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Positioning oneself in relation to larger collectivities in expatriates' workplace narratives

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Abstract

This article aims to explore narratives as sites for identity construction by employing the concept of positioning to analyse some of the discursive processes through which identity construction is accomplished in institutional contexts. Our specific foci are i) the ways in which individuals position themselves in relation to larger collectivities in their narratives about being expatriates living and working in Hong Kong, and ii) how they construct their professional identities in the tension that may arise due to their membership in different social groups. Drawing on data from a corpus of interviews with professionals in multicultural workplaces in Hong Kong, we provide an in-depth analysis of two case studies of expatriates who take very different stances towards their company and the cultural groups with whom they interact, and who, as a consequence, construct remarkably different identities for themselves, the people they work with and also their organisation. Our analyses illustrate some of the intricate ways in which identities are closely intertwined with and feed off individuals' membership in different collectivities, which surfaces especially when zooming in on the different levels of positioning in the interviewees' narratives.

Keywords: identity construction, positioning, narrative, workplace, expatriate

1. Introduction

In this article we explore some of the complex processes involved in identity construction by drawing on the concept of "positioning" to analyse the narratives of expatriate professionals

in the multicultural context of Hong Kong. We take as a starting point the assumption that identities are not created in isolation but are always to some extent influenced and shaped by other identities and are closely related to people's memberships in different social groups. We aim to analyse some of the discursive processes through which identity construction is accomplished in the tensions that may arise between people's membership in different social groups (Van De Mierop and Clifton, 2012, p. 1). This tension is particularly complex in institutional contexts since by constructing and negotiating their professional identities, interlocutors constantly orient to and position themselves in relation to larger collectivities, such as a specific professional group, a department or the wider institution (Jenkins, 2008, p. 35), while at the same time juggling their membership in other social groups.

In particular, we focus on two collectivities that the participants in our study have repeatedly referred to, namely the company for which they work and different cultural groups with whom they regularly interact. As we have elaborated elsewhere in more detail, in multicultural workplaces, such as the ones where this study is placed, professional and cultural identities are closely intertwined with each other, and one is often created by drawing on and feeding off the other (Schnurr and Zayts, 2012). This article aims to further explore the processes of identity construction in these contexts by exploring the integrate interplay between identity construction and membership in different social groups with a particular focus on the tensions that may arise between them.

Much research has been conducted on identity construction, and most recent approaches conceptualise identity as a fluid and dynamic process that takes place collaboratively among interlocutors as their interaction unfolds (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006; De Fina, 2010). In line with these approaches, Bucholtz and Hall (2005) outline a framework for analysing identity construction, which builds on work conducted in different linguistic and anthropological traditions. One of the five principles that they describe in their framework is the relationality principle which maintains that identities are relational phenomena which are not constructed in isolation but are always created in relation to other identities. More specifically, they argue that

Identities are intersubjectively constructed through several, often overlapping, complementary relations, including similarity/difference, genuineness/artifice, and authority/delegitimacy. (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005, p. 598)

According to this principle, the first pair of relations through which identities may be constructed is similarity/difference, which refers to the processes through which similarities with or differences from other individuals or groups are constructed by interlocutors (see also Locher, 2008, p. 513). The second set of relations, genuineness/artifice, captures how the specific identities individuals (or groups) claim for themselves are perceived by others, and more specifically, whether they are viewed as being genuine, artificial or even false. The third pair of identity relations, authority/delegitimacy, describes the ways in which institutionalized notions of power and ideology either affirm and impose identities (in the case of authority), or how they dismiss, censor and ignore them (in the case of delegitimacy). However, these various relations through which identities may be created are not mutually exclusive and often occur conjointly.

We take this relationality principle, which lies at the heart of Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) framework, as our starting point and explore how professional identities are discursively created by members in a multicultural workplace, and more specifically, how this is accomplished by reference to and in relation to membership claims in different collective groups. More specifically, we explore the interview narratives of two expatriate professionals who work in the same multicultural company in Hong Kong. Although both interviewees are relatively similar in their seniority, the stances they take towards the company differ substantially and they portray themselves and their workplace very differently. However, in both cases the identity construction takes place in the tension that arises through the ways in which the interviewees construct their individual identities by positioning and relating themselves to various collectivities, including the wider organisation and specific cultural groups with whom they regularly interact.

1.1 Identities, narratives and positioning

A lot of research has been done on narratives as sites of identity construction, since "the purpose of narrating is precisely the creation of an autonomous, unique self in discourse"

(Johnstone, 1996, p. 56). As Bruner (1991) observes, the uniqueness – or even exceptionality – of this self and of the story makes it tellable, but on the other hand, this happens against the backdrop of canonicity, thus shifting the interplay between the individual and the “culture confirming” social dimensions of narratives. Given the “widely accepted centrality of narrative as a privileged locus for the negotiation of identities” (De Fina et al., 2006, p. 16), it seems justified to focus on the stories these interviewees tell in order to gain an insight into the ways in which they construct their identities. We approach these stories using the notion of “positioning”.

