Engaging cultural boundaries: Intercultural collaboration at Mirai Corporation

Greetje Corporaal and Sierk Ybema

VU University Amsterdam

Contact: g.f.corporaal@gmail.com; sb.ybema@fsw.vu.nl

Paper written for the IXth IACCM Annual Conference at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLAN), Preston, UK June 22-25, 2010

Abstract

In this paper we pay attention to the dynamic and complex ways in which organizational actors at Mirai Corporation make sense of their intercultural work experiences, ten years after Mirai has acquired its Dutch counterpart. We explore how organizational actors discursively construct their own and others' cultural identities, as expressed in their self-other identity talk. It is suggested that cultural identities do not carry a pre-given meaning that people passively enact, as is sometimes assumed, but rather as social constructs, talked into existence by organizational actors within particular social contexts. We will illustrate the relevance of this constructivist, contextual, and power-sensitive approach to culture research for the CCM field by showing how organizational actors at Mirai Corporation alternately set and transcend cultural boundaries in their identity talk, depending on the situationally defined 'success' and 'failure' of intercultural collaborations.

Keywords: culture, discourse, identity, inter-cultural collaboration, power

Introduction

An emerging tradition of interpretive researchers in the field of cross-cultural management (CCM) is sensitive to organizational actors' situated sensemaking practices, asking the question: how do members of transnational networks and organizations attribute meaning to intercultural encounters (e.g. Søderberg & Holden, 2002, Ailon-Souday & Kunda, 2003; Clausen, 2007). Investigating the role of culture in organizations from a constructivist approach involves treating cultural identities not as 'mental software of the mind' which is passively enacted (e.g. Hofstede, 1991), but instead as social constructs talked into existence by organizational actors within particular social contexts. Recently, a variety of CCM scholars have argued for critically re-thinking the theoretical, conceptual, and

epistemological foundations that currently predominate research in the field (Søderberg & Holden, 2002; Jack et al., 2008; Ailon, 2008; Primecz et al., 2009). Interpretive researchers (e.g. Søderberg and Holden, 2002; Ybema and Byun, 2009) have suggested to shift attention away from studying culture per se, to exploring culture and cultural boundaries as being constituted in organizational actors' 'self-other identity talk' (Ybema et al. 2009). Viewed from this vantage point, cultural identities are constructed in the way actors talk about themselves and others, drawing or crossing cultural boundaries as they speak. Such a view directs the researcher's attention towards the dynamics of cultural identity and processes of power and politics in the discursive enactment of culture and cultural differences, conceptualised as 'mutable, negotiated, and infused with contestation and power relations' (Jack et al. 2008: 875).

In this paper, we illustrate and extend this theoretical argument based on a 10-month (still ongoing) ethnographic case study, conducted by the first author, of a Japanese business group in the technology-oriented manufacturing industry, which we will call Mirai Corporation (a pseudonym). In this study, we pay attention to the dynamic and complex ways in which organizational actors make sense of their intercultural work experiences, ten years after Mirai has acquired its Dutch counterpart. We explore how organizational actors discursively construct their own and others' cultural identities as expressed in their self-other identity talk. We hope to take the stream of interpretive research in CCM one step further by showing how organizational actors alternately set and transcend cultural boundaries in their identity talk, depending on the situationally defined 'success' and 'failure' of intercultural collaborations. By describing our research participants' oscillations between 'same' and 'other' and between an inclusive and exclusive 'us', we show the dynamics of intercultural collaboration and processes of identification.

Our paper will proceed as follows. After setting out the theoretical argument in more detail, we describe the research setting and the methodology and methods used to analyse the case. Preliminary research findings will be then be presented. We will conclude with a discussion of our findings and the insights an interpretive approach to culture research can offer to the CCM field.

Interpretive research in CCM: a brief literature review

The CCM field can roughly be divided into three main research streams (cross-national comparison, intercultural interaction & multiple cultures perspective), with each their own paradigms, definitions and methodologies (Primecz et al., 2009). Within the field, there is an imbalance in the research paradigms applied, with the positivist paradigm occupying a dominant position (Jack et al., 2009). In this paradigm, Hofstede is probably the best-known scholar. With his

