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Martin Fougère

ORGANIZING (WITH) THIRDNESS.
A DIALOGIC UNDERSTANDING OF BICULTURAL
INTERACTIONS IN ORGANIZATIONS

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Key words: Intercultural / Bicultural Interaction, Dialogism, Thirdness, Bakhtin, Sensemaking

© Swedish School of Economics and Business Administration,
Martin Fougère

Martin Fougère
Department of Marketing and Corporate Geography
Swedish School of Economics and Business Administration
P.O.Box 479
00101 Helsinki, Finland

Distributor:

Library
Swedish School of Economics and Business Administration
P.O.Box 479
00101 Helsinki
Finland

Phone: +358-9-431 33 376, +358-9-431 33 265
Fax: +358-9-431 33 425
E-mail: publ@hanken.fi
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Abstract

This conceptual paper examines bicultural interactions in organizations as they are experienced by the involved individuals. Notions from Bakhtinian dialogism are used in order to conceptualize the sensemaking opportunities provided by the encounter with a cultural otherness. It is argued that in such bicultural situations, because of the lack of intimate understanding of the other culture, the third element in the dialogic relation - 'thirdness', i.e. the relation itself, without which there would be no sensemaking potential - may be lacking as a result of the distorting combination of projected similarity and stereotyping, added to certain counterproductive organizational dynamics. Therefore, it is suggested that, to make the bicultural work interaction the rewarding relation it could be, thirdness should be coordinated by management in a way that can transcend the spontaneous negative dynamics of the confrontational situation. If management was to fail to organize (with) thirdness appropriately, bringing in a third party could be a possible alternative in order to initiate the necessary mutual understanding that should eventually lead to a fruitful work interaction.

Key words: Intercultural / Bicultural Interaction, Dialogism, Thirdness, Bakhtin, Sensemaking

Introduction

Research on cross-cultural and intercultural aspects in organizations has been traditionally conducted from an objectivist, functionalist perspective (Holden, 2002), with culture treated as an independent variable (Smircich, 1983), and often the key explanatory factor (Cray and Mallory, 1998; Tayeb, 2001). It is surprising that, while their founding assumption acknowledges an intrinsic cultural relativity, these studies still often seek to establish or confirm normative universal knowledge, by e.g. comparing cultures according to the same few dimensions (as in Hofstede, 1980; 1991). In so doing, they may fail to grasp precisely that which is not universal in cultures and makes them such a fascinating object of study. Perhaps more importantly, they do not render satisfactorily how and why cultures vary across individuals in their specificities, nor how and why they are constantly evolving. More subjectivist research on intercultural interactions, and especially on their relationships with the dynamics of cultural identity construction, is needed.

This conceptual paper will seek to address this need of introducing novel theoretical insights into intercultural studies by focusing on bicultural interactions in organizations, as they are experienced by the involved individuals. A Bakhtinian dialogic approach (Holquist 1990; Bakhtin 1996) will be used to describe the bicultural interaction as a distinctive phenomenon, where the individuals' cultural identities are defined and constructed in contact with the cultural otherness that is encountered. The role of 'thirdness', i.e. the relational element in that interaction, will be particularly stressed as central in the fulfilment of the sensemaking potential found in the bicultural situation.

The first section will be devoted to define culture in terms that allow for a subjectivist analysis, focusing on the dynamics of interaction rather than on comparison. The bicultural interaction will then be described from a dialogic perspective, stressing the enriching opportunities that the encounter with otherness should offer to individuals, and the critical concept of 'thirdness' will be introduced. Further, a relative 'deficit of thirdness' will be argued to characterize most bicultural interactions in organizations, because of the conjunction of negative bicultural dynamics and some worsening, intrinsically organizational problematics. The final two sections will introduce the suggestion that, to address this 'deficit' problem, thirdness will need to be coordinated through the management of 'interfaces', or through the reliance on 'institutional others'

that could act as third parties coming from outside the bipolar situation itself, so as to take advantage of the sensemaking opportunity offered by the bicultural interaction.

Culture and the Individual

To start my discussion of culture how it is usually understood in cross-cultural and intercultural studies in organizations, let me introduce the following two definitions of culture, which are among the most frequently quoted by scholars in the field:

1. Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups [...]; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e., historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values [...]. (Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1952, p. 181)
2. Culture is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another [...]. (Hofstede, 1980, p. 25)

Culture, how it is conceived of above and in most ‘mainstream’ cross-cultural and intercultural studies, is thus supposed to be, on the one hand, something that is shared by nearly all members of a given social group, and, on the other hand, something that shapes the individual’s thinking and behaviour (Adler, 1997, p. 15). The fact that culture is relevant at both the group level and the individual level may constitute the central problematic of culture: how to maintain that members of a social group share a common culture while acknowledging individual behaviour as specific to each individual? Further, if each individual’s thinking is shaped by her/his social group’s culture, how can any individual discuss cultures and cultural differences in a neutral, fair manner, without being a ‘prisoner’ of her/his relation of belonging to a culture¹?