In discursively oriented studies, the concept of positioning was introduced by Davies and Harré (1990, p. 264), who defined it as “the discursive process whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced story lines”. Although the authors clearly emphasize that speaking positions are relational (Harré and Van Langenhove, 1999, p. 1), not necessarily intentional (Davies and Harré, 1990, p. 264) and discursively realized, this theory has received a lot of criticism, mainly because of its assumption that such positions ‘exist’ in some kind of pre-discursive way (see De Fina and Georgakopoulou, 2012, p. 162-163).

A more strongly interactional approach, that aims to address the fleeting and dynamic nature of positions emerging in an ad hoc way, was proposed by Bamberg (1997b). This approach discerns three different levels of positioning, which can be defined as follows:

By positioning the characters at the content plane with regard to one another, the speaker positions him/herself with regard to the listener; and this process works simultaneously the other way around. The coordination between these two planes results in the establishment of a moral position for which the speaker can be held accountable, irrespective of whether the speaker him/herself plays a role in what is being talked about, or whether the talk is merely about others. (Bamberg, 1997a, p. 335)

At the first level of positioning, special attention is paid to the way in which the storyworld is laid out and how the characters are positioned vis-à-vis one another in this referential world. At the second level, the interactional world in which the story is narrated is being investigated, with a specific emphasis on how the story functions and is co-constructed with

the audience in the local storytelling context. The analyses of these two levels, according to Bamberg (2006, p. 145), “progressively lead to a differentiation of how narrators work up a position as complicit with or countering dominant discourses”. Moreover, through these processes the narrator’s identity claims are uncovered (which can be conceptualised as a third level) by linking the local level of the story to a more global level of the speaker assuming an ideological position which is either in line or in contrast with the master narratives.

Building on this, Lucius-Hoene and Deppermann (2004) further analysed Bamberg’s levels 1 and 2 and refined them. First, for level 1, they make a distinction between (1a) how the narrator animates the story characters vis-à-vis each other through reported dialogues; and (1b) how the narrator strategically designs the story characters’ acts. Second, regarding level 2, they draw attention to (2a) the narrator’s self-positioning through meta-narrative and evaluative comments oriented to self-reflexivity; (2b) the narrator’s performative interactional positioning as an entertaining teller; (2c) the teller’s meta-narrative interactional positioning towards the recipient(s); and, finally, (2d) the recipient’s interactional positioning, making him/her an active co-author of the story (for an overview, see also Deppermann, 2013, pp. 7-8). Furthermore, De Fina (2013) and Georgakopoulou (2013) discuss how level 3 allows researchers “to deal with how narrators and audiences negotiate less locally produced senses of who they are, i.e. their membership into social identities, moral identities etc.” (De Fina, 2013, p. 43), thus offering a “middle ground” between orientations with “a very narrow focus on the here and now of interactions” and those “that focus much more on wide social processes such as the circulation of ideologies and the exercise of control over social and cultural roles (De Fina, 2013, p. 44). They argue in favour of “a multi-method approach” (Georgakopoulou, 2013, p. 93) in which local analyses are complemented by ethnographic data, which allows researchers to get “a sense of the kinds of dominant Discourses and ideologies that underlie the social issues that narrators and interviewers raise” (De Fina, 2013, p. 58).

In what follows, we briefly describe our dataset, before providing an in-depth analysis of some of the discursive processes that are involved in constructing identities in relation to these three levels of positioning.

2. Data

The data that we draw on in this study belong to a larger corpus of authentic discourse data that were collected as part of an on-going research project investigating language and communication issues in multicultural workplaces in Hong Kong. The corpus currently comprises more than 80 hours of video- and audio-recorded workplace interactions that were collected in a range of multicultural workplaces in Hong Kong, including small private business companies, an NGO and large international corporations. We collected interactions in English and Chinese. The data were transcribed (and, where necessary, translated into English) using simplified transcription conventions traditionally used in conversation analytic literature (e.g. see ten Have, 2007).

These primary data were further supplemented by semi-structured interviews with participants, which were typically conducted at the end of the recording period. The aim of these interviews was to gain a better understanding of what went on in the interactions and to obtain participants' views on potentially relevant aspects and issues. These interviews also provided a good opportunity for participants to comment on anything that they thought was unusual or remarkable in any of the recorded interactions, and they also enabled the researchers to engage in a discussion with participants about topics of interest to the researchers (e.g. potential issues relating to participants' perceptions and views on working with people from different socio-cultural backgrounds). We also conducted extensive participant observation at the research sites and consulted a range of organizational documents to obtain valuable insights into "participants' normal everyday patterns of interaction in their usual workplace contexts" (Daly et al., 2004).

In this article we analyze the interviews with two of our participants, whom we have given the pseudonyms Martin and Susan, and who both work at a large financial organization which we call Company K. Company K describes itself as a global company which has offices in more than 150 countries around the world. According to its promotional material, Company K takes pride in the cultural diversity of its staff and presents this as a competitive advantage to its (allegedly equally culturally diverse) clients. Martin and Susan both work at the Hong Kong branch of Company K albeit in different areas and in different buildings. Martin is one of the partners of Company K while Susan is a senior manager and Head of one of the

departments within the firm. She supervises a team of 30 staff members. At the time of data collection Martin had been with the company for almost twenty years. He has started his career in Europe and moved to Hong Kong almost 10 years ago. Susan, on the other hand, has worked for Company K for four years (after having held management positions in other organizations) and has joined the Hong Kong branch just over two years ago after moving to Asia from Australia. In the interview she makes it clear that her move to Hong Kong was not voluntary but that '*we don't really have any choice*' as the senior management normally decide where to place their senior staff.