study at IBM, Hofstede has made 'a canonical contribution to the study of culture and management research' (Søderberg & Holden, 2002), which has received much imitation... However, despite the appealing simplicity of this approach to culture research and the useful grip it promises to provide on complex organizational phenomena, it has also received much criticism. For instance, for offering a passive, static and essentialist understanding of culture (McSweeney, 2002; Ailon-Souday & Kunda, 2003; Ailon, 2008); for being blind to social variation, diversity and power relations within the borders of nation states or organizations (Søderberg & Holden, 2002); for reifying and reproducing a particular system of global hierarchy, power and status, which would no longer hold as a universal typology (Ailon, 2008); and for popularizing culture as a quantifiable research variable, which has been counterproductive for understanding the role of culture in international relations (Shenkar et al., 2008). Moreover, even if the variable measured in culture-survey research does capture some 'real' or experienced cultural essence, it does not directly address how cultural differences have an impact on organizational processes in daily practice (Brannen & Salk, 2000). Despite these criticisms, this 'Hofstedean' approach is still the dominant stream in culture research and the diversity of existing approaches in the CCM field has not received much attention in scholarly and managerial literature (Primecz et al., 2009). However, there is a growing number of CCM researchers who view culture as more dynamic and variable. They are often inspired by sociological and anthropological studies of collective identity, showing processes of appropriation and mobilization of culture for constructing collective selfhood and distinctiveness through cultivating a discourse of common culture and casting the 'other' as 'strange' (e.g. Elias & Scotson, 1965; Barth, 1969; Cohen, 1985;). In order to invigorate cross-cultural research, we may have to shift attention away from studying culture perse, to exploring culture as being constituted in organizational actors' 'self-other identity talk' (Ybema et al., 2009). Such a discursive perspective views identity as enacted through the situated practices of talking and writing. According to identity theory, our understanding of who we are is intimately related to who we think others are (Jenkins 2004). The self is separated from the other by identifying 'relationships of similarity and difference' (Jenkins, 2008: 18) and signifying 'sameness' and 'otherness' (Ybema et al., 2009: 307), usually through invoking stark contrasts. Through various identification processes, individuals develop an ongoing sense of the 'self' and the 'other', in interaction with their social environments (Ybema et al., 2009). Through this 'discursive positioning' (Garcia and Hardy, 2007; Hopkinson, 2001), we talk our identities into being, producing a particular notion of 'us' or 'me' in comparison to 'them'. Seen from this theoretical vantage point, studying cultural identity talk means shedding light on the discursive processes of social categorization and distinction drawing, built upon putative differences in national or ethnic cultures.

Furthermore, as Ainsworth and Hardy (2004: 155) remind us, this discursive positioning is often utilized to establish or maintain a sense of 'moral uprightness' of the 'self' (Watson, 2009) and to position 'the other' not merely as different, but also as less acceptable, less respectable and, sometimes, less powerful (Hall, 1997). In political struggles, culture would often be used as a source of power; throwing cultural differences to the fore, precisely when they present a difference between the self and the other (e.g. Barth, 1969; Wong, 1999; Van Marrewijk, 2004). Various in depth case studies of transnational organizations have highlighted this situational and strategic use of cultural differences (e.g. Olie, 1994; Dahler-Larsen, 1997). Koot (1997) gives an ironic illustration by describing how employees of a Shell oil refinery on the Dutch Caribbean island of Curaçao were keen to express their affinity with Latino culture when in the 1960s and 1970s the management of the Shell plant was Dutch. However, the same Curaçaoan workers started to dissociate themselves from Latino culture when the refinery was rented out to a Venezuelan company in the 1980s, instead calling upon their Dutch roots and praising the old Shell culture. Such instances of cultural identity talk testify to the importance of socially situated use of culture, illustrating the significance of power asymmetries for intercultural relations.

Hence, identity construction may be a far from neutral process, coloured by emotions, moral judgments, and political or economic interests. It appears to be instrumental in attempts to establish, legitimate and secure, or challenge prevailing relationships of power and status. It implicates social manoeuvring and power games. And within the bound of institutional conditions and constraints, culture may be invented or invoked, in order to present an identity, establish a truth, enhance status and self-esteem, or defend an interest (Eriksen, 1993). Therefore, cultural identities should not be understood as coherent and stable entities, but as shifting social constructs that are dependent on specific interests that are at stake at a certain moment in a certain situation.

To conclude, our review of the literature shows the relevance of an interpretive, context-dependent and power-sensitive understanding of culture for CCM-research. In order to illustrate how this approach can enrich cross-cultural management and contribute to improved insights in how culture works out in day-today organizational settings, we will analyze how organizational members of Mirai Corporation talk about their own and others' cultural identities and alternately set and transcend cultural boundaries in their identity talk.

Setting the scene: Mirai Corporation

This study draws on field data, collected by the first author during a 10-month (still ongoing) study at Mirai Corporation (a pseudonym), a Japanese business group in the technology-oriented

manufacturing industry. Mirai is founded in the late 1920s in Japan. From the 1970s onwards, Mirai started to expand and globalize its business. Especially from the beginning of the 21st century, the company started to establish and acquire a number of subsidiaries in each of its various business areas. As part of this globalization strategy, Mirai decided to acquire its Dutch counterpart. With this acquisition, Mirai Corporation became one of the key global players in its field.

The Dutch company has a long history as well. It started in the early 1920 as a silk factory and is deeply rooted in the local community and broader in Dutch society. Although the company was relatively new in the fibre business, it had a positive outlook. However, since the management team decided at that time to restructure the company and to focus on its core business, the company sold its fibre branch to Mirai Corporation. After the acquisition, the Dutch company was integrated in Mirai's Fibre Business Group. Huge investments were made in research and development, and several expansion projects followed. The acquisition was described as 'a unique and enduring marriage, built upon mutual understanding and shared optimism'.

Currently Mirai Corporation employs over 20,000 employees of which 1500 are employed in the Netherlands. Of these 1500 employees, seven persons are Japanese expatriates. Only one of them fulfils a top-management position; the other Japanese expatriates fulfil engineering, marketing and sales positions. Mirai Netherlands is the only foreign subsidiary of Mirai Corporation with a mainly non-Japanese management team. After the acquisition of the Dutch company, Mirai Corporation decided to keep the Dutch management team in position, and to only replace the CEO by a Japanese one. However, after half a year, this decision was reversed and the former Dutch CEO was asked to resume his activities. This same person has recently been promoted CEO of the entire Fibre Business Group.