Much of the criticism that has been directed toward cross-cultural management and comparative organizational behaviour studies has been pointing to a failure to address these two questions. After reviewing and analyzing the main traditional approaches to comparative research, Cray and Mallory (1998, p. 142) claim that when these approaches do address ‘the linkage between culture at the societal level and individual behaviour’, it is ‘as a methodological but not a theoretical issue’. Elaborating on this statement, they call for ‘a cognitive approach to international management’ (ibid., pp.

139-61), for, in the spirit of Weick's (1979; 1995) works, 'studies that illustrate how managers and other employees adapt their cognitive frameworks, their sense-making abilities [...] to cope with a world that is increasingly multinational, multicultural and dynamic' (ibid., p. 4). Such a stress on dynamic cultural processes is also much in line with Alvesson's (1993) conceptualization of culture. In another significant criticism, Holden (2002) considers that cross-cultural management should be approached from a knowledge management perspective. He underlines what he calls the 'grand lacunae' of cross-cultural management literature in its failure to acknowledge that the field should embrace 'collaborative learning, knowledge-sharing and networking', and mainly blames this on 'the dominance of essentialist culture' represented by the overreliance on authors such as Hofstede and Hall (ibid., pp. 51-3).

In short, traditional approaches to cross-cultural management and comparative organizational behaviour tend to contribute to a triple illusion. First, by 'fixing' culture as the independent variable, they present it as much more static than it is. Second, by failing to render how cultures vary between individuals, and groups of individuals, in their specificities, they present them as much more homogeneous than they are. Third, by comparing cultures according to supposedly universal terms of comparison, such as in Hofstede's (1980; 1991) seminal study, they present them as much more symmetrical than they are. If one understands culture, as in Hofstede's (1980, p. 25) theorizing, as that 'which distinguishes the members of one human group from another', then why should a given 'culture A' be described in absolute terms according to a few universal dimensions, rather than in relative terms and according to dimensions that may vary depending on the 'culture B' that 'culture A' is being distinguished from?

Because of these three shortcomings of the traditional approaches to culture discussed above, there is a need to define culture in a way that allows for a subjectivist understanding of it. The following definition of culture may succeed in doing justice to culture seen as a 'software of the mind' (Hofstede, 1991) that seems to be shared by the other individuals from the same social group. As Keesing (1974, p. 58) puts it:

¹ As Ricœur (1981, p. 243) puts it, 'all objectifying knowledge about our position in society, in a social class, in a cultural tradition and in history is preceded by a relation of *belonging* upon which we can never entirely reflect'.

Culture, conceived as a system of competence shared in its broad design and deeper principles, and varying between individuals in its specificities, is [...] not all of what an individual knows and thinks and feels about his world. It is his *theory of what his fellows know, believe and mean*, his theory of the code being followed, the game being played, in the society into which he was born.

If culture is to be understood as defined above, I would like to point out three major reasons why we are then unable to describe a given culture as a whole. First, a social group's culture is a different 'theory' for each different member of this social group. Culture is thus not really shared by the members of the social group, although it is strongly perceived as being shared by them. Second, a given person may be in large measure unconscious of this 'theory' (ibid.), i.e. of the beliefs and assumptions that are at the core of her/his (cultural) identity. This does not mean, however, that these beliefs and assumptions are bound to remain totally unconscious: as I will later argue, certain situations provide excellent opportunities to become aware of some deep cultural values and make sense of one's cultural identity. Third, this 'theory', i.e. the individual's cultural identity, is to be constructed and reconstructed over time, especially through the interactions with others. What we need here is not only an approach of cross-cultural management that does justice to cognitive dimensions (Cray and Mallory, 1998, pp. 90-3), but one that focuses on interaction rather than comparison, such as, to a large extent, in Holden's (2002) view. In this context, the bicultural interaction as experienced by the involved individuals is a particularly interesting phenomenon to study.

The Bicultural Interaction from a Dialogic Perspective

First, I should need to explain what is meant by 'bicultural' in this paper. My assumption is not that there is such a thing as an objectively 'bicultural situation' where two cultures, and only two, would be involved. To me, a situation can be described as 'bicultural' insofar as most of the individuals involved in that situation perceive it as such, i.e. they feel that the situation is characterized by the presence of two and only two clear-cut social groups (representing e.g. different nations, and/or different former organizations, and/or different professions, etc.) and that they clearly belong to one of these two groups – and do not belong to the other group. I should also need to explain why I wish to focus on these 'bicultural' situations. There are three main reasons for that. First, bicultural situations are common in organizations, and more and more so,

whether one talks about foreign subsidiaries, mergers, acquisitions, joint-ventures, alliances, etc.² Second, the bicultural situation can be seen as one in which intercultural complexity is minimized, simply because it is perceived as involving only two cultures³. The ‘absolute relativity’ between these two cultures makes each more salient. Third, and most importantly, I will argue in this paper that bicultural situations create a distinctive kind of reality, precisely because of the ‘absolute relativity’ mentioned above, and that they should represent, to the involved individuals, a great opportunity of making sense of their culture, i.e. of making their unconscious ‘theory’ (as culture is defined by Keesing, see above) more conscious, as well as of (re)constructing this cultural identity. I should also briefly explain what I mean by ‘interaction’. This word conveys, I think, three important ideas. First, and quite straightforwardly, people working in organizations are ‘acting’, in that I assume work to imply ‘action’. Second, people working together are ‘inter’-acting, which also means that they are acting on each other, and affecting each other. Third, people involved in bicultural situations are actors – and ‘interactors’ - of their cultural identities, in that they act according to a sort of ‘cultural script’ that shapes their behaviours, but also in that they construct and reconstruct these cultural identities through action and interaction by playing a role ‘*in response* to the roles played by others’ (Kramsch, 1999, p. 45).

