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Desilencing Complexities: Addressing Categorization in Cross-Cultural Management with Intersectionality and Relationality

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Abstract: A central focus of cross-cultural management research is how individuals and organizations differ across national cultures and how that fundamentally shapes their thoughts and actions and serves as a unit of identification. In this article, we critically reconsider the essential categorical nature of culture, problematizing categorization and questioning national culture as the primary basis of differentiation. We draw on intersectionality, an approach that helps understand how multiple categories are experienced by the individual, and on relationality, an approach that conceptualizes people, organizations, and their actions within dynamic patterns of relations and cultural meanings. Both approaches challenge the primacy, unity, and separateness of any given category, the a priori determination of categories (and associated boundaries) in research, and the nature and stability of boundaries. Based on this we advance notions of boundary work and boundary shifting that help explore how today's sociocultural groups and categories, and the boundaries that separate them, emerge and change. We conclude that, while the extant cross-cultural literature has come far in identifying differences, relationality and intersectionality can enable cross-cultural scholars to engage in research practice that better reflects the complexities of sociocultural life. We contribute to theory by suggesting why and how these two approaches can be used to explore complex cross-cultural management phenomena.

Keywords: boundary work; boundary shifting, cross-cultural management research; categorization; relationality; intersectionality

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INTRODUCTION

Scholars in international business have over the years seen cross-cultural management develop into an independent field of academic study, separate from what was initially comparative management, where comparing and contrasting management, leadership, and organizations across countries was the main objective (Holden 2014). As the field of cross-cultural management emerged and developed in the surrounding geopolitical context, knowledge accumulation has been supported by methodological approaches and contemporary theories from nearby disciplines (Boyacigiller et al. 2004). With Hofstede's (1984) seminal work of quantitative measures cultural analysis secured a foothold in the earlier culture-free domains of international business. Researchers could measure how and when culture had an impact on a broad range of topics related to multinational firm activity, for example, choices of entry modes on foreign markets, inter-firm partnerships, and international human resource management (see reviews by Kirkman, Lowe, and Gibson 2006; Taras, Kirkman, and Steel 2010). Quantitative research methods became (almost) taken-for-granted for cultural investigations (see reviews by Taras, Rowney, and Steel 2009; Caprar et al. 2015) as scholars viewed this work as an opportunity to incorporate culture into their research, specifically to examine in what way, where, and when culture mattered.

In Hofstede's (1993, 89) well-cited definition of culture, "the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes one group or category of people from another", nation was not specified as the category to study. Despite this, and that intra-national variation, e.g., ethnic minorities (or gender), were entered early on into the discussion (Tung 1993), the practice of equating culture with country (or nation) became widespread. To address this concern, national level explanations such as the historical emergence of institutions and education were sought to substantiate, instead of assume, the relevance of national culture (Peterson and Smith 1997; Zander 1997). In an empirical justification, nationality was demonstrated to be a stronger predictor of employee leadership preferences across nations than employee groupings based on gender, age, departments, and occupations (Zander and Romani 2004). While cross-cultural management scholars, in contrast to international business scholars, tend to tread more carefully when using nation as the dominant category for examining culture, voices started to argue that the use of a priori defined culture measures as such is incompatible with a notion of culture as fluid, dynamic, and evolving and defined as socially constructed meanings (Boyacigiller et al. 2004). Other dynamic views of culture have been put forward, for example, the Yin Yang perspective in which contradictory yet interrelated elements are inherent in any culture, hence categorizing cultures, or nations, as a static a priori category becomes problematic (Fang 2012). As shown in an empirical analysis of Hofstede-based studies, a larger part of the cultural variance was found within-nations where categorizations such as socio-economic class and professions provided better cultural boundaries than the political borders of a country (Taras, Steel, and Kirkman 2016).

In parallel with the ongoing debate within the cross-cultural management field, critical management scholars would critically assess Hofstede's work, with its categorical approach and the use of nations as proxies for culture at the nexus of their criticism (e.g., McSweeney 2002, 2013; Fang 2003; Tung 2008). Yet, veering from the assumption of culture as a shared

property of a country while retaining it as a construct that demarcates one group from another (Tsui, Nifadkar, and Ou 2007) means that culture is and continues to be associated with categorization in cross-cultural research. Moreover, voices have long been heard that to understand intercultural interaction we need theories and methods that move away from the notion of nation as having an all-encompassing influence on human behavior (e.g., Brannen 2015; Guttormsen 2015; Klitmøller, Lauring, and Bjerregaard 2015).

Our objective in this paper is to advance the field of cross-cultural management by suggesting different ways of theorizing and empirically addressing categories and boundaries. We do so by focusing on the co-existence of multiple social categories in everyday life, their socially constructed nature, and on relational embeddedness rather than categorical memberships. We do not suggest that categories do not matter, but instead put forth that adopting categories a priori and in isolation could be misleading and inadequately silencing complexities of organizations and individuals. Rather, we need to study dynamic relations and with it the often fuzzy and shifting nature of boundaries. Furthermore, we suggest ways to appreciate newly emerging phenomena, groupings—and boundaries—that significantly differ from traditional cultural categories such as nation. We encourage cross-cultural researchers to move from relying on a rigid category-based theoretical view and empirical tools that emphasize cultural contrasts to reimagining cultural differences and diversity.

