INTRODUCTION

Cultural difference in organizations is often referred to as national cultural difference. Yet as culture provides a focus point for collective belonging, it can also be conceptualized as ‘collective identity’, a direction this chapter is going to follow. Collective identities can develop on different levels, even if different aspects of culture, for example, artefacts, might be shaped by an organization’s national cultural surroundings. This suggests that organizations are made up of more than mere national cultural identities – we can also find professional cultures, organizational cultures and site culture, to only name a few.

It is often suggested that these alternate collective identities are mere ‘subcultures’ and hence of lesser importance than national cultural differences. However, from the anthropological point of view, all levels of collective identity can and might be equally powerful – depending, for example, on context, plays of power, individual or group agenda. Using the case of a German high-tech company and its offshore site in India, this chapter will show when and how these alternative collective identities become salient. For the sake of confidentiality, all names have been changed.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND METHOD

Culture is many things, depending on perspective. However, to understand the findings from this case, one has to look at culture anthropologically, and this is the reason for the first section of this chapter to be devoted to theory.

Recent anthropological theory since Geertz (1973) conceptualizes culture as an open process of sense-making in interaction with changing boundaries. This making of a collective ‘We’ always takes place in interaction with the making of a group of ‘Other’ (Ricoeur, 1992). Perception of collective ‘Self’
and ‘Other’, inside (emic) and outside (etic) views on cultural discourse usually differ from each other. For the study of culture this means: Whom actors in the field perceive as different might, and most likely will, differ from expected difference from the outside view.

To uncover these emic views on collective identities, fieldwork has become the method of choice in organizational anthropology. Fieldwork essentially relies on the researcher to go into the field, to live with the actors and learn to live like them. On the one hand, fieldworkers participate, on the other hand, they observe action and actors from a higher stance. Through constant participant observation and reflexive practice researchers are drawn into a relationship between researcher and field which they keep track of through constant field notes. Thus, researchers themselves are the main tool of research and analysis.

For this case, two years of fieldwork were conducted in the field. The field was divided into the primary field, that is, the technical department to be researched, and the secondary field, that is, other corporate departments such as human resources that interacted with the primary field.

Data in the primary field was collected through initial interviews with 15 key actors and subsequent participant observation over two years (18 months at the German site, six weeks at the Indian site), including approximately 250 formal and informal interviews with members from three sites. After six months of research a core group of 31 key actors was identified. Interpretations were constantly mirrored back to the field and discussed with key actors in focus sessions until agreed upon to establish inter-subjectivity.

Data in the secondary field was collected through 34 days of participant observations of workshops, 36 qualitative semi-structured and 50 informal interviews. Additionally, I relied on cultural documents such as internal information distributed by corporate communications and corporate press releases and information spread by the media.

CASE PRESENTATION: CHIP-TECH CORPORATION

The field is a German designer and manufacturer of micro-chips, to be called ChipTech Corporation. ChipTech can look back on more than 100 years of organizational history. Its headquarters are located in Stadt, one of the major cities in Germany.

Approximately 20 years ago, corporate internationalization began. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the company has approximately 8000 employees in Germany and 35 000 worldwide. During the time of the research, approximately 15 per cent of the employees in Stadt were non-German nationals, mainly from other European countries. The official corporate language was German.
Virtually every ChipTech employee has an engineering degree, mainly a Master of Science (that is, the German degree called ‘diplom’), mainly in electrical engineering or computer science, depending on the task at hand. In research and development departments, one third of the employees have even completed a doctorate in these fields.

I will call this highly qualified technical workforce ‘engineers’ which is also the name they give themselves. As several authors have shown, engineering communities can be viewed as a transnational and de-localized community of experts with global, partly virtual practices that are considered to be highly universal (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997; Mahadevan, 2009).

During the time of the research, ChipTech ramped up an offshore site in the Indian town of Puram, mainly to realize the advantages of low labour costs. The corporate unit that was responsible for the ramp-up in Puram is the primary field of this case. It is to be called Technical Unit (TU). During the time of the research, TU consisted of approximately 450 members at three major sites, that is, the German central headquarters (approximately 250 members), a site in France (approximately 60 members) and a site in India (approximately 140 members at peak).

The purpose of TU: engineers from all three sites developed a complex, interdependent and distributed technological system that was to be used by internal customers for improvement of microchip design. Thus, TU is an internal department, located between service and research and development. Its customers are those ChipTech units that develop microchips which is the purpose of ChipTech organization. All TU managers had a degree in software or electrical engineering; I will therefore call them ‘engineering managers’.