Now, let me explain further what I have called above the opportunity of making sense of one’s culture in the bicultural interaction. What I mean is that the encounter with a cultural otherness that strikes as ‘different’ allows for a questioning of one’s own cultural beliefs and assumptions, just as coming across ‘incongruous events that do not make sense within [one’s] perceptual frameworks’ (Starbuck and Milliken, 1988, p. 52) can be seen as an ‘occasion for sensemaking’ (Weick, 1995, p. 100). The idea of ‘sensemaking’ is interesting here, because its properties as listed by Weick⁴ provide much insight into the discussion of the bicultural interaction: making sense of one’s

² In many of these situations, interestingly, clear-cut differences that define the situation as bicultural are displayed both in national and (former) organizational terms. It does not mean, however, that the situation will be bicultural in a more clear-cut manner than in a situation where the perceived difference / opposition between the two groups is merely in regional terms, for instance.

³ I am well aware, however, that, beyond this perception of two cultural groups facing each other, each individual may already represent many cultures, since her/his identity can be culturally defined at many levels: national, regional, organizational, professional, gender, etc.

⁴ Weick (1995, pp. 17-61) lists ‘seven properties of sensemaking’: it is ‘grounded in identity construction’, ‘retrospective’, ‘enactive of sensible environments’, ‘social’, ‘ongoing’, ‘focused on and by extracted cues’ and ‘driven by plausibility rather than accuracy’.

own cultural identity is possible only retrospectively thanks to an ongoing process of social interaction, in which identity is constructed and reconstructed. In the bicultural interaction, the encounter with the ‘incongruous’ is likely to be more frequent than in most other organizational situations. The sensemaking opportunity is thus particularly present, but, in order to take advantage of it, there is a need to have a real relation between the two parties, i.e. the two cultural groups. This is where I wish to introduce Bakhtinian dialogism in my discussion, as I seek to demonstrate that a dialogic bicultural relationship should allow each individual involved to learn about oneself from the other(s) / otherness, and in turn learn about the other(s) / otherness thanks to the enhanced understanding of oneself, and then again learn about oneself thanks to this enhanced understanding, etc. in a hermeneutic-like process during which the individual discovers, but also reinvents and reconstructs her/himself. My first attempt to address this idea of a self- and cross-cultural learning process has consisted in analyzing bicultural interactions from a ‘dialectical’ perspective (see Fougère 2002). In this paper I wish to switch from this dialectical argument to a dialogic one, which means that the relational nature of being is to become the focal factor rather than the rationality of one abstract consciousness presupposed in dialectics. Dialogism is indeed found to address better interactional aspects, as it recognizes that ‘the real object of study’ in social sciences is ‘the interrelation and interaction of “spirits”’ (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 144). Especially, the switch from dialectics to Bakhtinian dialogism will lead me to introduce the core concept of ‘thirdness’.

Bakhtin’s main argument is that the construction of meaning is in essence dialogic, that all meaning is relational⁵, i.e. that meaning arises in one reality when that reality encounters another reality. Especially, the individual does not exist, in that s/he cannot be defined and thus have a meaning, without ‘the other’. As Holquist (1990, p. 18) argues, ‘in dialogism, the very capacity to have consciousness is based on *otherness*’. Dialogism can be described as a differential relation, in which otherness determines who the individual is not, and, therefore, who s/he is. As Kramsch (1999, p. 45) puts it, ‘we perceive the world through the time/space of the self (our two basic categories of perception), but also through the time/space of the other’. We are relational beings, in

⁵ Bakhtin has been described as particularly receptive to Einstein’s relativity theory, i.e. that ‘one body’s motion has meaning only in relation to another body’; similarly, for Bakhtin, meaning should be the result of a ‘dialogue’ between and among bodies (Holquist, 1990, 20-1).

that our identity is reflexively constructed and reconstructed all the time through our relations with others⁶. This is similar to Weick's (1995, p. 20) argument that our identities are 'constituted out of the process of interaction' and that 'to shift among interactions is to shift among definitions of the self'. Bakhtin (1984, p. 287) expressed this idea in the following way:

I am conscious of myself only while revealing myself for another, through another, and with the help of another. The most important acts constituting self-consciousness are determined by a relationship toward another consciousness (toward a *thou*). [...] every internal experience ends up on the boundary, encounters another, and in this tension-filled encounter lies its entire essence. [...] The very being of man (both internal and external) is the *deepest communion*. *To be* means *to communicate*. [...] To be means to be for the other and through the other, for oneself. A person has no internal sovereign territory, he is wholly and always on the boundary. [...] I cannot manage without another, I cannot become myself without another; I must find myself in another by finding another in myself (in mutual reflection and mutual acceptance).

