely explored. Particular attention is usually given to its flexible qualities: identity is usually defined as a shifting, contested discourse of self- or group identification (Brown *et al.*, 2006, pp. 232-233; Beech, 2008). Alvesson *et al.* (2008, p. 19) note that identity takes the form of embodied practices, narratives, discursive formations and material practices; it can be an ongoing process or in response to specific incidents. Dahler-Larsen (1997, p. 368) says: "if identity exists at all, it is definitely not a thing. At best, it emerges only as part of an ongoing, interactive discourse". Identity will thus be here defined as a flexible, shifting, discursive and performative way of defining oneself and others through shared repertoires of symbols (Moore, 2003).

Identity discourses have also been used as a means of negotiating power relations in organisations. Alvesson and Wilmott (2002, p. 623, 628) argue that "identity becomes a *locus* and target of organizational control" by management, but that:

> […] discourses also depend upon the interpretation and inventive powers of employees. Employees are not passive receptacles or carriers of discourses but, instead, more or less actively and critically interpret and enact them.

Identity thus can be a means through which negotiation and change can take place, particularly in situations of cross-cultural contact.

These flexible, discursive and negotiation-friendly qualities make identity a particularly significant vector for the transfer of knowledge across borders. Nag *et al.* (2007, p. 840) consider the relationship between knowledge and identity in business: they conclude that identity is linked to knowledge and knowledge-use processes, and power relations. Cerulo (1997, p. 398), finally, notes the development of cross-border

identity groups through the use of new communication technologies. Identity has thus been established in many earlier studies as a means of international knowledge transfer.

The role of identity in networking and knowledge transfer is becoming, consequently, of interest to IB studies. Chang *et al.* (2009), for instance, note that Taiwanese businesses exercise centralised control of their expatriates through tight-knit personal networks, and Deng *et al.* (2009) note that for Taiwanese firms expanding into China, engagement in *guanxi* networks is an essential component of success. However, IB's historical focus on quantitative measurements and positivist studies leads to a narrow focus on identity as an object, rather than as a process (as outlined in, among others, Buckley *et al.*, 2011). This means that while an effect can frequently be identified (Chang *et al.*, 2009), *how* this effect is achieved, and what the actual role of identity is in the process of networking, becomes less apparent.

Furthermore, IB's often-criticised focus on national identity as opposed to more flexible and multivalent perspectives on identity (McSweeney, 2002, 2013) also means that the complexities of identity go unnoticed. The problems with IB's approach to cultural phenomena is summed up by Leung *et al.* (2005, p. 374):

> Much of previous research on culture and IB has adopted what we view as a simplistic view of culture, which tends to examine the static influence of a few cultural elements in isolation from other cultural elements and contextual variables. For instance, much of the research inspired by the Hofstede dimensions falls into this category, which, in our view, was instrumental in kickstarting the field.

A reified, simple view of culture, and by extension identity, as a static object, limits the researcher's ability to study how identity is used in the development of cross-border social and professional networks.

Studies done using less static perspectives, by contrast, have more success in exploring the complexities of national identity. Ryan and Mulholland (2013), in their study of French expatriates in London, indicate that, while national identity may play a part in the construction of social networks, it is not the only identity-related factor, and the process is complex and multifaceted. As noted earlier, national identity, like other forms of identity, is, as Cerulo (1997, p. 390) puts it, "multivoiced", including ideas of ethnicity, institution and social position; this would indicate that the national identity of the person constructing the network might provide a flexible medium from which to operate, finding a common ground not only on the part of shared nationality but also, more crucially, by using other symbolic discourses connected with national identity to build connections across social boundaries. The flexible, symbolic qualities of identity thus mean that a particular national identity can be used to construct knowledge networks which not only span geographical borders but also extend outside the identity group into other, related areas; however, this effect is little studied in IB.

A few studies in the IB area, however, do give evidence that the flexible, complex approach to identity found in organisation studies can also be applied successfully to IB issues. Vaara *et al.* (2003) look at how the construction of identity through the use of metaphors allows the participants in a merger to define and understand their situation, and to develop a shared organisational culture within the newly merged entity; Moore (2012a), likewise, considers how symbolic expressions of identity become the site of negotiating conflict and consensus during an international acquisition, as does Blazejewski (2012). Holden (2002) argues that cross-cultural management is a form of knowledge transfer, as the managers involved in the process learn and adjust to new

cultures and their associated identities, an argument developed by Moore (2012b), in her research on the way in which German expatriate managers use the flexible qualities of their national identity to transfer knowledge between branch and Head Office. However, none of these studies applies directly to the use of identity for the construction of transnational knowledge networks.