The secondary field of research was other company departments such as human resources (HR) and external providers of intercultural training who were employed by HR. These so-called central departments are the only departments that are headed by non-engineering managers and staffed with people without an engineering degree. I will therefore call members of these departments ‘non-engineering managers’.

From the actors’ perspective, the ramp-up of the Indian site constituted a major organizational and cultural change. Uncertainty was aggravated by profound reorganization – called ‘the reorganization’ by employees – that started shortly after the ramp-up decision had been made and threatened the existence of TU and thus influenced the cross-site work practice tremendously. It was feared by virtually every employee that ‘the reorganization’ in the end might make them superfluous. Parallel to these insecure boundary conditions, TU employees were required to transfer knowledge to India and build up expertise over there.
CASE ANALYSIS: COLLECTIVE IDENTITIES IN THE FIELD

Dominant Discourses

Dominant etic discourse: national cultural identity

Regarding national culture, non-engineering managers in the secondary field of HR thought this concept to be of paramount importance to cross-site engineering work practice, more precisely to have a negative impact on it. Their firm belief could be summarized as: ‘National cultural difference exists and it does harm cross-site work.’ When the site in Puram was ramped up, non-engineering managers expected engineers to have ‘cross-cultural issues’ due to differences in religion, customs, tradition and etiquette between ‘Germany’ and ‘India’ – regardless, for example, of the fact that more than 15 nationalities were working together at TU in Germany – often communicating in English.

At the same time, non-engineering managers thought of engineers as being socially and thus interculturally incompetent. Hence, they expected engineers to have ‘intercultural’ issues in the national cultural sense. One company HR manager said: ‘They [the engineers] simply don’t have enough social skills – and how should they, considering the kind of work they do!’

This view on technical employees as being socially less competent due to the (technical) nature of their work is a common view held by non-engineering employees. Dahlén (1997, p. 1) has called this phenomenon a ‘packaging of knowledge’. According to Dahlén this packaging serves two purposes: on the one hand, it alienates supposedly foreign cultures, on the other hand, it also legitimizes the cross-cultural manager’s claim to competence, for they are the only ones who can overcome this difference. To summarize Dahlén’s point: cross-cultural managers (he calls them ‘interculturalists’) need to first construct foreign cultures as ‘alien’ in order to make their own knowledge on cultural difference indispensable for the organization. If the Indian engineer were no different from the German one, then the cross-cultural manager and their knowledge would be superfluous.

The main interaction between TU and HR during the time of the research was through intercultural training activities: HR made it mandatory for every TU manager and project leader to attend a two-day intercultural training on India, Germany or France (or a combination of two of these countries). This training focused on national cultural difference. It worked with the intercultural dimensions of Hofstede (1980, 2003) and Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997) and pointed out the national cultural differences between these countries. It did acknowledge the presence of subcultures but merely mentioned them on a slide. When I observed one of these training sessions, a
mere eight minutes of two full working days was spent on the topic of professional subcultures.

**Dominant emic discourse: professional identity**

From the engineering perspective (meaning engineers and engineering management), culture was categorized as ‘national culture’ too. Yet only a few members of TU believed ‘culture’ in the sense of ‘national culture’ to have an influence on engineering work-practice. Culture in general was perceived as something outside one’s own work practice. As one engineer (himself of German nationality) describes another engineer (of Indian nationality): ‘He is not Indian. I know Vinod since four years, he is an expert in his topic, he is simply a colleague to me; we talk technically to each other.’ An Indian engineer at the Indian site said: ‘On the street, Germans don’t speak English – at work, people do speak English because this is the language of engineering.’ This can be interpreted as a firm belief in engineering as a global profession that is not impacted by national cultural difference.

When members of the secondary field – non-engineering managers – would hear of such statements, they would categorize it as a proof for lack of social skills among engineers and intensify their intercultural training programme efforts. Hence, they interpreted the engineers’ belief in engineering as a global profession as a rejection of national cultural difference.

Following Bennett’s (1986) model of intercultural learning, rejection of national cultural difference could indeed by interpreted as the ethnocentric stage of ‘minimalization’ in intercultural learning. According to Bennett (1986), most intercultural learners will first negate and then minimize national cultural difference before they can then fully acknowledge difference. The full acknowledgement of difference is seen by Bennett as a prerequisite for trying out alternative roles, changing one’s own role and incorporating other cultures into one’s own values and behaviour.