Therefore, for Bakhtin, an individual's (cultural) identity is being constructed and defined in the interaction with another, through the response(s) to this other's utterance(s). This utterance is itself always a response to some degree, since 'it expresses the speaker's attitude toward others' utterances and not just [her/]his attitude toward the object of [her/]his utterance' (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 92). Moreover, as Todorov (1981, p. 97) argues, 'any utterance is [...] a conception of the world, a *Weltanschauung*', and thus expresses one's identity. Addressivity, i.e. an utterance's 'quality of being directed to someone'⁷ (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 95), is a 'central characteristic of any utterance since it provides an anchorage between dialogism and a theory of "identity"' (Guillaume, 2002, p. 9). Thus, dialogue in the Bakhtinian sense is composed of three elements, 'an utterance, a reply, and a relation between the two' (Holquist, 1990, p. 38). It is this third, in-between relational element that is the most important and gives meaning to the other two elements. This relational element is to be understood both in geographical terms and in historical terms, in that it is also there to

⁶ On the idea of 'reflexive identity construction', see especially the works of Lindgren and Wåhlin (2001; 2002).

⁷ In a dialogue, an utterance both responds to the other's previous utterance and anticipates the other's response: 'When constructing my utterance, I try actively to determine this response. Moreover, I try to act in accordance with the response I anticipate, so this anticipated response, in turn, exerts an active influence on my utterance' (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 95). The utterance is thus inscribed in a 'double interact' (as defined by Weick, 1979, p. 89) process.

link present to past and future, and is ‘the constitutive warrant of historical change’ (Kramersch, 1999, p. 46) in the interaction. It is also ‘the third’ that allows for the possibility of the individual sensemaking process outlined above. As Holquist (1990, p. 38) writes:

The thirdness of dialogue frees my existence from the very circumscribed meaning it has in the limited configuration of self/other relations available in the immediate time and particular place of my life. For in later times and in other places, there will always be other configurations of such relations, and in conjunction with *that* other, my self will be differently understood. This degree of thirdness outside the present event insures the possibility of whatever transgression I can achieve toward myself.

The above mentioned concept of ‘transgression’ refers to ‘the ability to see the interaction as a dialogic event between [...] the self and the other, from a vantage point outside that event and not as a member within it’ (Hall, 1995, pp. 224-5), ‘in which attention is focused on the resources and identities involved in the event’ (Pavlenko and Lantolf, 2000, p. 174). Seeing things from that point outside the event itself should allow one to take advantage of the sensemaking opportunity offered in the encounter with another.

Thirdness is not exclusively a Bakhtinian concept⁸. The ideas of ‘Third Space’ as developed by Soja (1996) and Bhabha (1994) are also worth mentioning here, as they are very much developments of Bakhtin’s seminal ideas. Soja, elaborating on Lefebvre (1991), introduces a ‘trialectic’ of the individual, the social and the relational. He points to the connection and interdependence between Self and Other, which is to be seen from a third viewpoint. He argues that this ‘critical thirding’ allows for a ‘creative process of restructuring that draws selectively and strategically from the two opposing categories to open new alternatives’ (Soja, 1996, p. 5). Bhabha’s argument stems from the fact that ‘understanding someone from another culture requires an effort of translation from one perspective to the other, that manages to keep both in the same field of vision’ (Kramersch, 1999, p. 47). Consequently, in the postmodern world, the cultural space, which is constructed by our words and those of others, is a ‘highly contradictory and ambivalent space’ where meaning is to be negotiated (Bhabha, 1994, pp. 37-9):

⁸ Serres’s (1982, pp. 224-34) ‘theory of the quasi-object’ is another interesting theory in which thirdness is that which provides the relation between people or groups of people.

It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew. [...] the theoretical recognition of the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualizing an *international* culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the *diversity* of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's *hybridity*. To that end we should remember that it is the 'inter' – the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *in-between* space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture. It makes it possible to begin envisaging national, anti-nationalist histories of the 'people'. And by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves.

Bhabha's conception of the Third Space is dialogic, and it can be read as a development of another major Bakhtinian concept, that of carnival: 'a zone of mediation and activity that seeks to subvert' (Lucas, 1997, p. 4), in which the individual 'is both actor and spectator; he loses his sense of individuality, passes through a zero point of carnivalesque activity and splits into a subject of the spectacle and an object of the game' (Kristeva, 1980, p. 78). I will now try to show that both Bhabha's Third Space and Bakhtin's idea of 'carnival consciousness' may be seen as too idealistic, at least if one considers their possible application in the context of bicultural interactions in organizations.