In sum, then, while it is recognised in the organisation studies literature that national identity is used for building networks and transferring knowledge across borders, the connection between the two is little studied in an IB setting, as is the way in which identity actually operates as a means of knowledge transfer in transnational situations through its discursive, flexible qualities. Furthermore, the combination of positivist, outcome-focused studies, reified concepts of identity and the prioritisation of national identities above all others in IB has limited the number of investigations on how identity is used to construct transnational knowledge networks.

Using an ethnographic case study of Taiwanese professionals in London, we shall therefore consider how they use their identity as "Taiwanese" to share knowledge across borders through transnational social networks, not only with their coethnics but also with people outside of their ethnic group. This will indicate how the flexible qualities of identity make it a vector for the international transfer of knowledge, not only by creating shared connections between individuals but also by allowing bridge-building into other, unrelated groups.

Methodology

This case study (funded by the Nuffield Foundation) focuses on the ways in which Taiwanese professionals in London use their ethnic identities in their networking activities. The data were gathered using surveys, in-depth and unstructured interviews and participant-observation over a two-year period from 2009 to 2011. Because of the networking focus of the study, informants were contacted through Taiwanese and ethnic Chinese networking associations of various kinds, to be discussed in greater detail below. In-depth, formal interviews were conducted with 25 informants: eighteen self-identified as Taiwanese and the others with the mainland Chinese, Hong Kong or global Chinese diaspora. About half of the participants were current or former expatriate managers, and three others were Taiwanese government employees whose job involved facilitating the setting up and support of Taiwanese businesses in Europe; all participants were involved with at least one international networking association or group. Three informants were formally re-interviewed, and many were also encountered during the participant-observation phases of the project. Participant observation was conducted both during and around the interviews, and at community events such as the Lunar New Year festival, and networking events such as the Taiwanese European Chamber of Commerce annual conference. While the project initially focused on Chinese people in London more generally, the focus narrowed later to the Taiwanese community, for reasons to be discussed below.

The practice of conducting the study also became complicated in that the methodology replicated the construction of a network itself. While the quantitative side of the study yielded little useful data about the networking process (though the responses to unstructured survey questions were more informative), the process of making contact with interviewees involved the same sort of activities which the Taiwanese people used to build their own networks: attending events, asking

interviewees to recommend further people to talk to (in what is known in academic circles as the "snowball" method for obtaining contacts), joining online social networking groups and so forth, which allowed me to gain a sense of the connections between different people in the community and how social networks were constructed, developed and elaborated. Ethnographic methods, especially participant-observation, are particularly well suited to studying complex situations involving the acquisition of emic perspectives (Morris *et al.*, 1999, pp. 781-782), which provide insight into cultural and other difficult-to-define phenomena (Zhu and Bargiela-Chiappini, 2013) and thus are useful in terms of studying identity in business (Alvesson *et al.*, 2008, p. 20) as well as phenomena related to the transfer of tacit knowledge (Zhu and Bargiela-Chiappini, 2013). This paper is consequently not intended to be a generalisation about all Taiwanese expatriates, or even all Taiwanese expatriates in London, but to provide data on the ways in which identity is formed and used in the knowledge networking process.

The interviews were transcribed by a professional transcriber and analysed by the researcher using a coding system based on identifying broad topic categories, which were further divided down into subcategories. Where necessary, Mandarin-speaking assistants were consulted. The resulting documents were then subject to close reading to identify responses which provided particular insight into the process of knowledge networking. Excerpts from interviews have been chosen to illustrate particular key points and concepts referred to within the paper.