At the time of this study, almost a decade passed after the acquisition. The research describes intercultural collaboration practices within Mirai Netherlands and between Mirai Netherlands, the Japanese headquarter and its Japanese counterpart: Mirai fibres. It should be noted that, at the time of writing this paper, only employees located in the Netherlands were included in this study. Including employees from Japan, is the next step in this research project.

Methodology and approach to analysis

In order to get an up-close and in-depth understanding of organizational actors' sensemaking of intercultural encounters, we adopted an ethnographic research approach, in which we combined fieldwork methods of in-depth interviews, informal conversations, participant observations, and documentary analysis. In the first part of the fieldwork period, the primary focus was on studying

intercultural collaborations between Japanese and Dutch employees at Mirai Netherlands. In the period between September 2009 and March 2010, data has only been collected within Mirai Netherlands. 27 semi-structured interviews, ranging from 30 minutes to 2.5 hours, were conducted with organizational members from various departments and hierarchical levels. All the persons worked together with individuals with other nationalities on a daily basis. Of the interviewees, 19 had a Dutch nationality, seven had a Japanese nationality and one had a Belgian nationality.

The interviews were semi-structured and usually started with explaining the purpose of the research project, where the interview would be about and that the anonymity of the interviewee and the company more generally would be secured. After that, the interview started with some questions about the interviewee's personal and work background, after which the interviewee's experiences regarding working with people from different cultural backgrounds, cultural differences and differences in ways of working were discussed. Instead of answering a set of questions on pre-defined topics, the interviewees were encouraged to come up with issues themselves and to tell their own stories and experiences regarding their intercultural work experiences during the interview. The interview usually ended with some questions regarding the development of a training program on intercultural collaboration and whether the interviewee thought such a training program was useful or not. The interviews with Dutch individuals (and one Belgian) were held in Dutch, while the interviews with Japanese individuals were held in English. Although all interviews were recorded, the interviewer also made manual notes during the interviews.

Besides interviews, also field observations, informal conversations and documentary analysis were carried out. Daily working activities, as well as audit meetings, video conferences and project team meetings were observed. Together with observations in more informal settings like coffee breaks, lunch breaks, and after-work drinks, this gave us a sense of the everyday working lives of research participants. All observations were documented with fieldnotes, which were worked out after the events. Besides this, the first author also visited the different factories, to get a feel of the products that are made, and the people that are working there.

In the second part of the research project, we focussed on investigating the Japanese point of view on the collaboration with Mirai Netherlands. For this purpose, the first author collected data in Japan during a four-week stay in April 2010, mainly by conducting interviews with Japanese employees who frequently work together with Dutch employees. In this way, we were able to include viewpoints from both headquarters and subsidiaries, as well as Japanese and Dutch employees. However, at the time of writing this paper, these data could not yet be included. So, for

this paper, data have been used that were obtained during the first fieldwork period in the Netherlands.

In closely examining interviews, observational and documentary material, we explore how organizational actors make sense of their intercultural work expereiences and how they discursively construct their own and others' cultural identities. For this purpose, all interview transcripts and fieldnotes were analysed using Atlas ti. All data concerning cultural differences or differences in the way of working were coded and categorized, allowing us to systematically develop our interpretation of the data.

Showcasing the 'black swan'

The Hogo-project is a global project involving Japanese and Dutch engineers, breaking new ground in the fiber business by developing a new material. Within the industrial fiber business group, this project is celebrated as a huge success. It is regarded as the example *par excellence* of how global projects should proceed in the future. The success of this project is, as one Dutch top manager points out, the 'exception rather than standard practice', because most global projects run into cross-cultural difficulties. Therefore, the Hogo-project is, metaphorically speaking, like the black swan: against the general rule, it is known as running exceptionally well. As one Dutch top manager claimed: "Hogo went differently. I think Hogo is the good exception." So, when we started this research project within Mirai Netherlands, several people told us that we should definitely meet with the leader of the Hogo-project, Jan Kees, who had lived and worked in Japan for several years. He would be the person who could tell us all about successful Dutch-Japanese collaboration.

Jan Kees is a senior engineer at the research department of Mirai Netherlands who also worked at the research institute of Mirai in Japan for three years. When asked about the project, Jan Kees gives several reasons for the success of the project. Clearly, the end result – the successful development of a new product - has been important in breeding a good atmosphere for collaboration. Good results create good cooperation. Yet, Jan Kees maintains that the reverse is also true: the collaboration has been organized in such a way that it creates success. When the Hogo-project started, the first thing he did was creating interdependency between the Japanese and Dutch project members by making the Japanese and Dutch objectives supplementary:

> We [Dutch and Japanese] decided that the Japanese part would focus on the first generation product development, including the production process. We [the Dutch] would make the next generation product for that process and build up the fundamental knowledge to support the process in Japan. So then, you're dependent on each other. When the Japanese had problems at the plant, we could support them, because

> we developed the knowledge. And that wasn't threatening. (..) It gave a good result in the pilot plant and that creates trust.