A Deficit of Thirdness

The main limitations of Bakhtin's perspective lie, according to Morson and Emerson (1990, p. 470), in its presupposition of a benevolent attitude from the people involved in the interactions:

[...] the implied potential other in [Bakhtin's] dialogues lives on friendly boundaries and continuums. Bakhtin's other is as a rule benignly active, always at work to define us in ways we can live with and profit from [...] Bakhtin ignores the dangers of carnivalistic violence and antinomian energy. In short, it is not carnival but the "carnival symbolic" that inspires him, not real individual bodies in interaction but the potential for extending, transcending, and rendering immortal the collective body.

In the context of bicultural interactions in organizations, individuals usually are far from experiencing the benevolent atmosphere that Bakhtin seems to assume. Some of the

reasons for this are intrinsically related to the problems of bicultural dynamics, and some worsening factors are to be found in the modern organizational context itself.

As to the potentially negative bicultural dynamics as such, they can be explained by the well-known social phenomenon of identification to the ingroup as opposed to the outgroup, but also by what I would call 'an addressivity gap'. As I have briefly written above, addressivity, another core concept in Bakhtin's theorizing, has to do with the idea that 'meaning can come into existence only when two or more voices come into contact', 'when the voice of a listener responds to the voice of a speaker'; it can be defined as 'the quality of turning to someone else' (Wertsch, 1991, p. 52). As Bakhtin (1986, p. 95) formulated it, 'both the composition and, particularly, the style of the utterance depend on those to whom the utterance is addressed, how the speaker (or writer) senses and imagines his addressees, and the force of their effect on the utterance'. Consequently, in a bicultural interaction, addressivity is likely not to be satisfactory, because of two distorting tendencies that the involved individuals might suffer from: projected similarity and stereotyping. Projected similarity 'refers to the assumption that people are more similar to you than they actually are or that another person's situation is more similar to your own situation than it in fact is' (Adler, 1997, p. 83). When addressing someone whose cognitive time/space has been constructed in another cultural environment, the culturally determined codes that one has been using within one's culture may not be appropriate. There may thus be a 'lack of addressivity'. In addition, stereotyping, which can be seen as one way of dealing with the cognitive necessity of categorizing (see Illman and Widell, 2001; Widell, 2002), also has a distorting influence that may be detrimental to addressivity, and which does not necessarily disappear with time. As Brown (1995, p. 117) explains, 'stereotypes can have self-fulfilling properties, creating in the targets of their focus the very properties hypothesized to exist', which explains why very often, in bicultural dynamics, stereotypes are more verified than denied and the two cultural groups confront more than they cooperate.

If I now turn to what happens when these bicultural dynamics are to be found within the organizational context, I would like to mention three organizational problematics - relating to order / consensus, power and pressure / stress respectively - that may be affected by the bicultural situation in a way that is likely to make individuals at work

feel more uncomfortable. First, the bicultural situation brings about more perceived uncertainty and dissensus – through, simply, ‘difference’ and the fear it inspires -, which cannot satisfy the need for ‘order’ and ‘consensus’ that organizations, at least in the more traditional approaches (see e.g. Reed, 1996, pp. 34-8, on the ‘rationalistic’ and ‘integrational’ views of organizations), are supposed to have. Second, the power relationships are affected by the bicultural nature of the situation and may be, to some extent, defined in cultural terms: one culture might be seen as ‘dominant’, in power, or at least more so than the other one. This relative power of one culture over the other one can be due to fairly obvious reasons, as in acquisition situations (see especially Olie, 1994), but can also be caused by more insidious, indirect phenomena, such as the use of certain languages that may have ‘empowering’ characteristics in certain contexts (see especially Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999, 431-3). Third, the felt time pressure and consequent work stress that are inherent in modern organizations are likely to be worsened in the bicultural situation, since they are chiefly psychological phenomena that tend to correlate positively with added perceived uncertainty.

The conjunction of these dynamic bicultural factors and worsening organizational factors make the situation not favourable for the development of a constructive ‘thirdness’, i.e. a relational element historically constructed between the two cultural groups that form the bicultural interaction. The history of the bicultural relationship is often one of confrontation, in which cultural difference can be used as a good excuse on which to blame failure - while this failure may be due to an inability to cope with time constraints for instance. It is always easier, and somehow more satisfying, to hold other people, i.e. people who are ‘other’, responsible for failure⁹ rather than to try to do justice to the deeper reasons for this failure. In situations where, on top of these negative dynamics, clear power inequalities are perceived between the two groups, the cultural confrontation is bound to be more acute¹⁰. By making people cognitively and

⁹ Reformulating Miller’s and Ross’s (1975, pp. 213-4) argument around the ‘variously labeled *ego-defensive*, *ego-protective*, or *ego-biased* attribution’, Levitt and March (1988, p. 324; see also Levinthal and March 1993, p. 105) claim that ‘leaders of organizations are inclined to accept paradigms that attribute organizational successes to their own actions and organizational failures to the actions of others or to external forces, but opposition groups in an organization are likely to have the converse principle for attributing causality’. Similarly, Brown (1995, p. 117) argues that, in interactions between groups, ‘positive and negative behaviours by the ingroup are attributed internally and externally respectively’ and that ‘for outgroup behaviours the reverse applies’.