After discussing problems with categorization and the study of culture, we introduce the perspectives of *intersectionality* and *relationality*. In doing so, we adhere to the frequent calls for incorporating research from other disciplines into cross-cultural management theory (e.g., Leung et al. 2011; Mayrhofer and Pernkopf 2015). Intersectionality and relationality are both paradigmatic in sociological research areas, but have hitherto only had limited influence on international business research. This led some researchers to propose a research agenda based on intersectionality (Zander et al. 2010) and others to draw on relational approaches to conceptualize culture, multiculturalism, and social embeddedness within cross-cultural management (e.g., Lücke, Kostova, and Roth 2014; Bozkurt 2015; Lücke forthcoming).

Intersectionality and relationality share a skeptical view of how categories are used in research and are complementary in overcoming some of the limitations of categorical perspectives. Both perspectives build on an interpretive and social view of culture (see e.g., Boyacigiller et al. 2004), preventing to equate culture with social grouping. Specifically, we problematize the use of categories and boundaries in cross-cultural management, reconceiving boundaries in fluid, relational terms rather than as stable divisions and elaborating theoretical and practical implications. We suggest for cross-cultural management scholars theoretical and methodological ways to address cultural phenomena by introducing intersectionality of multiple categories as well as the criticality of exploring relational conceptions and dynamics. We conclude the article with some final reflections.

PITFALLS OF CATEGORIZATION AND CULTURE

Categories partition people, objects, or subjects into different groupings and as such play a key role in impressing coherence on the social world and theoretical explanations (Vergne and Wry 2014). With the help of categorization, researchers can, for example, compare different

groups (e.g., nations and societies), which has been subject of much research in cross-cultural management. This has built concise and coherent pictures of reality and parsimonious explanations. And yet theories by their nature of providing such coherent picture also constrain the field of vision and limit pictures of reality (Poole and Van de Ven 1989). Nonetheless, the highly categorical way of thinking about culture became one of the most influential assumptions in cross-cultural management. This is not surprising, given that to classify and categorize is an inherent part of academic research (McKelvey 1982). However, cultures are not as clearly bounded in everyday life, which implies that broad categorizations do not adequately depict cultural complexity and are too simplifying and static (e.g., Söderberg and Holden 2002; Fang 2005; Gould and Grein 2009; McSweeney 2009; Witte 2012).

Individuals can be embedded in multiple social groups and as such may be shaped by more than one cultural influence, so that drawing conclusions based on nation alone (or another category) becomes conjecture. In a modern work setting, for example, two employees may be from the same country, yet differ in their experiences based on their socio-economic class and profession (Taras, Steel, and Kirkman 2016). Do we presume that it is their common national background that explains much of their thoughts and actions and that other aspects of their lives matter less? This does not mean that nation may not be relevant or even salient in a specific setting, yet researchers and practitioners may not know this a priori. While a category such as nationality may seem easily bound, its meanings and importance are socially constructed and situational. For example, although expatriates typically identify more with their nationality when living overseas than when living at home, such identification can be revoked if they feel compromised by other fellow countrymen/women. Instead they may construct identities quite unlike the national identity; in fact national identity itself may take on an altogether new meaning. Hence, rather than focusing on categorical differences, managers and researchers are in need of tools to understand employees and cultural dynamics. This goes beyond defining or understanding categories to questioning how we view cultural boundaries and interactions. Questions include, for instance, how employees relate to themselves and others in the workplace and how we can understand the social processes that shape traditional as well as new boundaries.

Fundamentally, categorization implies drawing boundaries around a group of people, which emphasizes the demarcation of something, an entity or group. The assumption is that there are differences between groups and a relative homogeneity within. A troubling aspect is that this creates a simplified picture of unified categories, manifesting in the frequent use of one singular category—such as nation and country—over the use of multiple categories. Why should “Dutch, Brazilian, or Filipino people” act similarly under all conditions? Other categorical bases may matter at different times and in different settings, for example age, gender, or other social groupings such as teams. Moreover, these different categories may not be lived and understood in isolation of each other. In fact, it often remains unclear just how individuals experience different categorical influences, making these questions complex and a priori selection of categories difficult. We pose hence that classifications of people are more meaningful and intelligible if they are not dissociated from the relational embedding of a person and the discovery of other relevant categories.