Jan Kees suggests that making both Dutch and Japanese dependent on each other for producing the material has mitigated potential conflicts and competition. This would be an important difference with other global projects in which he himself also experienced intercultural difficulties:

> The objectives [in this other global project] were shared but that really was the Japanese project [pointing his hands in one direction] and the Dutch project [pointing his hands in another direction]. (..) Will *they* reach that target with *their* process or will *we* reach that target with *our* process? (..) And I think that there wasn't sufficient common ground... And when that common ground is already very small, and the cultural differences and communication comes on top of that… then it never becomes one project. The communication and cultural differences are like a mountain in between the two projects. Especially, when one side works completely in a Japanese way and the other in a Dutch way.

Apart from creating interdependency, Jan Kees also mentions a second reason for the project's success. According to him, the weekly reports 'really make a difference', because these ensure that all project members communicate in a systematic fashion and on a regular basis. In these reports (indeed highly valued by other project members), both the Japanese and Dutch write down what they did that week. In this way, all members know where the others are working on and what the status of the project is. In terms of his own intercultural attitude, Jan Kees claims to have learned a paradoxical lesson from working together with the Japanese. Half the job is to be aware of intercultural differences. The other half of the job is, paradoxically, to do the opposite:

> Try *not* to think in terms of 'us and them'. That's really important. And start with a respectful attitude towards each other. Try to be curious towards the other. Try to approach the other from a positive attitude.

Yet, he readily admits that it is still difficult to steer the cooperation in the right direction:

> Yes… that's difficult… And it's still difficult. That's… well, at this moment it's going well as far as that is concerned and eh... also because the results are going into the right direction.

Indeed, although the Hogo-project is regarded as the example of how a global project should be organized, also this project has its difficulties. When we take a closer look at the Hogo-project, it appears that the collaboration does not automatically go well, despite some people's efforts to steer

it in the right direction. The most salient issues are the role of hierarchy, cross-cultural knowledge sharing and trust. Also the involvement of the board of Mirai and its supporting staff in the decision-making process is an important issue.

The black swan in close-up

The other Dutch members of the Hogo-project acknowledge that in general, the cooperation between the Japanese and Dutch proceeds well. However, there are also some issues, of which one is the role of hierarchy in Japan. The Dutch project members note that when they need to communicate with the Japanese project members, they experience the importance of hierarchy for the Japanese. Contacting another Dutch person directly, even when he or she is from another department, simply does not work with Japanese:

> The first time I needed to know something from a Japanese, I sent that person an email directly. But I didn't get a response. Then I send an email via his boss, and then I nicely received a reaction. (Dutch engineer, Hogo-project)

One Dutch project member, Frank, who worked in Japan for several years as an expat, calls this 'communicating along hierarchical lines'. He stresses that for Japanese, it is very important to have a personal relationship with the other. It would really make a difference having met Japanese face-to-face in a more informal setting, for instance while sharing dinner or having a drink together. Then you establish a personal relationship and communication is much easier. This person also notes the importance of keeping the Japanese superiors informed:

> Now I have that relationship with the people with whom I work in our project, and I can email them directly. But every time I will put the people in Osaka who are responsible for that in the CC. In this way you keep their bosses informed. But in principle I'm now in the position that I can communicate with these people directly.

Another project member mentions that, after a while, you are able to have direct contact with the Japanese project members. However, this is only unidirectional:

> After a while, you also have direct contact with someone. But that is only when they want to know something. When you want to know something, you send an email via your own and the other's boss. (Dutch engineer, Hogo-project)

Furthermore, while Frank and Jan Kees do not personally feel restrained in contacting the Japanese, the other Dutch project members are sometimes a little hesitant in contacting them. They often feel insecure whether or not they can send a request to their Japanese colleagues, for instance to explain where they are working on. Jan Kees explains that he often encourages the Dutch project members to just ask their questions to their Japanese colleagues. They are, after all, one project and working on the same things:

> "I often ask 'Why don't you ask them? I mean… We work to achieve the same target, we work in one team... Their interest is your interest. So, why should you think different about them?' But well, that's something (..) That's a very difficult process."

So, in the Hogo-project hierarchy becomes particularly salient when it concerns communication and knowledge sharing. For Japanese, when there is no personal relationship with a person, you need to communicate along hierarchical lines. You need to ask your boss if he wants to contact the other person's boss about that. If the Japanese boss approves, you will receive an answer. But if you do not know this procedure, or the Japanese boss does not approve, the question remains unanswered.
Another issue mentioned by the Dutch members of the Hogo-project concerns cross-border knowledge sharing. Jan Kees mentions that sometimes the Dutch are clearly frustrated about the little information and knowledge the Japanese project members share with them.

> You'll see that other people feel differently about it. Sometimes people have frustrations.. sometimes emotions towards Japan are running high. Much distrust because of that... because you have the feeling that you're always giving but you don't get something in return.

Jan Kees mentions that although he set up the weekly reports, the frustrations of the Dutch project members about the little information that the Japanese share with them, reinforce feelings of distrust and form a constant risk for the project to grow apart. Frank also acknowledges that there is a lot of suspicion among the Dutch about the way in which the Japanese share their knowledge. Frank explains that the Japanese are used to a very different way of working, in which they do not share information across research groups.

> From the Dutch side, some people look at the Japanese with Argus' eyes. (..) It's very difficult to explain the exact reason. Partly it's the Japanese way of working. Doing things within your own group and different groups don't communicate.. So, cooperation is poor.