However, if one follows the anthropological approach and tries to uncover emic discourses, one has to discard Bennett’s model as an etic one. The anthropological demand goes one step further: How it really is, is of no consequence for culture is made and shaped by actors through their own imagination and sense-making in interaction. In that sense, objective reality does not exist. Any intercultural training activity should thus focus on uncovering emic perspectives and not objective truth.

From the emic perspective, the respective other to engineers is not ‘the German’ or ‘the Indian’, it is ‘management’. Or, as engineering managers and engineers during times of crisis often commented: ‘Luckily enough, we have not yet reached the stage where people like you [that is, people without an engineering degree] can become manager at ChipTech.’ Or they would say: ‘No wonder that [bad thing] is happening: we simply have too many non-
engineering people managing the company.’ If one truly takes the emic perspectives first, then any intercultural training activity for engineers would need to incorporate cultural discourses on the management-engineering difference for more than mere eight minutes in two days.

**Frontstage versus backstage integration**

Based on Kunda (1992), qualitative studies of engineering practice have viewed the engineering-management conflict in technical companies as given. Two reasons are that, first, from the anthropological perspective, engineers strive for technological freedom to realize the best-possible technological solution. Management control thwarts this goal which makes it likely that engineers might resist. Second, in this situation, engineers are a dangerous other for management, for they possess superior knowledge and thus cannot be fully controlled. Hence, their resistance is likely to be successful.

However, if this conflict was omnipresent in technical companies, one could ask from an anthropological perspective: how can the organization function? Again, it is not the purpose to judge how the system ‘organization’ could function better from a management perspective but to uncover how actors do make it function according to their own rules.

Goffman’s (1959) notion of play and his differentiation of contexts into ‘frontstage’ and ‘backstage’ can be of help here. ‘Frontstage’, two groups in interaction will behave in line with expected collective behaviour. Very often, interaction of such a kind is ritualized, thus not to be analysed for its content but for its symbolic purpose. ‘Real’ interaction for content will take place elsewhere, that is, offstage: Here, individuals from two parties can cooperate even though their official roles demand for ritualized conflict between these two parties onstage. This means: every analysis of ‘real’ cross-cultural issues within a company has to take context into account.

At TU, engineers and engineering managers would routinely contradict each other in meetings at which I participated. Scheduled meetings between two groups are a frontstage scenario. Whenever a manager would suggest a change in the schedule, specification or project planning, project leaders and engineers would answer with ‘this is not possible’, ‘this impacts functionality’, ‘this will be the end of the whole project’, ‘this will not work’, ‘even if we deliver it, we cannot guarantee functionality under such circumstances’, ‘you only think about cost-reduction, and you sacrifice technology for it’ and many more. In all meetings I observed on matters such as project planning, schedule and specification, discussions on such matters would end without agreement.

After the end of the meeting, however, engineers and managers would continue to discuss the matter informally, often in front of the coffee-machine or over lunch. This is a classical backstage scenario. There, managers would use phrases such as ‘well, you know, I used to be an engineer, too, I know how
it is like’ and engineers would use phrases such as ‘yes, I know ...’. During all backstage interaction I observed, in the end, an agreement was found and carried out – until the next meeting. With the help of Goffman and the anthropological perspective, this dialogue can be interpreted as the following: backstage, engineering managers construct themselves as ‘engineers, too’, and are acknowledged by engineers.

Therefore, I interpreted management-engineering frontstage interaction as ritualized symbolic contradiction that was to be integrated backstage. The main means of backstage integration was the hybrid quality of engineering-management’s identity: having an engineering background themselves, they can switch back to an alternate identity.

Unfortunately, as HR was an external department, most interaction between TU and HR took place frontstage. Therefore, HR non-engineering managers did not have access to backstage discourses of collective identity at TU. Thus, to them, frequent contradiction by engineers was just another proof for engineers not having social competencies. As one HR manager said: ‘You can’t even have a structured meeting with these people [the engineers]! How are we supposed to teach them advanced intercultural competency!’

Contextual Discourses of Defence and Appeasement

If etic and emic views on culture differ, one might ask: what then creates the real problems in engineering across sites at ChipTech? Unfortunately, this question cannot be answered easily, for it lies at the heart of every categorization of collective identity that it is influenced by the opposing categorization of the ‘Other’ as well as changing boundary conditions. For analysis of collective identity in organizations, personal feelings of endangerment, consecutive strategies of defence and counter-strategies of appeasement are of paramount importance.

