

‘YOU HAVE TO BE ADAPTABLE, OBVIOUSLY’. CONSTRUCTING PROFESSIONAL IDENTITIES IN MULTICULTURAL WORKPLACES IN HONG KONG

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Abstract

In spite of the increasing globalisation of the work domain and the mobilization of the workforce (Wong et al. 2007) only very little attention has been paid to the interplay between culture and professional identities in workplace contexts. This paper addresses this gap by exploring some of the ways through which professionals are required to construct and negotiate their various identities in increasingly multicultural contexts where notions of culture may become particularly salient.

We focus on multicultural workplaces where, we believe, the intricate and complex relationship between culture and identity is particularly well reflected: In these contexts members are on a daily basis exposed to culture-specific perceptions, assumptions, expectations, and practices which may ultimately be reflected in workplace communication, and which impact on how professional identities are constructed.

Drawing on a corpus of more than 80 hours of authentic workplace discourse and follow-up interviews conducted with professionals we explore how expatriates who work in Hong Kong with a team of local Chinese construct, negotiate and combine aspects of their professional and cultural identities in their workplace discourse. Our particular focus is on two issues that have been identified in participants' interviews: Sharing decision making responsibilities and negotiating a work-life balance. Our analysis of these two aspects illustrates the complex processes of identity construction from two different but complementary perspectives: i) the ways in which participants portray themselves as adapting to, negotiating or rejecting the new culture in which they work and live; and ii) the ways in which these perceived identity construction processes are actually reflected in participants' workplace discourse.

Keywords: Cultural identity; Professional identity; Social constructionism; Multicultural workplaces; Hong Kong; Shared decision making; Work-life balance.

1. Introduction

Identity is increasingly recognised as an important issue in organisational communication (e.g. Holmes 2000b; Kendall & Tannen 1997; Angouri & Marra 2011). In this paper we focus on a particular aspect of professional identities, namely the impact of culture. While the link between culture and identity is much researched (e.g. Kim 2007; Hall & Du Gay 1996), the construction and performance of culture as a crucial component of professional identities in workplace contexts, in particular in multicultural workplaces, have routinely been downplayed or neglected. This gap is particularly surprising considering the globalisation of the work domain and resulting mobilization of the workforce (Wong et al. 2007; Portes 2003), which often require

professionals to construct and negotiate their various identities in increasingly multicultural contexts where notions of culture often become particularly salient.

This paper aims to address this research gap by exploring how professional identities are constructed and negotiated in multicultural workplaces in ways that reflect interlocutors' cultural assumptions and beliefs. In particular, if we understand cultural identities (following Kidd (2002: 26)) as 'a sense of belonging to a distinct ethnic, cultural or subcultural group', and if we agree with Holliday (2010: 175) who views the profession as being an integral aspect of cultural identity, the close link between the notions of cultural and professional identities becomes obvious. Our focus in this paper is on multicultural workplaces where, we believe, this intricate relationship between culture and identity is particularly well reflected because members are on a daily basis exposed to culture-specific perceptions, assumptions, expectations, and practices which may all contribute to the construction and negotiation of their professional (and cultural) identities.

More specifically, in this paper we aim to explore how expatriates who live and work in Hong Kong construct, negotiate and combine aspects of their professional and their cultural identities in their workplace discourse. We have chosen Hong Kong as the focus of our study since it is a prime example of a place where people from a diversity of multicultural backgrounds live and work together. Hong Kong has been described as 'the city where East meets West' (Chan 2005: 75; Cheng 2003; Brooks 2004). And although the non-Chinese community in Hong Kong accounts for only 5% of the population¹, members of the expatriate community are well-represented in various commerce and industry sectors². This multicultural and multilingual workforce of expatriates from all over the world brings with it not only professional expertise, knowledge and skills but also culturally influenced ideas, assumptions and expectations about how things are to be done most appropriately and effectively in a workplace context. As Imahori and Cupach (2005: 195) note, '[d]ifferent cultures [...] have different expectations regarding which communicative behaviors are considered effective and socially appropriate.' And these expectations and the ways in which they are enacted on a daily basis, we argue, may ultimately have an impact on how interlocutors construct their professional identities in relation to each other, taking into account the wider socio-cultural context in which their interact.

2. Theorising identity construction in intercultural encounters

Several theories have been developed that conceptualise and explain the construction and negotiation of identities in intercultural encounters. Gudykunst et al. (2005), for example, outline four major theories that approach identity negotiation or management: Cultural identity theory (Collier & Thomas 1988), identity management theory (Cupach & Imahori 1993), identity negotiation theory (Ting-Toomey 1993), and communication theory of identity (Hecht 1993). While each of these theories provides useful insights

¹ Population by Ethnicity 2001 and 2006, http://www.censtatd.gov.hk/hong_kong_statistics/statistical_tables/index.jsp?tableID=139&ID=&subjectID=1

² Working population by Occupation, Duration of Residency in Hong Kong and Ethnicity, <http://www.censtatd.gov.hk>

into how interlocutors construct and negotiate their cultural identities in intercultural encounters, they have been criticised for not sufficiently capturing the role of communication in these processes (Gudykunst et al. 2005: 17).