The interviews were semi-formal and contained several closed and open ended questions. For some questions, the interviewees provided only short and often relatively factual answers, while for others they went into more detail and sometimes produced eloquent narratives and short anecdotes for illustration. One crucial aim of these interviews was to encourage the interviewees to talk and to provide us with their side of the story – for example by telling us what they considered to be the important aspects and issues that they have to deal with in their daily worklives. Most interviewees seemed to feel very comfortable talking to the interviewers and many interviews lasted much longer than the originally anticipated 20 minutes.

The interviews with Martin and Susan both lasted over an hour, and were conducted by two of the authors who are themselves Western expatriates, and who at the time of the recording worked and lived in Hong Kong for three and six years, respectively. The interviewers and interviewees thus share some aspects of their socio-cultural backgrounds and possibly also some experiences of being an expatriate in Hong Kong. Following positioning theory, this information is potentially relevant in understanding the processes through which the interviewees construct (and negotiate with the interviewers) their various identities. Especially regarding level 3-positioning, as De Fina (2013) argues, this ethnographic work and two of the authors' personal experience, allowed us to get acquainted with the "general tendencies in the way issues are viewed and dealt with by the communities to which individuals belong" (De Fina, 2013, p. 45).

3. Analysis

In order to explore some of the processes through which these expatriate interviewees create their individual professional identities in the narratives in the interviews, we pay particular attention to the ways in which they make reference and establish links to their membership in various larger groups or collectivities. More specifically, we aim to analyse how Martin and Susan construct – and negotiate with the interviewers – their professional identities throughout the interviews with a particular interest in exploring the extent to which the set-up of a storyworld on the first level of positioning may add something to the identities that are constructed on the second (interactional) and third (identity) level of positioning.

We approach these issues by looking at how the interviewees position themselves towards two specific collectivities which they make repeatedly relevant in the interviews, namely the institutional in-group and various cultural groups. However, as our analyses below illustrate, rather than constituting two distinct entities, a considerable overlap exists between the two collectivities, and the interviewees often talk into being an explicit link between them.

We have chosen Martin and Susan as two particularly interesting cases because both interviewees take very different stances towards these collectivities – either accepting and adapting or resisting and challenging the norms, values and practices that they consider to be typical for these groups. We discuss four fragments from the interviews to illustrate some of the ways in which the interviewees construct their identities by positioning themselves in relation to these collectivities.

We start with Martin, who portrays himself in line with the expectations and views of his organisation, and who constructs his individual professional identity as being strongly influenced by his membership in specific institutional and cultural collectivities. We then discuss the case of Susan, who takes a rather critical stance towards her organisation and who creates her professional identity by positioning herself in contrast to what she perceives to be the norms, views and practices of the company and particular cultural groups.

3.1 Accepting and adapting the (perceived) norms, values and practices of the collectivities

Throughout the interview Martin repeatedly draws on organisational jargon, as such not only constructing his identity as a professional, but also as a professional whose views are very much in line with the aims and objectives of the organisation. He achieves this, for example, by frequently using the inclusive first person plural pronoun *we* when talking about Company K, as in *we, over the last five years, have really tried as a firm to become globally uniform*. With comments like this, he not only reiterates and thus reinforces organisational discourses (here of becoming *globally uniform*) but he also explicitly aligns with the company's views and goals. At several points during the interview he signals that he has internalised (and is proud of) the company's aims and objectives (for example, when he spontaneously starts reciting the company's values). This constitutes an important aspect of his professional identity and of how he portrays himself towards the interviewers. Using Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) terminology, these relations through which Martin constructs his identity could be described in terms of similarity/difference. More specifically, by emphasising the similarities and shared ground between himself and the larger collectivity of Company K, Martin creates his professional identity. He does so in particular by portraying himself as embracing the globalisation and cultural diversity that Company K propagates (e.g. he frames being an expatriate as an *interesting experience* and stresses the benefits of living in Hong Kong).

In this sense, Martin constructs his individual professional identity as being strongly influenced by his membership in this specific institutional collectivity (viz. Company K). This aspect of identity construction is thus in line with what Bucholtz and Hall (2005, p. 598) describe as 'authority/delegitimacy'. By drawing on institutionalised discourses and by adapting and reproducing the Company's perspective, Martin at the same time uses institutionalised forms of power and ideology to confirm and support his identity claims as a member of Company K. However, what is particularly interesting about Martin's case is the observation that in the narratives that he recounts throughout the interview, he takes a slightly different and more nuanced stance towards the practices that characterise the Hong Kong branch of Company K. We have chosen two extracts to illustrate this, and to demonstrate how in these narratives Martin increasingly moves away from the company's perspective about appreciating cultural diversity.