¹⁰ Olie (1994, p. 164) argues that in acquisition as opposed to merger situations, there tends to be a need for ‘a unilateral process of adaptation by the acquired company to the culture of the dominant partner’ and

emotionally more tense and stressed, all these organizational conditions favour yet more stereotyping, and the stereotypes soon ‘also become personal opinions with emotional saturation’ (Illman and Widell, 2001, p. 10). Therefore, in most bicultural interactions in organizations, there seems to be a serious deficit of thirdness as it should be understood in the Bakhtinian sense. There is, therefore, a need to move to a different level as a strategy ‘for deblocking the fixations between the two parties’ (Janssens and Steyaert, 1999, p. 134). In other words, there is a need to coordinate thirdness in the organization, to create a ‘third space’ where the two opposite views can meet and be made sense of.

The Need for Organizing (with) Thirdness

In an organizational bicultural interaction, it is the organization itself that legitimates the situation and creates the relationship between the two cultural groups in the first place. It should thus chiefly be the role of the management of this organization to be the unifying element and to ensure that the relationship between the two parties is satisfactory. For that purpose, a voluntarist policy emphasizing dialogue and seeking to achieve a good balance between the two opposing views should be pursued. It is not necessarily all that idealistic to call for such a policy, since, in many respects, looking for compromises between conflicting pressures can be argued to be one of the main functions of management. Indeed, as Astley and Van de Ven (1983, p. 265) put it, organizational life is characterized by a number of ‘dialectical tensions’. Organizing and managing, therefore, may chiefly consist in the ‘dialectical reconciliation’ (ibid., p. 252) of these tensions.

In bicultural interactions, these dialectical tensions may easily take the form of ‘cultural antagonisms’¹¹, in that they tend to be defined in cultural terms: one culture can be associated with ‘person-orientation’ and the other one with ‘task-orientation’, and other similar bipolar oppositions can be made, such as ‘dissensus vs. consensus’, ‘transversality vs. segmentation’, ‘implicit vs. explicit communication’ (Pateau, 1998, p. 156; author’s translation), ‘individualism vs. collectivism’, ‘masculinity vs. femininity’

that often, ‘the result is that the acquired company clings to its own cultural practices and resists any changes imposed by the acquirer’, hence a sort of ‘antagonistic acculturation’ (Demorgon, 2000, p. 27; author’s translation). On the relationship between inter-group conflict and difference in power and status see also Argyle, 1991, p. 219.

¹¹ On the ‘logic of antagonisms’, see especially (in French) Pateau 1998, pp. 150-4, and Demorgon, 2000, pp. 33-70.

(Hofstede, 1980; 1991), ‘high- vs. low-context’, ‘polychronism vs. monochronism’ (Hall and Hall, 1990), ‘flexibility’ vs. ‘reliability’, ‘center’ vs. ‘periphery’, etc. However, in these antagonisms, the two sides should never be seen as mutually exclusive, nor should they be understood as associating one culture with only one side each time. Rather, the role of management should be to reconcile these two sides in the best possible way, to obtain a good global balance, for instance, between ‘consensus and dissensus’, ‘collectivism and individualism’, or ‘flexibility and reliability’. For that purpose, the management of a bicultural organization should be able to adopt a dialogic line and occupy a space that allows for a dialectical reconciliation, an ‘in-between’, ‘third space’ which may provide a consciousness of both requirements and a vision of how to solve the tension between them. That requires a will to favour processes of collective negotiations (see e.g. Holden, 2002, p. 93) and interactive translation (ibid., pp. 228-36) between the two cultural groups involved. But that also presupposes that the view of the management should be culturally fair – rather than culture-neutral, which would be impossible -, especially in addressing the tricky problems connected to power relationships. Indeed, the tension between ‘center’ and ‘periphery’, if perceived as intercultural, may be the most problematic for the organization. For instance, in the case of a foreign subsidiary of a fairly centralized multinational company, the local management should try to act as a third element, which can link the ‘center’, manifesting itself in the decisions coming all the way from the headquarters, to the ‘periphery’, i.e. the local employees of the subsidiary.

Unfortunately, the management of bicultural organizations rarely is in such a ‘culturally fair’ position, because, for it to occupy such a position, it should first need to be perceived as being ‘outside’ of the bipolar situation. As it is, it usually is seen by the involved individuals as being very clearly on one side rather than the other. It often comes down to the manager her/himself, her/his nationality or/and former organizational unit. In some cases, however, management tends to be perceived by both parties involved as rather on the other side (as in some previous bicultural projects I have been studying), which probably stems from the fact that, when the situation is actually fairly ‘in-between’, people tend to notice what is abnormal and ‘other’ more than they notice what actually should seem normal to them. This suggests that the ‘thirding’ influence of management should also be made obvious to both parties. That

does not necessarily imply that the manager should be from a 'third culture', but probably that s/he should be able to go 'back and forth' between the views of both cultures involved, and thus be, somehow, 'in-between' as a result. In his discussion of 'boundary' aspects, Wenger (1998, p. 109) notes that, within organizations, certain individuals 'in charge of special projects across functional units often find themselves brokering', that is, they use their multimembership to different communities of practice in order 'to transfer some element of one practice into another'. Managers of bicultural organizations should also see their role as involving a great deal of 'brokering' across boundaries. For that purpose they would need to have membership, or at least some form of cultural legitimacy, in both communities. The 'brokering' activity consists to a large extent in 'processes of translation, coordination and alignment between perspectives' (ibid.), and it obviously requires enough legitimacy on both sides in order to address the conflicting interests in a manner perceived as fair. In Wenger's argument, a brokering person can usually be claimed to belong 'at the same time to both practices and to neither' (ibid.).