For TU this means: when it comes to organizational power, an engineer depends on other engineers’ knowledge. A new engineer in Puram depends on the German engineers’ willingness and ability to transfer adequate knowledge to him. Otherwise, the new engineer will not be enabled to work ‘as a good engineer’. At the same time, both engineers and managers have to be placed in the context of the organization at large: will there be, for example, employment reduction in Germany due to transfer of knowledge to India? If the German employees have the feeling that they might lose their job due to reorganization after having transferred their knowledge to the new site in India they might develop counter-strategies to prevent this. Their sense of being endangered or not thus lies at the very heart of the strategy they might choose.

How fear of losing one’s job can influence knowledge transfer among an engineering community can be best illustrated by quoting Indian perspectives
on the German site. Let’s start with Anil, aged 27. He has been working for TU for 18 months. Anil remembers being sent to Stadt for initial training after his first days in Puram:

[In Stadt], I got the feeling: ‘They are afraid of losing their job.’ For example, this colleague of mine, he sat down with us during lunch and started talking about his expectations. And there was a lot about this: ‘What is going to happen to us?’ Stadt-people are not very happy about Puram and this kind of stuff.

So, Anil clearly sees fear of change and loss of employment at the German site. Yet does this boundary condition influence individual strategy? Another Puram engineer, Karthik, aged 25, and a fairly new member of TU, talks about the following recent episode in working together with the German site. He says:

Martin, he is an engineer in the Stadt-team. He was formerly doing my job, but then it became clear that this was going to be assigned to me, and that his responsibilities were going to shift. So I took his code and started testing it, and he was excellent support to me, and it used to be a jolly conversation, he always was very open with me.

After some time, he send me some code he had written and told me: ‘Give it a good shape.’ And I found many bugs in the code and I made an Excel Sheet, nice and clean. It was a big list, stating: These were the bugs, and that’s what we did about them. And I send it out to him via e-mail along with a documentation of how we improved the code, saying: ‘please review’. And then there was no reaction.

And some days later, Michael [another colleague from Stadt] told me that Martin had said: ‘I won’t talk to these people again.’ And, you know, we only wanted to improve the usability of that code, we only wanted to improve the tool and the project. And this was really strange, you know; all the time you have this image in mind of Germans being very straightforward and very non-emotional and you are also told to work exactly like that: non-emotional, high-quality and all those pictures you have in mind when it comes to German engineering.

Very clearly, Karthik refers to organizational power here: simply because he is new, he might not speak up to the established expert. Karthik even has a clear understanding of German national culture, he knows that non-emotionality and straightforward, facts-oriented approaches are highly valued. Yet in this case, due to boundary conditions that from Martin’s perspective aggravate uncertainty, he cannot succeed with this strategy. What did Karthik do? He continues:

So, what we then did, was: We had two meetings with Martin just to make him feel comfortable again – there was no other purpose behind these meetings – and we explained what we thought and asked for his opinion and so on and so on, and slowly he was back to normal.

See, this is how it is: When some Stadt-guy finds 100 bugs in my code and sends back just an Excel Sheet and tells me: ‘In Stadt, it’s just like that, we don’t fuss
about personal feelings, we just state technical facts nice and clear’, then I have to live with it, whatever I may feel. But on the other hand, if I do it the same Stadt-
way, technically only, nice and clear, then people feel they have the right to take it personally because I am only the stupid Indian computer-wallah [wallah is a person who does something] who doesn’t know a thing.

Again, Karthik refers to organizational power here: being treated as an inferior wallah seems to annoy him very much. Furthermore, this quote shows that he did choose an alternate strategy of appeasement in the end, a strategy that minimized fear from Martin’s side. As soon as fear was minimized, global engineering identity took place again, or as Karthik put it: ‘slowly he [Martin] was back to normal’. It is also important to note that Karthik, like all other engineers talking about each other, does not call people from the other sites ‘Germans’ but ‘Stadt-people’. This clearly indicates that from the engineering perspective, distance and not national culture is what separates engineers.

A few weeks after having heard of this incident, I talked to the German engineer Martin, aged 53 and working for ChipTech for 32 years. He says:

Working together with Puram is uncertain. I don’t know what will happen to me afterwards. What will my expertise be afterwards? But it will not be worse for me; it will be worse for the company: We will survive on the market without expertise. Management never thinks about this.

And also, these people in Puram, they are very pushy. They don’t seem to realize that they have much less expertise than we. They are only 25 years old. They think they know everything, but they don’t.