In the following fragment, the interviewers ask Martin to describe an ideal Company K employee. Among the requirements of such an ideal candidate, Martin lists several qualifications that could be expected (for example a suitable university degree and language proficiency). When prompted by the interviewers to describe the personality of an ideal employee, Martin starts listing a number of talents that would be advantageous:

Fragment 1

1. M: So, yeah, you do look for somebody who's open and er: outgoing
2. and willing to communicate- communicate in England (.), in English.
3. Um, I remember years ago in Holland, (.) and perhaps it's not so much
4. the case here yet because it's just a different culture but (.) Company K
5. put an ad on the television or newspapers, I can't remember which said
6. If you finished your university degree in three years, which typically you
7. would do four in Holland, if you finished it in three, or maybe it said even
8. four, er, please make, please make a trip around the world and then
9. come and speak to us. In other words, (.) we would like you to have
10. a little bit more than just your university focus on hopes and studies
11. and, uh, stuff like that. Um, so, yeah, it's (.) somebody who is a bit more
12. rounded than just, than just somebody who's focused on the university.

In between this enumeration of fairly abstract talents (e.g. *openness, being outgoing and communicative* (lines 1-2), and *a bit more rounded* (lines 11-12)), Martin inserts a relatively short story (lines 3-9) that serves as a clarification. Despite the fact that this story is not a canonical narrative of personal experience, some elements of the classical Labovian structure (Labov and Waletzky, 1966) can be identified, namely the orientation phase (lines 3-4), the complicating action (lines 4-9) and a coda linking the story back to the answer to the interviewers' question (lines 9-11). In this brief event narrative, thus, Martin manages to construct a referential world with Company K as the protagonist and the potential recruits as antagonists. The former incites the latter to *make a trip around the world* (line 8) and to gain some intercultural experience and develop competence in interacting with different cultures.

This story is thus in line with the company's official discourse of global uniformity which, as Martin repeatedly mentions throughout the interview, embraces cultural diversity and is a crucial aspect of the company's vision, to which he claims to strongly adhere. Coming back

to the different levels of positioning outlined above, the way “the referential world is put together” (Bamberg et al., 2011, p. 186) in this story on the first level of positioning can be viewed as playing a particular function in the interactional process of telling this story at this point in the interview which is situated on the second level of positioning. More specifically, the story contributes to Martin’s portrayal of himself as a representative of Company K, who is also a “global citizen” valuing experience with different cultures and aligning with the master narrative of embracing cultural diversity on the third level of positioning. This again nicely illustrates Bucholtz and Hall’s similarity/difference relation, as described above.

However, it is important to have a closer look at Martin’s elaboration in the orientation phase of his story. While his utterance in line 3 firmly nests this story in the past (i.e. *years ago*) and elsewhere (i.e. *in Holland*), thereby setting the scene in the referential world (first level of positioning), he briefly contrasts this with the local context in which the story is told (second level of positioning), which is situated in the here and now (line 4). Moreover, in this short sidestep Martin explicitly makes culture relevant as a discerning feature and an essential explanatory factor (line 5). He thus frames his story as being related to what he perceives to be a difference between the Netherlands (where the company’s headquarters are) and Hong Kong. Even though his statement is hedged (*perhaps*, line 4), it clearly constructs a hierarchical view of cultures, in which the values or customs of the Western (viz. Dutch) culture are set up as goals which the Hong Kong culture, in Martin’s words, has not *yet* reached (line 4). Through this process of reducing the differences between Company K’s branches in Hong Kong and the Netherlands to culture as an explanatory factor (*just a different culture*, line 5) and by constructing the former culture as immature, Martin at the same time constructs and makes relevant his own identity as a member of this particular Western culture who adheres to a hierarchical view of cultures as a master narrative.

It is, of course, quite ironic that this reductionist view of cultural differences and the subsequent hierarchical construction of cultures is actually established by means of a story about Company K’s (and by implication, Martin’s) awareness and appreciation of the importance of intercultural competence and openness to other cultures. This fragment thus shows that the first two levels of positioning may result in a contrasting image that has implications for the third level of positioning, i.e. the construction of the teller’s self (Bamberg,

1997b). We discuss this observation below in more detail after discussing one more example from Martin's interview data.

The next fragment occurs at the end of the interview after the interviewers asked Martin which three things he likes best about Company K and which three things he would change if he had the chance. After answering the first part of the question, the discussion gets side-tracked and interlocutors talk about Martin's career. Interestingly, Martin then re-initiates the topic of things he would like to change, thus showing his orientation to the interviewing frame of the interaction (line 1). This causes laughter by the interviewers because of the "role reversal" in which the interviewee rather than the interviewers is now managing the topics of the interaction.

Fragment 2

- 1 M: Now, about the three things that I would like to change.
- 2 IRS: *((laugh))*
- 3 M: Um, we've-we've moved a long, long way from when I just arrived (.)
- 4 to where we are now (.) in terms of bureaucracy, and, er, leadership,
- 5 or people in leadership positions being based on seniority and number
- 6 of years served. Er, I just had a group visiting, or, actually they came
- 7 from different locations, but one of the guys was a very young, er,
- 8 Dutch partner. And because of who he is in terms of personality and
- 9 ability and experience, he leads a group of people, er, he leads the
- 10 entire advisory practice for Company K in the Netherlands and sits on
- 11 the Dutch board. Er, and he was, when he joined the Dutch Company
- 12 K board he was thirty-eight. Er, in financial services in the Netherlands
- 13 the guy that leads financial services for Company K in the Netherlands
- 14 very similar, late thirties.
- ((5 lines omitted containing more details about the head of financial services in the Netherlands))*
- 20 So, I know we're moving there, but I don't think it's fast enough.
- 21 Having the right people for the right job rather than getting it 'cause it's
- 22 your turn, you're (.) the next in line.