A recurring problem of concepts such as culture has been that it conflates the concept (of culture) with social categories to the extent that culture has been equated to these categories, as for example in national culture or gender (Somers 1994). Views of culture are often tightly tied to categories such as an individual's identification with a nation (e.g., Hong et al. 2000). Using categorization and indicating seemingly clear cut social demarcations (e.g., nation/national identity) have the effect that social and cultural dynamics are easily underestimated. It implies a view of the world as consisting foremost of entities and static groups, naturally placing secondary emphasis on the dynamic, continuous aspects (Emirbayer 1997). This makes it difficult to discern the conceptual distinctions between group and culture and to examine cultural dynamics other than group mechanisms.

A related question is how one can truly argue for social and dynamic processes and change given theorizing from rather fixed, presupposed categories with given characteristics. The argument we are making is not that categories—both social (e.g., people, nations, organizations) and symbolic (e.g., meanings)—do not exist, but that the adoption of categories leads research into certain commonly criticized directions, such as taking the entitativity, stability, and even deterministic nature of categories for granted and overly emphasizing differences. Our view has epistemological implications in that the meaning of categories emerges from contextual and relational embeddedness and as such should be explored with this in mind.

Finally, new communities and groups (e.g., through social media) may also emerge. This does not necessarily lead to a more globalized culture, but may in fact establish new and yet poorly understood boundaries and categories (Donati 2013). For example, professional associations often rely on their facebook pages, which implicitly draws a boundary between facebook and non-facebook users. Shifts have taken place including trends to move across national boundaries (labor mobility or through migration), an associated changing nature of national boundaries, and the creation of new virtual configurations such as, for example, communities, networks, or institutions (Hearn and Blagojevic 2013). Such new communities may emerge from virtual forms of communication, for example, when working in a global team together. Yet, a woman may become part of a gaming community that is largely devoid of traditional boundaries of nation or ethnicity—only to discover a large rift between male and female gamers. Others may become actively involved and feel emotionally supported through their participation in health discussion groups or travel blogs.

This leads us to fundamental challenges that cross-cultural management scholars must face. First, nationality and country as categories are prioritized over others that may possibly be more important to the people being studied. Second, it can easily be overlooked that social constructions, such as culture, which are not bounded per se but lived, can “spread” over any categorical boundaries. Third, known geographic or ethnic distinctions (which are more or less clearly defined) may distract from theorizing origins, spread, and integration of cultures—the dynamic, interactional, and lived aspects. Cultural differences and organizational and individual realities are less straightforward than is often recognized within management studies (Witte 2012).

We suggest that one possible remedy for these issues can be found in the categorically destabilizing and dynamically enriching notions of relationality and intersectionality. This is

supported by conceptualizations of culture as socially intertwined and constructed and of culture as shared meanings and cultural cognitions. Intersectionality and relationality critically question categorical thinking in research and focus on the social and cultural experiences of individuals and groups. As such they can contribute to more complex explorations in cross-cultural management. In the next sections, we will briefly review intersectionality and relationality followed by a discussion of how these concepts can contribute to advancing the cross-cultural management field.

INTERSECTIONALITY

Intersectionality considers that a wide range of experiences and identities and social encounters do not fit neatly within a master category and that therefore a single category, for example nation, limits our understanding of a complex and dynamic reality. Crenshaw (2003) illustrated this with a crossroad metaphor: we find ourselves in the middle of multiple intersections that often cross each other, creating complex crossroads where two, three, or more roads of gender, ethnicity, or sexuality may meet in overlapping dimensions. For example, Li is newly employed in a Swedish multinational technological firm, and although the official language is English she finds that Swedish is often used in everyday work situations. She does not generally initiate ideas, demonstrate her knowledge or argue for her suggestions without being asked to do so. Other employees, not necessarily the ones with something relevant to share, tend to dominate. How could managers understand and approach this problem? Some scholars would say: This behavior is typical of someone from the Chinese culture. Others would say: No, it is because of her gender! Yet others would realize the difficulties of working in an English-Swedish mixed environment for a non-Swedish speaker. With the help of intersectionality, we can understand the behavior in the intersection of nationality, gender, and linguistic ability. And this analysis will bring more insightful understandings than considering only Chinese (the situation may be different for a Chinese man), only gender (Swedish women and Chinese women may not be the same), or linguistic skills in general (a Swedish speaking foreign employee may be different from a non-Swedish speaking foreign employee).

Intersectional theorizing can be traced back to the 1970s and early 1980s, when feminists of color in the United States criticized white feminists for their white middle-class bias. Within research on inequality and difference, the triad race-class-gender became a “fast and flexible traveller” (Knapp 2005, 254) to other countries. Toward the end of the 1980s, the explicit use of intersectionality as a theoretical perspective and analytical tool developed out of legal and sociological studies of discrimination (Crenshaw 1989) and Black Feminist Theory (Collins 2000). Intersectionality also provided an alternative to traditional identity politics of movements, by questioning the identity formation based on one category alone—such as being a woman or black or gay—and pointed to differences *within* groups in that, for example, black women (multiple categories ethnicity and gender as an intersection) had different experiences than white women or black men (Crenshaw 1991).