The study focused on the Taiwanese community in London, though, as it involved investigating the construction of social networks, informants and activities extended elsewhere in the UK (for instance to Telford and Edinburgh) and outside the Taiwanese community itself (mainly to the Chinese diaspora). Taiwanese people have been present in London since the founding of the state; most are students who usually return to Taiwan afterwards (although their time in the UK does appear to affect their networking activities), though some do remain longer for a variety of reasons, such as being offered employment or forming a relationship with a British person, and, with the international expansion of Taiwanese businesses such as Acer and HTC, the UK houses an increasing number of Taiwanese international managers and their families. Most of the diplomats and community leaders I spoke with estimated the total number of Taiwanese in the UK to be around 3,000.

Case study: Taiwanese identity and networks in London

The case of Taiwanese identity in the UK context supports the proposition that national identity is complex and flexible. The general British public, while they are aware that Taiwan exists and is politically differentiated from the mainland (Sui, 2011), generally tend to subsume them into the general social category of "Chinese people", affecting my interviewees' ability to be perceived as a distinct group to mainlanders. My interviewees' attitude to their relationship to the mainland was complex: on the one hand, they often differentiated themselves from the mainland Chinese quite strongly, making a claim to being the "real Chinese" (one consular employee half-jokingly said that Taiwan had not split off from China, but China had split off from Taiwan). During my fieldwork in 2011, the Taiwanese community were actively celebrating the "centenary of Taiwan", which was in fact the centenary of the founding of the Republic of China in 1911 (Taiwan itself had actually been a Japanese colony at that time). Chiefly, they would emphasise their democratic, republican political system as a point of

distinction, as in the case of one informant who, despite his mainland origins, identified as Taiwanese:

> I left China in 1949 when the Communists came over to China and I went to Singapore. And when I was in Singapore I was given a Singaporean passport. But I never regarded myself as Singaporean but I regard myself as Chinese. But I cannot […] You know, I cannot accept the Communist Chinese is a free Chinese, you know. So, I joined the Kuomintang in London. (Taiwanese retired accountant, male; founder/active member of Taiwanese-focused international networking association).

Taiwanese identity in London thus shows the complex, flexible properties that Alvesson *et al.* (2008), Moore (2012a) and others describe, being a discursive process of forming and expressing an individual and group identification in the context of others' expressions of their own identities. We shall now consider how this complexity is used in knowledge management.

Not surprisingly, common symbols of national identity were used to share identity within the community of Taiwanese people in London. Informants used membership of Taiwanese associations to build connections and would share knowledge during the social portions of community events. It could also be used for transnational knowledge sharing within the national group: many interviewees described their family connections in North America, particularly the "global cities" such as New York, Toronto, Vancouver and Los Angeles, as forming part of their social networks, and as allowing them to keep informed about the business environments in these cities. As predicted in the literature, then, shared identity facilitated knowledge transfer within the group, and by describing themselves as "Taiwanese" and joining "Taiwanese" associations, my interviewees were able to share knowledge.

At the same time, Taiwanese identity was used for networking with businesspeople from the Chinese mainland. Most informants also acknowledged having family ties or social ties to the mainland (or complex geographical origins as with the informant quoted above), and some businesspeople referred to exploiting such ties to gain information about, and entry into, the lucrative Chinese manufacturing sector – with some also mentioning that association with a Taiwanese company was desirable for mainland businesses due to the greater respectability of the Taiwanese in the eyes of European customers. The Taiwanese thus used the flexible nature of their national identity to build connections with the mainland Chinese by emphasising the "Chinese" aspects of Taiwaneseness, which they would then use to acquire knowledge about business opportunities on the mainland.

Furthermore, the same process of identification as "free Chinese" which was used to build connections within the Taiwanese community, and with mainland Chinese, was used simultaneously on other levels to build connections with the British. Many informants emphasised the similarity of British and Taiwanese political institutions, the ease with which Taiwanese people could get permission to work or study in the UK (often contrasting this with the mainland Chinese) and the cosmopolitanism of the Taiwanese, referring to the large Taiwanese communities in the USA and to their historic ties to Japan, as being a natural fit with cosmopolitan London, using the "transnational" and "democratic" aspects of Taiwanese identity to build connections. This, again, resulted in the development of networks which were used for knowledge transfer. For example, one former expatriate I interviewed set up his own business in the UK through using his connections in both the UK and Taiwan to identify emerging

European market trends in computer hardware, and source suppliers in Taiwan. The Taiwanese thus were able to use an identification as Taiwanese to network with mainland Chinese and with British businesses simultaneously, by expressing their identity in ways which allowed these shared connections, and thereby to acquire and transfer knowledge about different markets, business opportunities, emerging trends and products.