It seems that Martin fears becoming superfluous after having transferred his expertise to Puram. To make sense of this development and to still be able to view himself as an established expert, he creates the logical ‘Other’ for himself: the corresponding perspective of a pushy young Puram engineer. In that sense, every group of other is a creation based on interpretation of one’s own situation and not based on objective facts or ‘real’ cultural difference.

Construction of alternate ‘Others’ in times of endangerment only takes place as soon and as long as this endangerment is perceived as such. Martin’s statement shows that the dominant emic perspective of ‘global engineering’ still exists: he speaks about ‘bad management’. From his perspective, technical expertise lies at the heart of corporate success – not management strategy and techniques. It is thus very likely that the dominant emic discourse of ‘we are all engineers’ will take over as soon as endangerment is perceived as being non-existent.

Therefore, Martin’s contextual discourse of defence also depends on counter-strategies of other actors, in this case on the strategy chosen by young Puram engineers such as Karthik: Karthik does have the power to make Martin ‘come back to normal’, he can do so through his own contextual strategy of appeasement.
What will happen if Martin and Karthik are united as engineers in such a way? If something goes wrong, that is, corporate crisis occurs, they are likely to blame management ‘Others’ and not the global community of engineers.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CROSS-CULTURAL MANAGEMENT

As the previous pages have shown for the case of ChipTech, discourses of identity in organizations occur on different levels and largely depend on context and individual agenda. This means: there is no simple explanation to how collective sense is established under changing boundary conditions. Taking an interpretative approach to organizational complexity seems thus the only viable means to study discourses of ‘We’ and the ‘Other’ for each setting and not to generalize them. In any complex professional setting, the key question is: when will dormant collective identities become salient? Only if this context is known, cross-cultural management from the emic perspective is possible.

Herein lies the danger of organizational dynamics for the field of cross-cultural management. If employees have the power of reinterpretation and sense-making within a complex organizational field, they might take whatever knowledge they acquire and use it for their own defence. Hence, they might even use intercultural dimensions that are introduced to them in intercultural training. If such a training activity is based on monolithic, static and nationally comparative theories, the emic outcome is unclear. If cross-cultural managers in the field are not aware of this new sense that employees might give to their messages, they might thus even fuel potential conflict between sites.

Further research yet has to clarify these uncertainties in detail. However, what seems clear already is the fact that organizational actors make their own sense of change and the Other. This sense is deeply rooted within the organization and consists of a complex agglomeration of categorizations in times of stability and crisis.

The meaning of this conclusion is double-fold: first, actors in the field chose these discourses depending on issues of hierarchy, power, crisis and endangerment. Second, only if cross-cultural managers are aware of these facts can they devise intercultural measures that work at the ‘real’ intercultural border from the actors’ perspective.

RECOMMENDATION TO PRACTITIONERS

Naturally, uncovering emic discourses cannot be a streamlined process. Yet as a checklist, the following questions to the actors should be answered from their perspective:
1. What is considered to be ‘good work practice’? What are the requirements and constraints of ‘good work practice’ of such a kind? This question will deliver dominant emic collective identities, for example, engineers versus management.

2. Who is the respective collective ‘Other’ in times of stability and in times of change or crisis? What is considered to be a crisis that calls for strategies of defence against actors of other sites? This question will deliver the specific boundary conditions in which dormant emic discourses will become salient. In technical companies that are in the process of knowledge transfer across sites, crisis refers to the fear of losing one’s job after having completed knowledge transfer. This fear increases the likelihood that offshore site engineers or management (to be blamed for crisis) are made alien. However, this categorization, too, does not always take place – depending on the counter-strategies of appeasement chosen by the offshore site.

3. What is the impact of the discourse of national cultural difference from the actors’ perspective? If they contradict this discourse: when and why are they doing so? This question will deliver the interpretation of etic discourses by the actors in the field and show potential viable cross-cultural management strategies. In technical companies, this means: affirmation of global engineering identity by HR management will most likely increase engineers’ motivation to receive intercultural training and learn about potential national cultural differences. Stating the importance of national cultural difference will make HR management themselves be perceived as alien by engineers and decrease engineers’ motivation to take national cultural differences into account.

4. What are the ‘worst-case combinations’ of the above-mentioned boundary conditions? This question will deliver the strongest scenario of conflict based on collective identities. In technical companies this might be the combination of HR management stressing national cultural differences and engineers feeling endangered while transferring knowledge. Under such a scenario, engineers might use learned dimensions of national cultural difference (even though they don’t believe in them) to prove that working together with the offshore site cannot work and to overcome their own endangerment.

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