Intersectionality View on Categories

The assumption that a category takes its meaning as a category relative to another category (Shields 2008) has opened up for a more complex view of notions such as identities (Sanchez-Hucles and Davis 2010) and helps explore the intricacies of the experiences within groups (McCall 2005). This builds implicitly on constructivist and interpretive approaches to culture that emphasize that reality is socially constructed and people share how they make sense of their world (Boyacigiller et al. 2004; Gould and Grein 2009; Primecz, Romani, and Sackmann 2009).

This intra-categorical complexity is explored, for example, through narrative research of individual's experiences (McCall 2005), capturing the subtleties of the processes by which subjects and social groups are constructed. Intersectionality researchers focus on a particular intersection of multiple categories capturing "people whose identity crosses the boundaries of traditionally constructed groups" (Dill 2002, 5). How these processes will play out cannot be determined beforehand and hence they should be studied in the context in which they are created. The point is not to deny the existence of categories but to explore the ways in which these unfold everyday life.

From Category to Intersections

Nationality is not viewed as an independent aspect of people's lives. Instead, other categories such as gender are intimately connected. Thus, talking about and comparing nationality without considering other categories is problematic. Ethnicity and race (or skin color) are categories often referred to in intersectional analysis. They are seen as significant elements in the constitution of collective as well as individual identities (Ospina and Foldy 2009) as well as the basis for racism or xenophobia. Different intersections of, for example, ethnicity and gender or ethnicity and class appear within what we call nations, leading to increasingly complex intra-national arrangements. A white woman potentially experiences specific advantages compared to a black woman or a black man, but could be disadvantaged compared to a white man; yet all of them are situated within a national context.

Intersectionality scholars have emphasized the benefits of bringing in intersectionality into leadership, organizational and international business research (e.g., Richardson and Loubier 2008; Sanchez-Hucles and Davis 2010; Zander et al. 2010). For example, intersecting experiences of racism, classism, and sexism have been found to shape black women's leadership styles (Jean-Marie, Williams, and Sherman 2009). Another example is how people view female managers based on their age (gender/age). This is illustrated in Jyrkinen's study of Finnish women managers' experiences of gendered ageism in their careers (Jyrkinen 2014), that is, an intersection of the discriminatory processes of sexism and ageism, which cannot be understood as separate processes (i.e., each of the categories cannot be understood in isolation).

Intersectionality is also fundamental to our understanding of managers in top positions in global organizations, including governmental organizations. International shifts and interactions have given rise to transnational business masculinities at the intersections of

gender, class (top management), age (seniority), and sexuality (marriage-arrangements) (Connell and Wood 2005; Hearn and Blagojevic 2013). These intersections are constructed both within and transcend national borders; they are shaped by international processes even when manifesting locally. In the wake of globalization, a traditional form of masculinity characterized by authority, social conservatism, compulsory heterosexuality, strongly marked gender differences, and emotional distance between men and women was challenged by the transnational business masculinity constructed in terms of flexibility, tolerance, and libertarianism (Connell and Wood 2005). Specifically, more junior men (age) distance themselves from old management by showing a “self-conscious modernity” toward nationality, sexuality, and gender.

Attempts at bringing in an intersectionality perspective into international business have focused on gender and diversity, or gender and ethnicity, but there are also studies revealing power and influence aspects of language, nationality, and work position intersections (see Zander et al. 2010). Other examples include a study of employees’ sentiments towards performance appraisals demonstrating an intersection between gender and placement in the global organization (John and Mäkelä 2014).

RELATIONALITY

An employee may not find his national identity relevant in everyday life in a given situation or setting. Being a volunteer or participating in social media could shape his views and actions far more than more traditional categories of nation, ethnicity, or class. Furthermore, he may also have incorporated multiple (national) cultures with little chance or necessity of extricating them from one another. These phenomena are difficult to understand with a focus on specific traditional categories and with beliefs in the separation and distinct characteristics of such categories in research and practice.

Relationality puts a questioning eye to the category as a starting point for theorization and analysis. It has a long history in sociology, although only within the past years has this solidified into a paradigmatic research field that combines interpretive-cultural and social-structural views within relational sociology (e.g., Emirbayer 1997; Mohr 1998; White 2008; Donati 2010; Crossley 2011; DiMaggio 2011; Mische 2011; Fuhse 2013, 2015; Crossley 2015). Relationality constitutes a shift in thinking, away from presuming pre-existing categories towards understanding the relational and mutually constitutive nature of culture and social practice (Somers 1994; Emirbayer 1997; White 2008; Donati 2013). In short, people are shaped by (and shape) the cross-cutting structural and cultural relationships in which they are embedded.

The increasing popularity of relational theorizing is not coincidental but rooted in fundamental changes that signify today’s globalization, specifically (1) an exponential increase in sociocultural variability with increased heterogeneity within and between populations and (2) new mechanisms of formation and stabilization of social relations. That is, new criteria or

cultural codes often validate social relations and these are diffused through new means of communication and connection, such as virtual ones across distances and beyond face-to-face modes. This constitutes a rethinking of the workings of social integration from traditional categories to relations and a shift from exchange relations to culturally and intrinsically meaningful social links (Donati 2013).