In the discussion of bicultural interactions and thirdness, the problematization of 'interface' is also highly relevant. As Holden (2002, p. 212) puts it, it is 'an advantageous term in that [it] implies a point of contact, a common boundary', while not having to be robust or permanent, nor permeable. I will argue that organizing (with) thirdness implies the setting-up and ongoing management of 'interfaces' as tools for ensuring the needed relationship between two specific groups of people having to work together. Interface management may involve the use of 'boundary objects' (Star and Griesemer, 1989), objects that 'serve to coordinate the perspectives of various constituencies for some purpose' (Wenger, 1999, p. 106), and which can be concrete or/and abstract. Thinking of artifacts that are designed for organizational purposes – e.g. documents and systems - as 'boundary objects' could enhance thirdness, by setting up as fundamental tasks such as 'connecting the communities involved, understanding practices, and managing boundaries [...]'. It is then imperative to consider a broader range of connections beyond the artifact itself, both to reconcile various perspectives in the nexus and to take advantage of their diversity' (ibid., p. 108). The creation of coincident boundaries between different worlds should thus not be seen as an end in itself, but as 'an anchor for more widely-ranging, riskier claims' (Star and Griesemer,

1989, 410), opening toward new cooperative possibilities, thanks to both additional convergence and a better awareness of divergent views and stakes. However, it does not mean that ‘boundary objects’ will be supposed to altogether dissolve the distortion in addressivity described above, nor should it be their purpose: in order for them to be adaptable across different communities, they actually require a certain ‘vagueness’ that allows them to serve as ‘a means of communicating and cooperating symbolically – a ‘good enough’ road map for both parties’ (ibid.). It would, in any case, not really be desirable for addressivity to be ‘perfect’, since it would suggest that there would be no room for learning left. In addition, there can be no such thing as ‘perfect addressivity’, and especially, all cooperative interaction between people from different cultures implies a ‘continuous levelling of vagueness’, as Barinaga (2002, 183), drawing on Wittgenstein (1953), puts it.

Holden (2002) provides examples of how interfaces can be managed from a few cases studies he has conducted. One of them involves the setting-up of regular multicultural seminars; they are described as follows (ibid., pp. 216):

The seminar is a carefully planned event. It is a kind of experiment designed to reduce personal and professional barriers among the individuals who take part. Musical interludes and group exercises such as painting encourage people to find solidarity. A major consideration is that the seminar also provides participants with skills for participation in multicultural teams.

Although, in that case, seminars are multicultural, similar experiments would be greatly valuable in the case of bicultural organizations. They could enhance a process of ‘collective sense-making’ (ibid., 92-3), involving negotiations of meaning in search for a common understanding, allow for ‘interactive translation’ (ibid., 228-9), and provide the conditions favourable to ‘articulate interanimation for knowledge-sharing’ (ibid., 240). Language is obviously a critical factor in anything that deals with the interface between two groups of people. Rather than as a barrier, language should be seen and used as a facilitator (Holden, 2002, 233-4; Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999, 430-1), meant not only to share views but also possibly to bridge them. In many cases where neither cultural group is supposed to be composed of native English speakers, the use of English as a mediation language can indeed be quite beneficial as a third, ‘boundary language’, especially since it tends to be satisfactory regarding the general need to ‘level

vagueness' (Barinaga 2002), as argued above. All these can be seen as tools to reach a satisfactory – but not 'perfect' - addressivity, and allow for 'communion', which, in Weick's (1996, p. 213) description, is synonymous with 'organizing to learn', creating an environment in which 'individuals must be prepared for transformation, to lose and gain definitions of self' (Marshall, 1989, p. 287).

Third Parties and Thirdness

If management clearly fails to directly provide the thirdness that is necessary to the bicultural situation, then it should come down to some 'professional Others', as Meyer (1996, p. 247) calls them, to try and bring about this third element, or at least to initiate the mutual understanding necessary for the development of thirdness. Janssens and Steyaert (1999, p. 135) call for such a 'third party intervention':

Whenever two people, firms, countries or parties face one another as blocs unprepared and unwilling to bulge, the only way to create some room for manoeuvre is to bring in a third party. The third party then adopts a dialogic line. [...] Basically, a third party intervention implies a process whereby the initial dyad is developed to become a triadic interaction. In a sense every interaction can be called "triadic", in that the space that the two parties generate between them is the "third" element. [...] as the difference widens, the "space between" needs to be interpreted by a third party, who reveals through suggestions and reactions and often by simply being there, the relationship and its malleability. Again, through dialogue, the third party intervention is able to manage the differences in a constructive way.