From the start of his turn in line 3, Martin shifts the footing from a personal perspective to an institutional or collective perspective, as his use of the first person plural pronominal forms indicate. Throughout the fragment, there is a frequent oscillation between this personal and institutional footing, which is not surprising given the interviewers' request to formulate a personal opinion or criticism about the institutional situation. In line with his overall stance towards the company, Martin does not take this opportunity to formulate a strong criticism but rather describes a positive evolution (or learning curve) which he would prefer to move even faster. In his initial description (lines 3-6), his answer is rather vague, using general terms like *bureaucracy*, *leadership* and *seniority*. However, this vagueness gets clarified by means of two illustrations, of which the gist is summarized by means of a personal opinion at the end of the fragment (c.f. the concluding *so* in line 20). Here, the personal and the institutional perspectives are briefly juxtaposed, followed by a summary of the content of his slight criticism (line 20-22).

In these illustrations, Martin returns to talking about the situation in the Dutch branch of Company K. He sets up the storyworld of this example as one in which he is the protagonist, who receives visitors from all over the world (lines 6-7). However, the brief reformulation (*or*, line 6) and the structure of lines 6 and 7 (*actually...*, *but...*) frames the global diversity of the group as secondary information that is only added for reasons of completeness, which is then contrasted (*but* (line 7)) with the focal point of the story, namely the introduction of the main antagonist labelled as *a very young Dutch partner* (line 7). Interestingly, the features of this character in the referential world that are highlighted here are his age and his nationality, and especially the latter feature will prove to be important in the remainder of the fragment.

Instead of continuing in an event narrative frame, in line 8 Martin shifts to a more descriptive narrative frame which resembles that of a chronicle (see e.g. De Fina, 2009). In this narrative frame he factually lists the talents (lines 8-9) and tasks (lines 9-11) of this partner before concluding his description by emphasizing the latter's young age. Martin then immediately embarks on another illustration, this time about the young age of the Head of Financial Services in the Netherlands. Throughout the first and the second illustration, Martin repeatedly mentions that this is a practice of the Dutch branch (and by implication, headquarters) of the company. The words *Dutch* and *the Netherlands* are mentioned in

almost every line of this illustration (lines 8-14) – giving the location a significant amount of emphasis. This strong spatial orientation firmly embeds the referential world into the Netherlands and Dutch culture, which was already made relevant in the initial characterization of the storyworld character in line 8. Interestingly, when in line 20 Martin moves out of the story frame and sums up the gist of these illustrations, he uses a spatial metaphor (*we're moving there*, line 20). He thereby again implicitly emphasizes the spatial difference between the referential world (first level of positioning) and the interactional world (second level of positioning). Overall, these two illustrations about the situation in the Netherlands function as a sort of factual back-up of Martin's personal opinion, thus giving his ideas a stronger basis.

Similar to fragment 1, culture is also made an issue here – albeit much less explicit – by making the Dutch culture the reference point towards which the Hong Kong branch of Company K needs to evolve (line 20). Although this could be explained, to some extent, by the fact that Company K's headquarters are in the Netherlands, Martin also uses this to once more set up a hierarchical view of cultures. This is particularly noteworthy as in both fragments it was the interviewee (rather than the interviewers) who made culture relevant. What this means in terms of identity construction is that he emphasises the similarity aspect in the similarity/difference relation (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005): in addition to constructing himself as a member of Company K and firmly associating himself with the company, Martin also highlights his membership in the Western culture (which he repeatedly puts in opposition to the Hong Kong culture). He thereby also sets up a membership reference that he shares with the interviewers who are also expatriates from Western cultures. This is an important aspect since, as Bamberg (1997a) maintains, the way these two levels of positioning are constructed has implications for the 'self' of the speaker that is talked into being against the backdrop of dominant discourses relating to cultural diversity. In this case, Martin presents himself in the storyworld and in the interactional world as a representative of Company K who subscribes to its values, views and practices. However, the specific way this storyworld is laid out, reveals his strong orientation towards the Dutch headquarters of the company of which he used to be a member.

Our analyses of Martin's fragments thus illustrate that in contrast to the small snippets from the interview referred to at the beginning of this section where Martin mainly reproduced the company's hegemonic discourses of embracing cultural diversity and globalisation, in the narratives that he produces throughout the interview (fragments 1 and 2), a rather different and more nuanced picture is presented. In these narratives, culture is explicitly made an issue by Martin, and is repeatedly used as a reference point to which he orients himself (drawing on the similarity aspect of the similarity/difference relation described by Bucholtz and Hall, 2005) when constructing his identity. So as our discussions above have shown, the analysis of these first and second levels of positioning helped us gain greater insight into the complexity of the construction of this interviewee's 'self'.

We now move on to analyse Susan, and explore some of the discursive processes through which she constructs her professional identity in relation to the company and other relevant collectivities.