Relational View on Categories

At the core, relationality contrasts with categorical thinking in that it embraces the anticategorical imperative of Emirbayer's seminal article on relationality in 1997. This does not mean that categories do not exist, of course, just as in categorical accounts relations are considered. Rather, relationality cautions against explaining "human behavior or social processes solely in terms of categorical attributes of actors, whether individual or collective" (Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994, 1414). It questions the assumption that things are what they are because of their nature or stable characteristics, in that commonly members of a social group will act predictably (Tsekeris 2013). Such assumption governs an approach that starts with groups (e.g., nation, ethnicity), by a priori selection or as a variable, that are theorized as unified and separate from others and the meanings that bring them together (Strathern 1988). Underlying is a strong belief in the explanatory power of categorical commonalities in much of social science, philosophy, and cognitive science (Fuchs 2001).

In contrast, the relational approach "embeds the actor within relationships and stories that shift over time and space and thus preclude categorical stability in action" (Somers and Gibson 1994, 65). Individuals or groups are not seen as separate, but can only be understood in interconnection with others, embedded in dynamic relational contexts (e.g., Simmel 1902; Elias 1978). This moves the reference point of a group away from a category with attributes, characteristics, traits, or values to its dynamic yet temporally stable existence (Somers 1995).

From Categories to Cultural and Social Relations

In the relational approach, culture is interpretive and conceptualized as relational shared meanings and as deeply intertwined with social practice (Somers 1995; Mohr 1998; DiMaggio 2011; Crossley 2015). Relations between actors are imbued with meaning that shape and are shaped by interactions within these (Mische 2011); they have histories and futures that are maintained through interactive and dynamic yet patterned processes. This leads to changes in how to conceive of notions such as national culture and ethnicity as emerging from sociocultural contexts, with at best fuzzy boundaries, rather than being pre-conceived categories. Culture hence cannot be equated with nation. At the same time, cultural meanings provide ordering mechanisms that play out in (affect and are affected by) social relations. The relational approach to culture is most closely related to social constructionist, interpretive, and dynamic-cognitive approaches to culture in cross-cultural management and other disciplines (e.g., Boyacigiller et al. 2004; Gould and Grein 2009; Primecz, Romani, and Sackmann 2009).

A relational approach suggests rethinking (multinational) corporations by building on the interconnectivity of people and groups. An organization, for example, is a diversity of intersecting networks of social interaction and a site of production, maintenance, and change of cultural meanings. Many boundaries may appear clear-cut (teams, nations), yet people and meanings are fundamentally interconnected and relational mechanisms can and do reach across these boundaries. Linking, relating to one another, connecting, and the underlying processes, rather than categories and boundaries per se, are central (Fuhse 2015).

This shift in perspective has research implications. Relationality highlights a vast potential in reconceiving of key concepts, such as culture, identity, power, equality, and organization in relational terms (Emirbayer 1997). An example is Somers and Gibson's relational view of the then categorical concept of identity, avoiding categorical rigidities by embedding identity in overlapping networks of relations that are constructed in cultural stories and narratives (Somers and Gibson 1994; Somers 1994; Fuhse 2013). In other words, people often do not perceive identity categories as separate or even fixed, but identities are emerging out of their relational embeddedness.

In another example, Redshaw (2013) pointed out the need for boundaries to be redrawn in the traditional Western healthcare system, moving away from highly individualized to embracing the relationality of parent and child in childcare. Within cross-cultural management, bi- or multiculturalism has traditionally been conceived of in categorical terms of dual cultural identities, focusing on questions such as how individuals with bicultural identity can manage or switch between their multiple identities. Research has advanced from considering bicultural identity as "either/or" to "both" or "neither" (e.g., Brannen, Garcia, and Thomas 2009), where Hong and colleagues' study (2000) provides support for the "both" identity categorization with individuals switching their cultural frames depending on cues (either/or). A relational and culture-cognitive conceptualization of multiculturalism adds to these insights by explicitly conceptualizing integration, mixing, or linking of multiple cultures (Lücke, Kostova, and Roth 2014). A person may or may not experience national identity as a significant influence, yet the intertwining of cultures is essential to multiculturalism.