This process could also be seen at the annual Taiwanese Food Festival, a one-day event where community organisations and small businesses would set up stalls and sell Taiwanese food to attendees. This was a crucial event within the London community as a focus for identity definition, as all Taiwanese in my study (and some non-Taiwanese) identified Taiwanese food as a key symbol of Taiwanese identity. The event was visibly a site for in-group networking, as Taiwanese community members made a point of attending the event. However, it was also a means to build connections with other groups: members of the wider Chinese diaspora also attended, either out of interest or as members of Buddhist or other social and business organisations, again using shared symbols of identity to form connections with the Taiwanese attendees. These groups would use the event to spread awareness of their activities, thus disseminating knowledge; less formally, conversations at these events were used to share and compare knowledge about new businesses and organisations. The flexible nature of identity here allowed networking, and knowledge transfer, inside and outside the group, through such shared symbols of identity as a love of Taiwanese food.

Language was also crucial as a form of identity and of building connections with others, and thereby sharing knowledge (Holden, 2002). One informant, for instance, talked about how her parents' generation had been educated in Japanese, highlighting the country's previous history as a Japanese colony, to both express her distinct identity as Taiwanese, and also to emphasise her transnational credentials and form links with non-Taiwanese Londoners, forming in-group and out-group knowledge networks at the same time. Others emphasised the use of Mandarin with traditional (rather than simplified) characters as a means of distinguishing Taiwanese from other ethnic Chinese groups. As a professional language teacher noted:

> I believe that full-form [traditional] Chinese characters will contain all the Chinese culture, history, background, so [at] my school I teach the full-form […]. Because I studied Chinese literature, and we learned the Chinese characters because each character they contain Chinese history, background or the people's living, all in a square picture of that character. (Taiwanese, Mandarin teacher, female; founder/member of transnational diaspora Chinese networking association).

However, again this form of identity allowed for networking outside the Taiwanese community, rather than just building solidarity within it. Other groups within the wider Chinese diaspora, such as the Malay Chinese and diaspora groups in North America and Hong Kong, also favour traditional characters. Such groups were also described by my informants as having similarities to the Taiwanese, and these similarities were actively used to build social networks between communities. The Taiwanese social events frequently included attendees from the Malay Chinese or Hong Kong Chinese communities, who would thereby gain access to Taiwanese knowledge, and vice versa. Although religion did not seem to form a major point of identity or network-building, the community both held its own celebrations for the Lunar New Year and Mid-Autumn Festival and joined in with shared events with the mainland Chinese and other Chinese

groups, making religious festivals occasions for networking and knowledge sharing within and outside the national group. Taiwanese events thus provided points of contact not only with other transnational Taiwanese professionals but also with groups from all around the world, and for sharing knowledge.

The use of language as a symbol of identity also led to the development of another source of knowledge networking: "language groups" and informal social clubs where people would meet to speak or practice Mandarin and their local dialects, which, again, provided means for knowledge transfer within and outside the group. Knowledge sharing inevitably took place during the conversations, as with Holden's (2002, pp. 225-236) consideration of language learning as a vector for knowledge transfer; as the meetings were attended not only by Taiwanese people but also other Mandarin-speaking Chinese groups, and by British and other Mandarin-learners, connections were built, and knowledge shared, with other groups, through the complexity of Mandarin as being at once a distinct symbol of Taiwanese identity, and a shared language with members of other groups. At language events, I encountered several non-Taiwanese, particularly North Americans, who built up connections with Taiwan through, for instance, having spent time teaching English in Taiwan prior to, or subsequent to, university and were now trying to maintain those connections for the purpose of "keeping informed" about job or travel opportunities.

Social networking websites, particularly Facebook, were also popular with younger Taiwanese and allowed the means for groups to organise events and disseminate information. Identity and self-presentation are crucial to the operation of such sites, and knowledge is shared and gained through their use; small business owners in particular used such networks to inform their customer base of their activities and to identify and contact potential clients. Again, however, these were not limited solely to people who identified as "Taiwanese"; I was encouraged to join such networks by interviewees as a means of learning about the Taiwanese community and its activities.