3.2 Resisting and challenging the (perceived) norms, views and practices of the collectivities

In contrast to Martin, who generally portrayed himself as adapting and accepting the norms, views and hegemonic discourses of Company K, Susan takes a very different stance which is repeatedly in sharp opposition to the organisation. Her rather sceptical and often negative attitude towards her employer becomes apparent, for example, when she describes Company K as *a psychopath* and explains to the puzzled interviewers that *it has no morality - the organisation will never have any morality [...] so it's a psychopath*. She thereby explicitly distances herself from the organisation, which is further emphasised by her choice of pronouns throughout the interview. In contrast to Martin who typically used the inclusive *we*-form, Susan consistently uses *I* versus *them, it* thereby creating a "me-versus-them" dichotomy and making it very clear that she does not subscribe to the company's views and practices in the way that Martin does. In contrast to Martin, then, who primarily emphasised the similarity aspect in the similarity/difference relation proposed by Bucholtz and Hall (2005), Susan typically highlights the difference aspect when constructing her identity. However, in spite of these differences to Martin's interview, when it comes to describing the business culture of Hong Kong, Susan, to a certain extent, mirrors Martin's view and also describes

the Hong Kong/Chinese culture as lacking behind and as hierarchically inferior to a Western (business) culture. In particular, she stresses that *there is a naivety about business here in Hong Kong and in China*.

However, what is particularly interesting about Susan's case is that in the referential world of the stories that she initiates throughout the interview, she constructs a rather different picture. For example, in the next fragment, Susan gives her opinion on the most efficient way of communicating with her local Hong Kong Chinese subordinates. She first explains that she always uses a clear language when giving instructions (prior to this fragment), after which she inserts the following story.

Fragment 3

1. S: I mean the other thing I do here which again
2. is is seen as a no-no in western management theory
3. IR: mm
4. S: is that u::m I absolutely use email all the time,
5. IR: mm
6. S: >I may ask someone to do something<
7. but then I follow it up with an email
8. which gives really really precise directions to allow
9. them time, to give them 20 minutes. You know,
10. they have to look up () looking up the dictionary
11. IR: mm
12. S: to check that they've got the words right because
13. (2.0)
14. S: it's the only way you can be clear.
15. And and again it's a no-no in western management theory.
16. IR: mm
17. S: But actually I think it's a yes-yes here in China.

In the initial lines of the fragment (lines 1-2), Susan formulates a preliminary to her story in which she frames it as an example of the dichotomy between what she *does* in reality and what *Western management theory* says she *should do*. She thereby contrasts reality with theory, and Hong Kong/China (*here*, line 1) with the West (line 2). Interestingly, and unlike

Martin in his interview, she does not unquestioningly align with doing things according to *Western management theory*, but rather describes her own way of doing things by means of a narrative of personal experience.

In the abstract (line 4), Susan immediately constructs her behaviour as the story of a routine action, related by means of a habitual narrative. Such narratives are typically “composed of thematically organized incidents that occur regularly, without a peak in action” (Riessman, 1993, p. 18). The pervasiveness of this routine action is underlined by means of a booster (*absolutely*) and a temporal Extreme Case Formulation (*all*) (Pomerantz, 1986), which are both emphatically pronounced (line 4). In the main part of the story, then, the referential world is set up as comprising of Susan as the protagonist as opposed to a non-descript group of antagonists, who are usually referred to by means of the third person plural pronominal form (lines 9, 10, 12). As such, she constructs a dichotomy between herself as the one in charge – since she is the source of the directions (line 8) – versus the group of her subordinates. Interestingly, she explicitly – and quite elaborately – accounts for this particular way of communicating in lines 8-14, in which she makes her subordinates’ linguistic uncertainty relevant as a reason for what she describes as her unusual and deviant communicative approach (namely to always send an email). It is important to note though that Susan does not explicitly state that her behavior is a reaction to her subordinates’ limited language proficiency (which could have been a logical second part of the sentence that is broken off right after *because* in line 12). Instead, she takes over the responsibility (*it’s the only way you can be clear*) without assigning any blame. She thereby ends her story in a more or less generic way by shifting to the generic *you*-form (line 14) and repeating her initial framing of the story as an example of going against Western management theory. She closes her turn by explicitly contrasting *the West* and *theory* (line 15) with *China* and her own experience with professional practice (line 17).

So, on the one hand, Susan orients to what she describes as *Western management theory* thereby positioning herself within this cultural frame (which is shared with the interviewers) – thus emphasizing the similarity aspect of the similarity/difference relation of identity construction described by Bucholtz and Hall (2005). On the other hand, she contrasts this

theory with practice, and by underlining the habitual nature of her actions in the story, she makes this practice (i.e. her communicative behavior) “harder to challenge” (Carranza, 1998, p. 305) by the other interlocutors at the second level of positioning. At the third level of positioning, this habitual narrative thus enables her to construct herself as an expert in successfully dealing with the challenges of working with and leading a multicultural team. By orienting to, but *not* aligning with, the practices propagated by *Western management theory*, she formulates a counternarrative to this Western ideal, and instead, successfully carves out a space between the opposing expectations of this theory, on the one hand, and the actual reality and practices of her workplace, on the other hand. And she constructs her professional identity in this space in between these tensions that arise from orienting and relating to two different collectivities (i.e. the *West* and *China*).