RETHINKING CATEGORIES AND BOUNDARIES IN CROSS-CULTURAL MANAGEMENT

Intersectionality and relationality constitute complementary views that overcome some of the limitations of categorical thinking. In order to advance our understanding of categorizations and the boundaries that separate these, we will examine these research approaches within cross-cultural management. Intersectionality examines identities and realities of multiple categorical groupings. Relationality's combination of interpretive-cultural with social-interpersonal aspects promotes a focus on relations in theory and analysis. Both approaches challenge the singularity, unity, and separateness of any given category and even the concept of category itself. They help establish a skeptical view of how categories are used in cross-cultural management research and how real-life complexity can be managed within research. The insistent and troublesome questions of how to define a social group or category, both

theoretically and empirically, has increasingly given rise to questions about whether to categorize, differentiate, and separate at all, and how to recognize multifaceted experiences without negating the order people experience through cultures. Categories are not irrelevant in either approach but are critically examined as easily “misleading constructs that do not readily allow for the diversity and heterogeneity of experience to be represented” (McCall 2005, 1783). As such, intersectionality and relationality constitute categorically destabilizing and dynamically enriching notions that help introduce complexity into cross-cultural research in various ways.

Rethinking Categories with Intersectionality and Relationality

Examining only one dominant category such as nationality may yield, as discussed above, faulty or incomplete results. A concern has hence been how to enrich our understanding of these experiences from relatively static categorical, simplified understandings to more detailed explorations of underlying processes, dynamics, and complexities. What does this suggest to cross-cultural management?

Drawing on intersectionality, which intersections are relevant is largely an empirical matter, with no overall theoretical ordering (e.g., hierarchical or nested) or selection of master categories. This means that we should ask the “other question” to identify blind spots (Matsuda 1991): what other categories than the ones that we are so prone to take for granted could be considered? This further suggests examining how intersections take on, or even impose, meaning from the perspective of the person. Insights emerge from the research, for example, by conducting in-depth studies of the construction of intersections within organizational contexts. Such research answers calls for qualitative research in cross-cultural management to capture how individuals and groups experience and socially construct culture (e.g., Liangputtong 2010; Yagi and Kleinberg 2011).

With relationality, we question the unitary effects of nation and other categories and instead theorize less deterministic influences through webs of social relations and meanings. Relations are the primary theoretical and empirical focus. A manager in an organization, for example, is embedded in multiple groups and settings, including the private realm (e.g., Bozkurt 2015). This reconceptualizes the manager as not simply filling certain functions but within a diverse social-relational context (including work and personal) and the meanings that are (re-)constructed within this context. It takes into account interpretations of roles and concepts that may not be clearly attributed to one group or another but that emerge in interactions with various “categories” more fluidly. The stability and primacy of a category is understood through relational patterns. This suggests examining relational dynamics and the intertwined nature of interactions and cultural meanings. Relational research in cross-cultural management may involve the interconnectedness, for example, of team members within a team and/or with external others to explore the construction or disruption of shared understandings (Lücke forthcoming).

An integration of relationality and intersectionality can also lead to more complex understandings by examining the relational embeddedness and dynamics of a social group or

intersection. For example, the social relational construction of an intersection (Sang, Al-Dajani, and Özbilgin 2013; Johansson and Śliwa 2014) can provide inroads into how various groupings within a global organization construct their selves within a social network of colleagues, friends, and family. Such studies involve, for example, the analysis of managers' and subordinates' narratives (see also Somers 1994).

Rethinking Boundaries with Intersectionality and Relationality

We turn our focus now to the question of exploring complexity by problematizing the boundaries, the demarcations that occur as soon as we partition reality into categories, and how we can reconceive of and manage boundaries. If culture and social groupings—be they geographic, ethnic, or other—are not conceptualized as fully separate and unitary, it becomes particularly interesting to problematize these demarcations more relationally in a fluid, dynamic manner and less like a border or arena of conflict and negotiation.

Increasingly researchers show attention to what happens where communities and cultures meet. Gould and Grein (2009), for example, emphasize that cultural dynamics often happen at the edges, across communities, for example through processes of hybridization. Rosaldo called these social borderlands, shifting the focus on the boundaries where groups interact, yet leaving the focus on the effects on the group and the difficulties of crossing barriers between disparate worlds (1993). Recent work within international business and global leadership has focused on the spanning boundaries such as organizational, geographic, or functional ones (Beechler et al. 2004; Butler et al. 2012; Barner-Rasmussen et al. 2014). This work has been expanded to include national cultural boundaries in which boundary spanners act as conduits (Beechler et al. 2004; Yagi and Kleinberg 2011). Within cross-cultural management the focus is on the individual acting as a cultural bridge-maker, translator, or broker between individuals with different cultural backgrounds, rather than between groups which is more typical for boundary spanning (e.g., Butler et al. 2012).