According to Jan Kees, this different way of working in Japan implies that the Japanese project members do not recognize that they should keep their Dutch colleagues informed. Hence, the lack of knowledge sharing from the Japanese side results in frustration and confusion on the Dutch side. But Frank emphasizes that when you constantly pounce on the importance of informing each other, proper knowledge exchange would be possible. However, the difficulties concerning cross-border knowledge sharing are not the only issue that cause frustration among the Dutch project members. According to Frank, the Japanese would also have a tendency to figure things out by themselves and sometimes even start parallel research projects:

> Japanese prefer to figure things out by themselves. They need to have the proof for themselves (..) And in that context, they often start up things by themselves. And Japanese also have a tendency to collect some things over here and do something with it by themselves.. To work it out and make it bigger. Meanwhile, they also start their own little research program…

Frank tells that this Japanese way of working is experienced as very annoying from the Dutch side. There would be a constant risk that people fall back on thinking in terms of 'us' and 'them'. This would reinforce feelings of distrust and drift the project apart. In order to prevent this to happen, Frank emphasizes that you constantly need to focus on the positive things and push the Japanese to keep the Dutch members informed:

> So you constantly need to see the positive side of those things. Why are they doing that? And then, you really need to pounce on it.. Well, what did you do .. tell me. If you don't ask that, there's a danger that it will grow apart.

Another project member also mentions the Japanese tendency to work on their own research interests. After attending a videoconference with the Japanese project members he uttered, clearly frustrated: "When those Japanese would finally start producing the right material and send it to us!" When asked what he meant by this remark, he explained: "They think that their method is better, and then we have to test that again." Since Jan Kees has found out that when people start thinking in terms of 'us and them', he always emphasizes that the Dutch project members should not do this:

> Don't start thinking in us and them. I've seen a couple of concrete examples in our project on that. From the moment that you start thinking like that... Recently, Japan asked for some of the new material we've made. (..) Because they also wanted to do some evaluations. Well, of course there's immediately distrust here. 'What will they do with it? They [the Japanese] asked for it but they didn't say for what purpose they're going to use it [the material].' After a while, we said 'You can only do one thing and that is to just decently ask them about their plans.' Yes, yes, well next time we'll see… And some time later I asked if they had already asked what they wanted to do with it. They responded with 'No, no, but they're probably doing this and that.' And at a certain moment, frustrations were running up so high.. and a distrust.. 'We send the material and now they've probably done that and we haven't heard anything!' Then I said 'Did you ask what they've done with it? I'm sure that if you ask, you'll also get a decent answer, but when you don't ask, you won't get an answer. But then they still didn't ask them and emotions were running so high.. that for the next video conference, I sent a polite email to one of the Japanese if he could explain in the next meeting what they had done. Then there were all fine answers, with sheets and a proper explanation. Well.. if you don't ask.. (..) But now I did it. And then they say 'hello.. you know them!'

A third issue mentioned by the project members concerns an acquisition for which the board of Mirai Corporation had to give approval. Jan Kees tells that, now the Hogo-project has entered the commercialization phase, they are increasingly dependent on the board of Mirai Corporation and its supporting staff. As a result, decision-making takes much more time than before. For instance, they wanted to acquire another company for Hogo. For this acquisition, the board needed to give approval and this took a long time. Jan Kees explains that especially the project members who had not worked in Japan, did not understand why the decision took so long and why the board and its supporting staff were asking so many questions:

> That's an interesting aspect of our project because other people from my team who don't have this experience…[in Japan] They say 'All those questions... apparently nothing happens. When I would have done it... it was already finished ten times.'

Jan Kees explains that this frustration is because the Dutch project members think the board does not work on the acquisition, while in fact, the Japanese do work on it but the Dutch are not used to this process:

> It's really about sensitivity. I mean.. I developed an extra sense for this kind of processes. But when you don't have that.. In Japan, the signals are very small. So you need to focus much more on these small signals.

> While, viewed from our side.. we just don't see those little signals. We don't see anything.. just nothing happens! So, I keep saying.. keep explaining, keep explaining..at a certain point you'll see that the result will come. Build up the trust. It's a process we have to go through, which we're not used to because we immediately want to do business.

Hence, despite the fact that the Hogo-project is seen as a pioneering success by the project members, as well as broader in the organization, there are also certain issues that are seen as problematic. There is a constant risk that the Dutch and Japanese grow apart. Feelings of distrust constantly recur and it takes a lot of time and energy from the project members to prevent this from happening. We found that the difficulties encountered in the Hogo-project gave us a micro-example of members' experiences of intercultural collaboration at Mirai.

Zooming out: Mirai Netherlands's engagement with Japanese culture

Internal reporting

The Dutch perceive the many information requests from Japan as the most important communication issue. Due to differences in English language proficiency and different presentation and reporting styles, there would be a lot of miscommunication. The Japanese would not be able to read and understand the Dutch reports, and would therefore need a lot of explanation. One Dutch top manager explains that the Dutch are sometimes frustrated by all these information requests, and therefore they do not always react very polite: "A couple of times we received some questions from Japan, which we responded with 'We already explained that, look at page 12.' And yes... That didn't go well." One Dutch senior engineer thinks that "The Japanese are much more visually oriented." Dutch reports would consist of long pieces of text, while in a Japanese style-report, the text is always clarified with tables and figures.