Finally, the flexible properties of national identity were used to combine it with other identities for the purpose of knowledge sharing and acquisition. Professional identities were combined with Taiwanese identity through, for instance, the Chambers of Commerce, and through various professional associations for lawyers, accountants and so forth. The main purpose of such organisations was to allow network construction and knowledge dissemination and acquisition: business owners and representatives at the European Taiwanese Chamber of Commerce meeting, for instance, used the event to socialise with potential collaborators and clients, and to provide information about, and samples of, their products and services. Alumni status at various institutions could also be used for such purposes.

However, these organisations combined identities in complex ways. Central St Martin's College of Art and Design, for instance, was an institution whose alumni shared a professional as well as educational identity, and the Young Chinese Professionals in Scotland online networking group included many people who were not Chinese, or not currently residing in Scotland. Online social networking through Facebook, LinkedIn and so forth also provided the opportunity to combine social identities and to build up a public profile with connections to a number of different groups. Such expressions of identity not only were neutral but also included elements of power and dominance

within the discourse (Dörrenbächer and Geppert, 2006; Ybema and Byun, 2011). Connections such as professional status, having attended an elite school such as Oxford or LSE or working for well-known companies were visibly exploited as part of networking activities: one informant, a successful entrepreneur, described how he had set up his own business using contacts he had made while working, as a Taiwanese manager, for a British multinational corporation. The more connections one could deploy, the greater the access to formal and informal knowledge bases, and thus the greater one's ability to acquire and exploit knowledge. Expressions of high status through membership of professional or alumni associations also enhance the prestige of one's activities. The flexible nature of identity thus allowed the combination of national and other identities for the purpose of knowledge management.

The Taiwanese in London thus, as argued in earlier studies, used the flexible properties of identity to widen their networking and knowledge-transfer opportunities and to build common ground not only with each other but also with outside groups which were seen as having possible shared interests. Identity was presented in strategic ways to build connections and to share and gain knowledge. Identity is thus not only crucial to knowledge management within a particular national group but, through its flexible properties, also allows sharing and acquisition of knowledge with other groups, with whom common aspects of identity provide networking connections. We shall now consider the implications of this for IB studies more generally.

Discussion and conclusions

Theoretical implications

The case of the Taiwanese in London thus demonstrates how identity, viewed as a complex and flexible property defined through ongoing discursive processes by insiders and outsiders of the group in question, facilitates knowledge sharing through the construction of not only in-group networks but also networks with outsiders as well – an insight that a more reified, outcome-focused view of identity does not permit. Taiwanese identity could be defined in negative terms (as "not-mainland") or in positive ones (emphasising the social and cultural ties Taiwanese people possess to Japan, the USA and Europe), but, more often, it was expressed in complicated ways. For instance, Taiwanese identity as "not-mainland" could be exploited as a means of building connections with other "not-mainland" groups, while Taiwanese identity as "Chinese" could be exploited to develop ties to the mainland for the purposes of benefiting from the mainland's ongoing manufacturing successes. Furthermore, Taiwanese identity could be combined with other identities to build connections, a possibility which has never, to my knowledge, been extensively studied in the IB literature. The flexible, discursive nature of identity thus provides the necessary complex, transnational and cross-group connections to enable the construction of transnational knowledge networks, not only within an ethnic community but also outside it as well, and to facilitate the sharing of knowledge across borders; as such, it illuminates what is, in IB studies, largely a hidden process.

Cases like the Taiwanese knowledge networks discussed here, therefore, provide a useful addition to the more traditional national-culture or institution-focused perspectives on knowledge management which are currently the dominant paradigm in IB (Chang *et al.*, 2009). Taken together, and in combination with other studies such as Blazejewski (2012) or Vaara *et al.* (2003), which take a more complex approach to identity

and its use, these studies also show how an identity-focused perspective can contribute in more and less traditional areas of IB studies by allowing for a nuanced, complex view of social interaction and its impact on business activities, and can thus serve as a complement to research from a micropolitical or narrative-studies perspective (Ryan and Mulholland, 2013). The project thus contributes to IB studies by fleshing out earlier positivist studies of knowledge and transnational networking (Chang *et al.*, 2009; Deng *et al.*, 2009), through showing the process of transnational knowledge network construction and use which underlies their results and counteracting the reified perspective on cultural phenomena critiqued by Leung *et al.* (2005). In doing so, furthermore, this case has demonstrated how identity can be used as a flexible tool, not only to create ethnic networks along lines of shared origins but also to use symbols of identity which are shared with other groups, and the combination of national identity with other identities, to expand networks out to pursue knowledge and business opportunities.