Relationality and intersectionality in their focus on interconnectivity and multiple embeddedness naturally lend themselves to reexamine boundaries of categories such as nation, “culture”, or even organization or team. Many of these are relatively stable divisions, yet relational microdynamics in overlapping and intersecting networks constitute detectable and analyzable sources of change. As such, topics that rely on boundaries and categorical distinctions are interesting to reconceive in the light of relational theorizing. The focus is on relations rather than differences per se. It helps to “zoom in” on the concrete settings and interconnections, both the concrete social and personal aspects as well as the cultural ones. This can be imagined as zooming in on a map that shows a seemingly clear divide between one neighborhood and another from high above. Once you look at a close-up, the links—from people being friends to overpasses enabling the easy transfer from one side to another—and quite different dynamics and seeds of change become visible (Drogendijk and Zander 2010). These relations are possible traction points for management in order to face challenges or promote connectivity, meaning making, and if necessary change. Beyond the often preconceived and “known” divides (e.g., geography, ethnicity, nation, organization), a

relational focus also directs attention to new bases and meanings of relations enabling connectivity in a digitalized and globalized context as well as previously unnoticed divisions. This does not concern a distinction between local and global but an emphasis on different ways people connect and meanings are constructed.

The problem of boundaries is then less about spanning or crossing something, as a stable “something” is not taken as the starting point, and the “spanning” or “crossing” is consequently not taken as the core critical aspect. A relation is neither a simple border nor a sharp distinction to be overcome and cultural differences are not chasms to bridge. Focus is on relational dynamics, rather than on a role or task to perform, and on the co-existence of various meaningful and overlapping relationships.

As such the issue of boundaries is partly analytic (what are these boundaries? are there others?), partly organizational (what can facilitate or inhibit interconnectivity and resonance?), and partly managerial (what can a manager do?). What is happening at boundaries is hence neither a chain, nor a pipe that directs knowledge and information flows (c.f., Beecher et al. 2004), as boundaries themselves are questioned, added, and shifted in the meanings that they take on. Specifically, one can reconsider the fluidity and clarity of boundaries.

We suggest that essential organizational and managerial aspects of problematizing boundaries are *boundary work*, concerning the dynamics of interconnectivity, and *boundary shifting*, the reconceiving and redrawing of boundaries. In this we build on the concept of boundary work (Yagi and Kleinberg 2011) while incorporating a more critical stance towards categories and boundaries. Boundary work here denotes the active efforts of a manager in making and modifying critical meanings and social dynamics, for example, in order to prevent conflicts and/or facilitate common understandings (see also Butler et al. 2012); yet it is not limited to crossing/spanning, but refers more broadly to relational work with joining as well as separating dynamics. Such boundary work can happen by shaping social patterns and specific interactions to facilitate meaning making (social intervention) or it can involve affecting symbols and meanings to influence relational aspects among employees (cultural intervention). In other words, the social and the symbolic would be different levers a manager could employ to dynamically influence potential cross-cultural changes and opportunities. In virtual teams such boundary work may be particularly challenging as interactions are necessarily less diverse and often do not include chance encounters and group discussion are more difficult to arrange.

Intersectionality can provide additional insights based on individual’s experiences with engaging in complex boundary work processes and withdrawing from their own identity construction “at the cross-roads” of traditional and often imposed categorical divisions. This suggests inquiry into and understanding of individual-level processes. Boundary work also extends to combining relational and intersectional approaches to examine how intersections relate to one another. This can lead cross-cultural management to explicitly focus on the role of relational patterns and cultural dynamics that link one intersection to another.

Boundary shifting concerns the reconceiving of boundaries more dynamically as opposed to taking boundaries as a given. This involves an effort to change and redraw boundaries more explicitly than through boundary work. One example would be to reject supervisor and supervisee as separate and instead recognize their entwined, and even mutually constitutive,

relationship and address them together, rather than as separate individuals with separate evaluation criteria, training, and wellbeing. Another example is to shift boundaries by separating rather than by crossing for example national boundaries. Rather than knitting together or crossing, this involves enhancing other differences. While this initially seems counterintuitive, it is important to remember that joining and separating, sharing and differentiating, are parts of the ongoing relational dynamics. Separating dynamics can ultimately soften and shift strong boundaries by changing social dynamics. Organizational implications also exist where the attention on traditional (e.g., organizational and/or national) boundaries comes at the expense of new channels of communication and interconnection (Klitmøller, Luring, and Bjerregaard 2015). Virtual teams that operate across geographic and organizational distances are an example where such new channels are important and boundary shifting can be critical.

What is really separate and in need to be spanned is also becoming fuzzy when considering multiple boundaries simultaneously: what is distant may not be so distant (or possibly more so). This introduces a shift in definitional views of boundaries. Considering only nationality within a team would draw certain boundaries; yet *also* including gender and ethnicity requires researchers and managers to fundamentally reconsider these boundaries. Going back to the map example, in which a division seems clearly visible from above, an intersectional view promotes a more differentiated picture that not only shifts the boundaries but also prevents from drawing erroneous conclusions about one group (e.g., class) when other boundaries also matter (e.g., gender). This constitutes not only more boundaries, but also changes the nature of the existing ones; that is, a class-gender boundary would be approached quite differently to a simple class boundary. This increases the understanding of possible and actual divisions and what they mean for the people who experience them.