However, at other points throughout the interview Susan constructs herself rather differently and positions herself in line with Western practices and expectations. Fragment 4 is a good illustration of this. This fragment was directly preceded by a discussion of different leadership styles, in which Susan underlines the necessity to use a more *dictatorial style* in China, even though she states that she tries to avoid that style as much as possible (see Schnurr and Zayts, 2012 for a more detailed discussion). The interviewers probe this topic further by asking for an example in the first line of the following fragment:

Fragment 4

1. IR: Can you give us an example?
2. S: Um
3. (6.0)
4. S: You don't need, you don't need, if you try and give the (),
5. say for example this morning, it happens every day,
6. just pick one this morning. So we have to
7. prepare some detailed reports for the global firm.
8. And in-in Australia ↑, it's pretty obvious if you think about this
9. that the global firm wants its reports because
10. they are doing a review of learning and development in China.
11. And the automatic thing in over, say in Australia ↑ would be,

12. the administration is pretty same-same,
13. “they are doing their review, I might lose my job”.
14. So what you-, the way you manage it in Australia †
15. is you explain why they are doing this and
16. you-you allow that question-answer to happen.
17. In China, if you try to do that, it just worries people.
18. They don’t actually want to know.
19. And I put it down to the fact that an awful lot of people
20. get shot, and they are actually sometimes better not to know.
21. That you just go with what you go with.
22. The longer I am in China, I think, the more I-
23. the more I realize that- that for a lot of employees
24. it’s better not to know. Because if you know
25. (employees) it actually gives you responsibilities
26. that may be difficult to deal with.

After an initial hesitation, a lengthy pause and a couple of reformulations (line 4), Susan inserts a story about something that happened *this morning* (lines 5-6), but which is representative for *every day* (line 5), as such giving this singular example a more generic status. This status is maintained throughout the rest of the fragment, as for instance the use of the generic *you*-form and the general present tense indicate. She thus stresses typicality and iterativity (Baynham, 2006, p. 382) by means of a generic narrative rather than a habitual narrative as in the previous fragment. The story itself is about her employees having to prepare review reports for the company, which may eventually lead to redundancies. The point of the story revolves around the way in which Susan has to present this task to her subordinates in a totally different way in Australia versus China: while she says she would have an explicit discussion about this with her employees in Australia (lines 14-16), she would avoid such a discussion in China (line 17).

Interestingly, although this story revolves around the difference between Australia and China, its orientation phase is broken off several times to further clarify the point of the story and to stress its general applicability. This is achieved by stating that it is a story of the *global firm* (line 9) in which *the administration is pretty same-same* (line 12). She also frames Australia as a randomly chosen example (*say in Australia*, line 11), which is quite different from the way in which Martin constructed the Netherlands as *the* example in the fragments above.

Both interviewees thus differ from each other in the ways in which they frame their cultural-comparative examples: either as applicable to all situations and with one culture in an exemplary role (in the case of Martin) or as potentially diverging in different contexts and with one, allegedly randomly chosen culture in comparison to another (in the case of Susan). Moreover, in contrast to Martin, Susan avoids explicitly evaluating the various practices that characterize the different socio-cultural contexts. Moreover, she invests a lot of effort into the explanation of what she considers to be the reasons behind this *I don't want to know*-attitude of her Hong Kong Chinese subordinates. From line 19 onwards, in particular, she voices her – steadily growing (line 22-24) – understanding for this attitude and attempts to explain it.

So on the first level of positioning, in this fragment Susan repeatedly emphasises the difference aspect of the similarity/difference relation outlined in Bucholtz and Hall (2005) and constructs herself in opposition to three collectivity groups of antagonists: (1) the company, which is consistently referred to in the third person plural pronominal form (e.g. lines 10, 13, 15) – allowing Susan to avoid any alignment with this institutional in-group, (2) the Australian employees and (3) the Hong Kong Chinese employees. The behaviour of the two latter groups is under discussion here although only the behaviour of the Hong Kong Chinese is explicitly accounted for. This could be explained by the fact that on the second level of positioning Susan interacts with two Western interviewers and thus a certain degree of cultural “common ground” is to be expected. But this explicit accounting also contributes to constructing Susan’s professional identity. More specifically, on the third level of positioning she portrays herself as a highly independent professional with a lot of insight into, and empathy for, the ways in which people from other cultures behave and the reasons behind this, hence orienting to the dominant discourse of respecting cultural diversity. Quite telling in this respect is the face saving way in which she constructs her Chinese subordinates on the first level of positioning, namely by avoiding evaluations of their language proficiency (fragment 3) and providing explanations for their behaviour (fragment 4).

Fragments 3 and 4 have thus shown that through the insertion of stories and the insights they provide into the ways in which the teller sets up the referential world and talks into being the characters within it, a more nuanced picture is created of the various identities that Susan is constructing in the course of this interaction with the interviewers. For example, by

positioning the company as an antagonist in fragment 4, she supports her explicit identity claims of non-institutional alignment (c.f. Bucholtz and Hall's notion of difference) that she has made throughout the interview. Furthermore, these identity claims can be related to master narratives about perceived cultural practices and differences, thus linking the local, "here and now of storytelling" layer to a more global layer of societal views and dominant discourses on culture.