Methodological implications

From a methodological point of view, this paper adds to the growing literature encouraging more research developed from thick description and intensive, experiential data from a small sample of respondents rather than the more wide-ranging approach more traditional in IB studies. It has been argued by many that IB studies could benefit from a greater focus on such methods, to balance out the more broad-based methods (among others, Hodson, 1998; Hanson, 2008; Buckley *et al.*, 2011), and indeed there has been a movement in recent years towards including such perspectives (Westney and van Maanen, 2011; Buckley *et al.*, 2011). It is worth noting that in the Taiwanese study, although a survey was included, it was the more qualitative, intensive, small-group-focused research activities which generated the actual data on how networking was done, and what use it was to my informants' cross-border business activities. Furthermore, the complexity of expressions of identity, and informants' ability to use identity to transcend group boundaries, would have been difficult, if not impossible, to identify without intensive qualitative research. In cases where larger samples or wider perspectives are also needed, these might be obtained through multi-group or team studies, or through holistic ethnography (Moore, 2011); however, the point remains that tacit processes such as the expression of identity and the management of knowledge are difficult to rigorously study through quantitative means or through structured short interviews. This paper thus further argues for an increased use of more qualitative, long-term, intensive and participative research methods in IB, not only as a complement to more traditional methods but also for the benefits which they can bring in an identity-focused perspective.

Furthermore, however, this project indicates how the process of networking can be actually studied in IB settings: through the ethnographic activity of constructing, and tracing, a social network for research purposes. This is significant in the context of IB studies, first, because it shows how a casual, *ad hoc*, almost unconscious process, such as networking at social events for people of shared ethnic identity, can affect the practices of IB, and that this is clearly able to be exposed for the study through taking an identity-focused approach to method and analysis. There are thus clear implications for methodology in terms of studying the impact of networking on IB, suggesting that

researchers wishing to study such phenomena are advised to consider replicating the networking process themselves to obtain accurate data.

Areas for further research. This study suggests that identity and its expression may be a much more important vector for knowledge management than is generally reflected in IB studies. For instance, there is little research tracing the actual process by which knowledge is transferred throughout a business group (Hurt and Hurt, 2005; Wagner and Vormbusch, 2010, p. 221), which might become visible through a similar study to the Taiwanese networking project. Moore's BMW case study, discussed above, also indicates that there are a number of issues in mergers, acquisitions and joint ventures, in which national culture is likely to become complicated by identity-related issues (Moore, 2012b). Other areas could also benefit from an identity-focused investigation. Expatriate adjustment could also benefit from a more complex perspective which takes identity and its flexible nature into account, as indicated in Selmer's (2002) study of the adjustment of diaspora Chinese expatriates to a mainland Chinese environment. The subject, and methodological approach, of this study could thus be used to good effect to develop more critical perspectives in IB. The study of "identity" thus may be more relevant to studying actual processes of cross-cultural management than the current focus on "culture", overcoming the limitations of focusing on a single variable by considering a flexible, discursive and multivalent process instead.

Conclusions

The Taiwanese networks case study thus, first, shows how the flexible nature of identity makes it a crucial tool for constructing knowledge networks which extend not only across national borders along ethnic lines but also into other social and ethnic groups, fleshing out a process which IB studies have generally only been able to identify by their outcome. This study therefore overcomes the limitations of earlier ones in IB, which have either been unable to assess the role of identity in this process or have been limited to examining knowledge transfer within a single group or organisation. Furthermore, this perspective allows consideration of power relations and individual histories within the research process and reveals something of the extent to which discursive processes of identity can facilitate, or hinder, access to and sharing of knowledge. Finally, conducting the study using ethnographic methods allows researchers to understand the processes whereby knowledge is transferred, rather than simply examining the result as with more traditional methods. There are thus clear theoretical and epistemological advantages for IB studies in using an identity-focused approach to examine cross-border business-related activities.

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Further reading

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