The Dutch also explain that the high amount of requests from Japan is because Mirai makes a distinction between mainland and overseas subsidiaries, which would result in different management strategies and communication channels. For instance, in contrast with Japanese top managers, the Dutch top managers do not have direct communication lines with the general managers of their business groups, the board members and its supporting staff. This is organized through certain liaison or window persons. While recognizing that language proficiency my play parts here, the Dutch top managers still think this is strange. They feel that Mirai feels more responsible for mainland subsidiaries than for overseas ones. Furthermore, one Dutch top manager mentions that Mirai Netherlands forms a special case within Mirai Corporation, because they are categorized

as an overseas company, but they are very big. They have the feeling that these standard communication channels for overseas subsidiaries are not suitable for them and result in a lot of miscommunication. One Dutch top manager mentions that, for research, the CTO of Mirai is probably perfectly informed through the standard communication channels for mainland subsidiaries. However, since Mirai Netherlands is an overseas subsidiary, they are left behind:

> One time I read... and that terribly irritates me... I read a remark about Mirai Netherlands in a management report of a strategy meeting. But really... That [remark] was completely untrue. And it was stated by one of our highest officials... Where's he talking about! The very idea! (..) So he doesn't know that we properly write down all our research projects, that we always record what the market expectations are, when we plan to finish the projects, the chances of success etcetera. We write that down in a book that he doesn't have. An then you hear him making the remark of... 'Nowhere Mirai Netherlands has specified its market expectations.' Bullshit! We do have that!

The Dutch also have the feeling that although they spend a lot of time and energy complying with all information requests from Japan, they do not get much in return. Especially among the engineers, this would result in a lot of distrust. After a video conference with Japan, one Dutch engineer said with some frustration that this meeting was again an example of this: "They only want to find out what we can offer to them. It's not the other way around, while we did ask for that." So, when it concerns knowledge sharing, the Japanese do want that the Dutch share their knowledge with them, but they do not share their knowledge with the Dutch.

Cross-border knowledge sharing

Within Mirai Netherlands, people often work together both within and across different departments or project teams, For instance, the Dutch engineers of the research institute have a weekly coffee hour in the office of one of the senior engineers. This is to promote the exchange of expertise between members of the different research projects and is highly valued among Dutch engineers.

> We have a weekly coffee hour with the different research groups. Here, we discuss all sorts of things. (..) Look, we are a group of people with different fields of expertise, and these research projects go straight across that. In Japan they really don't know something like that. That is unimaginable. (Dutch senior engineer)

Frank tells that from his experience in Japan he knows that also in Japan, people often work in teams, even more than in the Netherlands.

> Japan is designed to do things in a team. You're also responsible for that team. Dutch people are much more individualistic. Also in Japan, everyone has to agree.. the whole consensus.. Only then, you can start doing things.

However, Frank also experienced that although there is much collaboration within teams, people do not collaborate and share their knowledge outside their team. That would really be 'not done' in Japan:

> Within Mirai you have a very strong connection with your division. I was in the business group that worked together with Mirai Netherlands and TTP, but within the entire Mirai Group there are all separate clusters. And all these groups work separately from each other and don't have much contact with each other.

Another expat tells that when he was in Japan, he put a lot of effort to organize a get together between the different research departments. However, he admits that he did not succeed in this.

> I asked for more cooperation between the different sections of the research department in Japan. (..) Maybe the other people have some great ideas, which can help us in solving the problems we had at that time. And maybe by collaborating, new ideas would come up. However, the section manager replied that the members of the section had to find out for themselves, work hard by themselves to find the solution. 'The members of other sections are not specialists in our project, so they cannot help us.'

In answer to the question why Japanese do not share their knowledge across borders, Frank and the other Dutch expats answer that this is because there is a strong sense of internal competition in Japan. But they also think that it has something to do with the high number of patents people need to write in Japan.

> I think it's protection of their own knowledge and ideas. Those are all very sensitive issues. What if something turns out wrong.. or what if one person runs of with an idea of the other, who also worked on that. That is all very sensitive. It has never been pronounced like this, but it's my feeling. And I think I'm not far away from the truth. (Dutch senior engineer/expat)

> Still internal competition… It's one company but they are all separate units. (..)It also has something to do with the fact that people need to write many patents. That you don't share your information that easily...

> Because then, the other group also needs to be put on that patent and that has financial consequences. (Frank)

In Japan, the performance of engineers is evaluated, based on the number of patents they applied for. Mirai has also tried to implement this system in the Netherlands. However, the Dutch engineers severely objected against this. This system of job evaluation would discourage the open communication and knowledge sharing between research groups, which is highly valued by the Dutch engineers.

Patent rights

In global projects, the Dutch engineers often have the feeling that the Japanese are not always completely open about their intentions, are keeping information behind and may even have hidden agendas. These feelings of distrust originate from the fact that in the past, the Japanese have not always handled the application for patents properly. According to a Dutch senior engineer, it has happened that the Japanese applied for patents, based on the knowledge of the Dutch. This resulted in a lot of suspicion and distrust among the Dutch.

> We need to discuss very well how we will handle the application for patents. That they don't run of with our ideas. That has happened in the past. The way in which they dealt with patents has resulted in a lot of suspicion (..) Especially within our research department this has severely damaged the trust in Japan. If you don't deal with patent applications in an integer way, this causes a lot of suspicion. (..) You cannot just steal the ideas of someone else! It's going completely wrong then. Then these researchers say 'Forget it.. I won't cooperate anymore!' It breeds bad blood in the team and won't stimulate collaboration.