Consultants, for instance, could act as such a 'third party'. However, the idea that they should 'not in the first instance offer any substantive solution to the conflict in question' but should above all 'listen before asking questions or getting mixed up in the others' messages' (ibid.) may not be appealing to them, nor may they always have the required skills to keep the dialogue alive. There should be more professional mediators or 'facilitators' that could take on the role of 'third parties' in these situations, as specific training is certainly needed in order to practice this form of dialogic 'organizational therapy'. Holden (2002, pp. 111-31) analyzes the management of such facilitators in the case study of a Danish pharmaceutical company. In that case, the company itself set up a multicultural group of facilitators, whose task was to 'assist corporate management in transferring the values associated with [the company] [...] to all units throughout the world' (ibid., p. 112). Although in this example it was supposedly more a matter of

knowledge transfer than deeper therapy, many of the issues encountered in the management of this initiative could be relevant in the case of problematic bicultural interactions. Especially, the way the group was feeling separate from both the company's central decision-making and the subsidiaries they were dealing with provided them a sense of 'in-between-ness', and this perceived isolation 'was a key factor in creating [...] intense bonds of loyalty to each other', despite their consciousness of 'a kind of a divide between the Danish and non-Danish members of the team' (ibid., p. 122). This perception not to belong anywhere apparently allowed the team to become a more 'culturally fair' third party.

To bring my discussion to a close, I would like to mention another possible third party: the researcher who studies the bicultural interaction. It should be possible for her/him to adopt the appropriate 'listening' attitude characteristic of the dialogic approach. I am convinced that conducting qualitative, conversational interviews can allow the involved individuals to retrospectively make sense of their ongoing bicultural experience by, much in the way that Socrates practiced his art of 'maieutics', giving birth to their deep reflections on this experience. As Bakhtin (1984, p. 110) himself pointed out, Socratic dialogues can be seen as having their basis in 'the dialogic nature of truth'¹², since 'Socratic truth ("meaning") is the product of a dialogical relationship among speakers' (Kristeva, 1980, p. 81). Dialogism as a perspective can thus be argued to originate with Socrates and his *dialogue* with some of his contemporaries, especially Protagoras, allegedly 'the first person who asserted that in every question there were two sides to the argument exactly opposite to one another' (Billig, 1987, p. 41). Being inspired by the ancestral maieutic art, far from being retrograde, may well help to find a suitable method to both enhance people's sensemaking on the bicultural interaction and, in turn, study this sensemaking process.

Conclusions and Implications

This conceptual paper has been an attempt to conceptualize bicultural interactions in organizations in a novel way, so as to try to do justice to how these interactions are experienced by the involved individuals. In order to study such bicultural interactions with an emphasis on the individual experience, my first step has been to look for a

definition of culture that may allow for a subjectivist analysis of it: a culture – and a cultural identity -, from that perspective, is always what individuals make of it, and depends on whom they are interacting with. Further, a dialogic perspective on the bicultural interaction provides insight on how cultural identities are dynamically, reflexively defined and redefined in contact with a cultural otherness. It also allows to point to ‘thirdness’, the historically constructed relation that exists between the two parties, and the apparent lack thereof in many bicultural interactions in organizations.

To address this problem of a lack of thirdness, my prescriptive suggestion is to try to provide thirdness through a ‘dialogically aware’, culturally fair management of the organization, for which the management of ‘interfaces’ is put to the fore, or through the introduction of third parties that can (inter-)act as a mediating force helping to make sense of the situation. The researcher, by seeking to give birth to the involved individuals’ retrospective reflections on their bicultural experiences, may also be able to offer such a sensemaking opportunity. More qualitative, purely inductive, ‘maieutic’ research, based on conversational interviews, should be needed in order to both study people’s experiences and contribute to a form of ‘organizational therapy’. Such research material could then be exploited in a dialogic way, thereby including a reflexive dimension by analyzing the researcher’s interaction with her/his respondent(s). Further, normative implications could include suggestions on how the researcher may provide thirdness during the interviews and other interactional situations in which s/he may be involved with the organization. Descriptive research based on participant observation aiming to show how meaning is negotiated and translated in daily organizational life as well as in more specific contexts such as e.g. specially designed bicultural seminars within the organization could be highly interesting as well.

Beyond the promise of more efficient cooperation between the two cultural groups, what is at stake, for the people who are involved in bicultural interactions in organizations, is the possibility to switch from the alienating frustrations of the confrontational situation to the emancipating understanding and redefinition of oneself and the other: exploring a ‘Third Space’ allowing one to be liberated from ‘the politics of polarity’¹³ (Bhabha, 1994, p. 39), to see ‘oneself as another’ (Ricoeur, 1992), to be ‘a

¹² ‘Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born *between people* collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction’ (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 110).

¹³ See the longer quotation above.

stranger to oneself”, in a situation where everybody would acknowledge themselves as ‘foreigners, foreign to bonds and communities’ (Kristeva, 1988, p. 9; author’s translation), and thus could, to the extent that it may be necessary for a fruitful work interaction, feel part of an *intercultural*, ‘third’ organizational culture.

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