Theoretical Implications

For scientists, categories are paramount. Scientists categorize, create typologies, and form understandings and explanations based on groupings. In the natural sciences this is the bread and butter of exploring nature, plants, and materials, as many of these clearly belong in one and not in another category. In the social sciences, this is more complex when people, despite an initial overall categorization as *homo sapiens*, belong into more than one group, when it is not clear which category is relevant for a phenomenon, or when the boundaries between categories are fuzzy rather than clearly defined. This is not to say that categories do not matter, but in cross-cultural research categories have often been understood as relatively stable, predetermined, and non-ambiguous, even in the light of the oft-mentioned criticism that these are social constructions. The notion of “category” is a lot more slippery than we often think and less clearly bounded and more fluid than it looks at first sight. Importantly, although historical, institutional, educational, linguistic, and other arguments for the relevance of using country as a category has some relevance, it is less clear to what extent such categories can be presumed a priori and if salience of a certain category, or categories, can be assumed in the context or settings of a specific study at the expense of other categories.

Calls for new perspectives and advancements in the cross-cultural management field have long highlighted the need to re-examine the concept of culture and to move away from the national culture conceptualization dominance. And yet, we still use largely the same theoretical, empirical, and practical tools. The change to a multicultural reality is fundamental and requires more than tweaking our academic toolbox. We hence do not simply wish to contrast with more positivistic views in cross-cultural management, but specifically highlight the pitfalls of extensive categorical thinking such as narrowing our focus on one or few categories and selecting traditional categories a priori, while disregarding others and emergent cultural dynamics. For example, to integrate dynamics into existing categorical views leaves assumed categories and boundaries intact.

We suggest reexamining these assumptions. We wish to advance cross-cultural management research by demonstrating new ways of thinking about traditional categories and interrelationships of these categories and by suggesting how to reconceive boundaries and the management thereof. Questions of cultural differences then may not be framed in terms of sharp divisions (between cultures) or in terms of points of cultural conflict, a border where negotiations take place, but as relations that may include areas of conflict but also of reciprocity, sharing, and mutual belonging which is constitutive not separating. This encourages examining intersections and relational processes with in-depth qualitative studies as well as relational methodologies such as the analysis of meaning structures (Mohr 1998), topic modeling (DiMaggio, Nag, and Blei 2013), the structural analysis of culture (Krinsky 2010), and the analysis of the duality of culture and social such as lattice analysis (Mohr and Duquenne 1997).

Practical Implications

Thinking in terms of categories provides a simplified working model of reality, and, similar to the use of heuristics, categorization can lead to negative stereotyping (see review by Sutton, Zander, and Stamm 2013) or sophisticated stereotyping (Osland and Bird 2000). Both lead to faulty conclusions at the individual level. Intersectional and relational approaches in contrast urge managers and other organizational members to question commonly accepted unitary categorical divisions and to reflect on how intersections of multiple categories as well as relations between individuals and groups could impact manager and subordinate work lives. A manager, who is aware of such aspects of a cross-cultural organizational environment (e.g., played out within a team), can also contribute to shaping the meanings that are constructed within the team by leveraging social dynamics. This may involve deliberately encouraging interactions “across” different possible boundaries or more subtly designing relational environments that encourage reflexive thinking and the joint construction of new interpretations that may become shared or develop further (Lücke forthcoming). In the context of globalization, with various new media, global networks, and increased mobility, it is important for a manager to understand *emerging* interconnections and potential boundaries as well as *existing* boundaries.

CONCLUSION

Relationality and intersectionality tackle some of the limitations of categorical thinking and shine light onto silenced complexities and boundary aspects that are associated with this thinking within cross-cultural management. We suggest that relationality and intersectionality are increasingly relevant in today's world because many social and cultural arrangements are overlapping, crisscrossing, and shifting rather than stable categories. Simply put, while traditional categorical views have enhanced our understanding how very much cultures can differ—providing key insights to organizations to consider these differences and distances—relationality and intersectionality can illuminate more how they can connect and intersect.

We encourage researchers to challenge cross-cultural management phenomena, specifically to reconsider these in terms of fluid social processes rather than isolated individuals or rigid (external) influences. This does not of course deny the existence of a certain order, which remains at the core of any cultural phenomenon. In this article, we propose focusing on relations and the emergence, changing, and reconceiving of categorical boundaries and/or intersecting multiple categories as a way forward. Intersectionality and relationality address the fact that many experiences and identities do not fit neatly into a category such as, for example, nation. Research using relationality and intersectionality approaches provide a critical examination of categories. The underlying interpretive and interpersonal view of culture supports the epistemological position that categories, and boundaries, and their meanings emerge from and are to be analyzed through their contextual and relational nature. While certain categories may be of empirical and theoretical interest in a specific context, meaning, relevance, and influence of these can be highly variable. Underlying mechanisms and dynamics are still rather unexplored within cross-cultural management. It has been our endeavor to address the negative impact of categorizations in cross-cultural management by bringing in relationality and intersectionality. We hope that this endeavor can inspire researchers to “desilence” complexities within the field.

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