Because of how the Japanese share their knowledge and how they deal with patent applications, these global projects often do not work out in practice. And although the Japanese and Dutch are members of the same global project, the Dutch often do not feel like they are one team:

> On paper, the project was a collaboration between new-business, Mirai fibers and Mirai Netherlands. But in actual practice, it was very difficult to really have this. So, on paper it seemed a global project, but in practice, that wasn't true. (Frank)

Dealing with failures

Besides the fact that the Japanese do not share their knowledge properly and do not always act in an integer way when it concerns the application for patents, the different ways in which Dutch and Japanese deal with failures and mistakes is also seen as an important issue. Frank of the Hogo-project mentions that Japanese 'can be very harsh in their judgement' while in the Netherlands, it would be more accepted to make mistakes. One Dutch top manager, responsible for the research institute, also thinks that making mistakes is worse in Japan than in the Netherlands. In the Netherlands, making mistakes is seen as being part of doing research:

> Suppose I'm responsible for a project and I say to someone: 'Well we wanted to do the test and we needed a pilot plant. But that pilot plant was occupied by another project which was more important. So, in this year we only did half of the tests that I actually planned. So, I'm behind. And I also had some setbacks... It appears to be more difficult than we expected. Therefore, I'm behind and will not reach my target.' For a Dutch person that is a classic explanation. Everyone knows that in research there are setbacks. And you're overruled: your project was suppressed by another project which had higher priority. That's possible.

So, according to this top manager it is generally accepted in the Netherlands when people fail to reach their targets due to unfavourable circumstances or setbacks. However, in Japan, this argument is completely rubbish:

> For a Japanese, this is a complete nonsense story. That is just blah-blah. (..) Japanese look at us a bit as 'These Dutch... they are a couple of layabouts!' You can notice that very clearly. They say: 'If you say that a project will be finished at the end of next year, and it is finished two years later, that doesn't matter to you.' That is the impression from their side. It isn't true of course, but it is true in their eyes.

This person also mentions about an occasion where one of his female engineers had to give a presentation about her research project in a videoconference with Japan. Frank was working in Japan at that time, and attended the videoconference from there:

> In a meeting with corporate, one of my engineers held a story about her project in the Netherlands. She thought that huge progress was made. And she actually did: the learning curve was very steep and she also had few time at the pilot plant. She tought it was a good story and I agree with that. But we didn't hear much from the Japanese side. Later, I talked with Frank who attended the video conference from the other side between the Japanese. And he said 'Well, did you notice that she held her story, but the Japanese... Before she started her talk they already knew what time it was because she didn't reach her

> target.' So, the Japanese closed their eyes straight away. She didn't reach her target. Done. While we say, well we have learned this and that and we know what to do better next time.

The top manager explains that "In Japan, when you've committed yourself to a certain target, it's a big disgrace when you don't reach it." He had once asked a Japanese colleague with whom he had a good understanding with, how one is treated who just finished a project that miserably failed:

> It remained silent for a long time, because he had to think about how to put it in English. And then he said: 'He will be treated like a criminal.' Then you think, people will prefer not to have anything to do with him, they will walk around him. And it will take a long time before this person can function normally again.

Discussion & Conclusion

In this paper, we illustrated the dynamic and complex ways in which organizational actors at Mirai Corporation make sense of their positive and negative experiences of intercultural collaboration. We explored how organizational actors discursively construct their own and others' cultural identities, as expressed in their self-other identity talk. By investigating the pioneering 'success' story of the Hogo-project in detail and exploring how the issues encountered in the Hogo-project play a role broader in the organization, we show how organizational actors alternately set and transcend cultural boundaries in their identity talk, depending on the situationally defined 'success' (in the Hogo-project) and 'failure' (in many other projects) of intercultural collaborations.

Within the Hogo-project, people are aware that in order to have a successful collaboration, they should transcend cultural boundaries. The Dutch project leader of the Hogo-project emphasizes that instead of thinking in terms of 'us and them', people should create an inclusive 'us'. People should have a positive attitude towards the Japanese and realise that they are all members of the same project: they are one team, sharing the same interests and working to achieve the same targets. However, despite the fact that the project leader has tried to prevent intercultural difficulties to occur, there are also several intercultural difficulties in this project. Despite the fact that the Dutch members of the Hogo-project are aware that thinking in terms of 'us and them' will have a negative impact on the collaboration, this form of identity talk still pops up when facing difficulties in working together. It seems that, when facing intercultural difficulties, this automatically triggers and self-serving us/them-identifications among the Dutch project members: the Japanese are viewed negatively, while praising the self.

The intercultural issues encountered in the Hogo-project are also mentioned broader in the organization, especially in other global projects. The Dutch engineers are often frustrated about the

Japanese way of working and deeply distrust the Japanese, based on negative experiences from the past. When analyzing organizational actors' identity talk, it appears that also broader in the organization the Japanese are viewed in negative terms, while praising the self.