4. Discussion and conclusion

This article has examined some of the specific processes involved in identity construction. More specifically, the case studies of Martin and Susan, two expatriates who work at the same company with a group of local Hong Kong Chinese employees, have shown how both individuals construct remarkably different professional identities by orienting themselves towards and positioning themselves in relation to the same larger collectivities of their company and specific cultural in-groups. In their narratives both expatriates orient themselves to the same dominant discourses of an advanced Western culture, which may, at least partly, be related to the interactional situation in the sense that both interviewees are also expatriates who share with the interviewees a Western socio-cultural background. However, in spite of these similarities, Martin and Susan position themselves rather differently, each carving out a space in between the tensions that they perceive to be existing between different cultural collectivities (the *West* versus *China*) and the institutional collectivity of their company. Although both use these spaces to construct their own professional identities, they draw on very different processes to achieve this. While they both make use of the various identity relations that Bucholtz and Hall (2005) describe as part of the relationality principle, each of them emphasises different aspects of these relations. First of all, regarding the company, Martin mainly emphasises the similarity-aspect, while Susan predominantly highlights the difference-aspect. As a consequence, Martin and Susan position themselves in relation to this institutional collectivity very differently which, in turn, leads to the construction of remarkably different professional identities.

Secondly, the image is more complex when looking at those instances where Martin and Susan make culture relevant and where they evoke certain cultural identities for themselves

and the people they work with. While Martin often sets up a comparative referential world in his stories (i.e. Hong Kong versus the Netherlands) and constructs the best possible future for Hong Kong as becoming a copy of the Dutch culture, he highlights the difference-aspect. Susan at times takes a similar difference-oriented approach, but she also constructs a more complex reality – for example by accounting for observed differences and difficulties due to situational challenges (e.g. the language proficiency of her subordinates in fragment 3; and employees' fear of being fired in fragment 4). She thereby carves out a more individualistic space than Martin, so to speak fluctuating on the continuum between difference and similarity as identified by Bucholtz and Hall (2005), and manages to construct a more complex professional identity – an identity that moves beyond the hegemonic discourses that are propagated by their company and that are often associated with their “own” Western culture.

From a methodological angle and when looking specifically at the analytical processes that yielded these observations and facilitated the integration of these orientations to different collectivities, it is important to highlight the crucial role of the analysis of the interviewees' narratives from a positioning perspective (cf. Bamberg, 1997b; Deppermann, 2013; De Fina, 2013). In both cases before scrutinizing the narrative sections of the interviews, we initially observed that the interviewees' explicit claims about their professional identities seemed fairly coherent. However, a close analysis of the narratives that Martin and Susan produced throughout the interview revealed a rather different and more nuanced picture which partially tears down these seemingly neatly constructed professional identities. Especially the first level of positioning, comprising of the set-up of the referential world in these stories and the positioning of the characters vis-à-vis one another in this world turned out to be quite telling. But also the analysis of the second level of positioning, namely the function of these stories in their local interactional contexts and for example the way the set-up of the first level of positioning is (or is not) accounted for, contributed significantly to the depth of the analyses. In the case of Martin, such an in-depth analysis enabled us to deconstruct his institutional lingo of “being globally uniform” and to show an orientation to a hierarchical notion of culture with a clear preference for “his own” culture and a lack of understanding and interest in the Chinese culture (i.e. merely viewing it as and reducing it to being “not there yet”). Moreover, after analysing the comments Martin utters throughout the interview and comparing them to

his narratives, we have shown that his institutional alignment needs to be “revisited”, and has to be described more adequately as an alignment not with Company K as such but rather with its Western (or more specifically, Dutch) branches. In the case of Susan we also observed an orientation to what she describes as Western culture, but in a less hierarchical, and more open way. Her institutional non-alignment is consistent throughout the interview, but her orientation to the Western culture as the benchmark is not as static and consistent as Martin’s – especially in her narratives, a more complex and nuanced approach to and understanding of cultural norms, practices and expectations is revealed.

Our analyses have thus shown that the insertion of stories in their most basic form, resulting in the addition of the first level of positioning (the set-up of the referential world), adds further meaning and complexity to the interactional layer (on the second level). In these longer, narrative stretches of talk by the interviewees a more nuanced, and hence seemingly more negotiated professional identity emerges. Although there is hardly any explicit interaction (or interactional negotiation of meaning) in these narratives (e.g. the interviewers hardly interrupt the interviewees), it is precisely this combination of the first and the second levels of positioning which crucially contributes to the construction of more complex and nuanced identities. As we have shown, the implications of these two layers, in turn, are highly relevant for the identity claims that the interviewees make in relation to the dominant discourses regarding cultural diversity on the third level of positioning.

Through the analyses of these case studies, we hope to have contributed to mapping the complexities of identity construction, and, in particular, to have illustrated some of the benefits of taking an interactional positioning approach. Analysing identity construction from this angle has proved particularly useful for identifying and revealing some of the inconsistencies between the interviewees’ identity claims and the identities that are constructed through their stories. Far from being a straightforward linear process, identity construction is a complex web of interacting and closely integrated activities and processes. This fascinating area of study, we believe, is likely to remain of galvanizing interest and to capture the attention of researchers for some time to come.

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