These preliminary findings suggest that the Dutch construct an inclusive 'we' in case of success and an exclusive and self-serving us/them-identification in case of failure. Hence, the paradoxical lesson of being aware of cultural differences, but not thinking in terms of 'us and them', seems to work only in case of success. Furthermore, how people make sense of positive and negative intercultural collaborations is about taking responsibility for success and failure. And by alternately set and transcend cultural boundaries, the research participants responsibility for successes and failures is shifting: enhancing personal gains and diminishing losses. But the Japanese seem to adopt slightly different us/them-formulas, constructing a clear exclusive 'us' regardless the success or failure of the cooperation. This difference in identification processes can be explained by the harsh culture of dealing with successes and failures in Japan: failure would have more serious implications for Japanese than for Dutch persons. While in the Netherlands, failures due to situational factors are generally accepted and will not result in drastic consequences for peoples' careers, this tends not to be the case in Japan. Regardless the cause of the mistakes, people will be judged harsh. Therefore, the Japanese will do everything to reduce the risks of mistakes or failures and to enhance the chances of success, even when this affects the collaboration with the Dutch.

In conclusion, by describing our research participants' oscillations between 'same' and 'other' and between an inclusive and exclusive 'us', we have shown the dynamics of intercultural collaboration and processes of identification. Furthermore, we hope that this study illustrated the relevance of a constructivist, contextual, and power-sensitive approach to culture research for the CCM field.

References

Ailon, G. (2008). Mirror, mirror on the wall: Culture's consequences in a value test of its own design. *Academy of Management Review*, 33(4): 885-904.

Ailon-Souday, G. & Kunda, G. (2003). The local selves of global workers: The social construction of national identity in the face of organizational globalization. *Organization Studies,* 24(7): 1073-1196.

Ainsworth, S. & Hardy, C. (2004). Discourse and identities. In D. Grant et al. (Eds.) *Handbook of organizational discourse.* London: Sage, 153-73.

Barth, F. (1969). *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Cultural Difference*. Allen and Unwin, London.

Brannen, M.Y. & Salk, J.E. (2000). Partnering across borders: Negotiating organizational culture in a German-Japanese joint venture. *Human Relations*, 53(4): 451-487.

Cohen, A.P. (1985). *The Symbolic Construction of Community.* Ellis Harwood/ Tavistock, London.

Clausen, L. (2007). Corporate Communication Challenges: A 'Negotiated' Culture Perspective. *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management*, 7 (3): 317-332.

Dahler-Larsen, P. (1997). Organizational identity as a crowded category: A case of multiple and quickly shifting 'we' typifications. In S.A. Sackmann, (Ed.) *Cultural Complexity in Organizations: Inherent Contrasts and Contradictions*. London: Sage, 367-389.

Elias, N. & Scotson, J.L. (1965). *The Established and the Outsiders: A Sociological Inquiry into Community Problems*. London: Frank Cass

Eriksen, T.H. (1993). *Ethnicity & Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives*. Pluto, London

Garcia, P. & Hardy, C. (2007). Positioning, similarity and difference: Narratives of individual and organisational identities in an Australian university. *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 2007, *23*: 363–83.

Hall, S. (1997). *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices.* London: Sage/Open University.

Hofstede, G. (1991). *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-related Values*. Newbury Sage, Park.

Hopkinson, G. (2001). Influence in marketing channels: A sense-making investigation. *Psychology & Marketing*, 2001, *18* (5): 423–44.

Jack, G.A., Calás, M.B., Nkomo, S.M & Peltonen, T. (2008) Critique and international management: An uneasy relationship? *Academy of Management Review*, 33(4): 870-884.

Jenkins, R. (2004). *Social Identity*. 2nd ed. Routledge, London/New York.

Koot, W.C.J. (1997). Strategic utilization of ethnicity in contemporary organizations. In S.A. Sackmann (Ed.) *Cultural Complexity: Inherent Contrasts and Contradictions*. London: Sage, 315-339.

McSweeney, B. (2002) Hofstede's model of national cultural differences and their consequences: a triumph of faith – a failure of analysis. *Human Relations*, 55(1): 89–118.

Olie, R. (1994). Shades of culture and institutions in international mergers. *Organization Studies*, 15: 381-406.

Primecz, H., Romani, L., Sackmann, S.A. & Topcu K. (2009). Introduction to Special Issue: Multiple views for enhanced understandings in cross-cultural management. *International Journal of Cross-Cultural Management*, 9(3): 267-274.

Shenkar O., Luo, Y., Yeheskel, O. (2008). From "Distance" to "Friction": Substituting Metaphors and Redirecting Intercultural Research. The Academy of Management Review, 33 (4): 905-923.

Soderberg, A-M. & Holden N. (2002). Rethinking cross cultural management in a globalizing business world. *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management*, 2(1): 103-121.

Van Marrewijk, A. (2004). Crisis in the transition of Telecom Alliance Unisource. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 19(3): 235-251.

Watson, T. (2009). Narrative, life story and manager identity: A case study in autobiographical identity work. *Human Relations,* 62(3): 425-452.

Wong, H.W. (1999). *Japanese Bosses, Chinese Workers. Power and Control in a Hong Kong Megastore*. University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu.

Ybema, S. & Byun, H. (2009). Cultivating cultural differences in asymmetric power relations. I*nternational Journal of Cross-Cultural Management,* 9(3): 339-358.

Ybema, S., Keenoy, T., Oswick, C., Beverungen, A,. Ellis, N. & Sabelis, I. (2009). Articulating identities. *Human Relations* 62(3): 299-322.