This paper, thus takes a social constructionist perspective, which treats the construction of identities as a constantly shaping and developing process (Holmes 2000a). In this process the various aspects of identity are conceptualised as being ‘maintained and (re-)created through social practices, including language practices’ (Kendall & Tannen 1997: 83). In contrast to the theories mentioned above, a social constructionist perspective enables us to approach identity construction via an analysis of linguistic practices. In other words, we look at how interlocutors construct and negotiate their own and each others’ identities in and through talk, and how they portray themselves (and each other) as particular kinds of people in their discourse. However, as Marra and Holmes (2008: 399) note, ‘it is important to bear in mind that linguistic features and ways of speaking do not directly encode social meanings such as ethnicity, but rather do so indirectly through their associations with particular rites, activities, traits and stances’. Thus, there is no one-to-one relation between specific ways of talking and certain identities. Rather, linguistic forms are implicitly associated with certain identities via the interactional stances that they evoke (Ochs 1993).

In contrast to earlier theories, social constructionism sees identity not as a fixed and static category based on the attributes attached to individuals, but defines it as ‘a dynamic construct that may not only develop and change over time but is also context dependent’ (Ellemers et al. 2003: 13; Hall et al. 1999; Hall 2000). As a consequence of this conceptualisation of identity, identity construction is not viewed as an individual act but as a process that involves others. As such, identities are constructed not only in local contexts but also in relation and in collaboration with others (see also Schnurr & Zayts 2011). Moreover, as social constructionism acknowledges, an individual’s multiple identities may not necessarily be in harmony with each other but may give rise to certain tensions (Sunderland & Litosseliti 2002; Lytra 2009).

Our aim is to explore this intricate relationship between professional and cultural identities, and to illustrate some of the ways in which they impact on and interact with each other, with a particular focus on the ways in which participants’ cultural perceptions and beliefs become relevant for the construction of their professional identities.

3. Data

The data analysed in this study is part of a larger corpus of workplace interactions collected in a range of different workplaces in Hong Kong, ranging from small privately-owned companies to large international financial corporations. Our data collection methodology follows closely the procedures developed by the Language in the Workplace Project (see e.g. Holmes & Stubbe 2003). The corpus comprises more than 80 hours of video- and audio-recordings of authentic workplace discourse. These primary data are supplemented by audio-recorded interviews with participants, notes from participant observation and a range of (internal and external) organisational documents.

In our analyses we draw on two different kinds of discourse, namely participants’ authentic workplace discourse (in particular, meeting discourse) and their

comments and reflections gathered through interviews. In particular, we approach identity construction from two different but complementary perspectives, namely i) the ways in which interlocutors portray themselves as adapting to, negotiating or rejecting the new culture in which they work and live; and ii) the ways in which these perceived identity construction processes are actually reflected in interlocutors' workplace discourse. As Fairhurst (2007: 113) maintains, 'identity comes to be defined both by the way individuals act and what they say about themselves'. Thus, combining participants' everyday workplace discourse with their reflections on their experiences in working in multicultural workplaces provides valuable insights into the multi-faceted picture of the complex (and often contradictory) processes involved in identity construction in organisational settings.

3.1. Background of the participants

The main participants in this study are UK expatriates who have been residing in Hong Kong for various periods of time ranging from a few years to several decades. Interestingly, the insights that our participants provided about their professional experiences of working in multicultural teams in Hong Kong displayed consistent similarities regardless of the amount of time that they have spent in Hong Kong. We briefly introduce our participants before analysing extracts of their discourse.

Janet³, the owner of a language teaching company, has arrived in Hong Kong nearly thirty years ago. First employed as an English teacher at the British Counsel, she later established her own company, Lingsoft Inc. Currently, the company has 15 employees who are all Hong Kong Chinese with the exception of Janet.

Tobias, a managing director of a large telecommunication company, Telenor, has been living in different parts of Asia for over 10 years, and prior to that he was working in the UK but travelling to Asia regularly on business trips. At the time of data collection he managed more than 1000 employees. Most of his staff are local Hong Kong Chinese, but also include some expatriates from around the world.

Our other participant, Susan, has been residing in Hong Kong for a comparatively short period of time, namely for 2.5 years. Prior to that she lived and worked in Australia. Susan is the Head of one of the departments in a major international financial corporation, Company K. Her team is comprised of 30 people, and they include both Hong Kong Chinese and expatriate members.

However, although our participants are all expatriates and although their experiences (as reflected in their comments in the interviews) are to some extent similar, we do not want to suggest that they form a homogenous or monolithic group (see also Nair-Venugopal 2009). Nor do we want to claim that they merely 'represent the cultures they belong to' (Nair-Venugopal 2009: 77), rather, we aim to illustrate some of the ways in which our participants make culture an issue in their workplace discourse and how their conceptualisations of culture contribute to constructing and negotiating their professional and their cultural identities in the context of their multicultural workplaces.

³ All participants and the companies they work for have been assigned pseudonyms. We would like to thank all participants for taking part in this project.

4. Constructing professional identities in multicultural workplaces: An analysis

In our analysis of seven examples of authentic workplace discourse and interview discourse we explore how expatriate professionals in three different multicultural workplaces construct their professional identities as expatriate leaders in their respective organisations. Our particular focus is on two aspects repeatedly mentioned by the participants in our study: Sharing decision making power among team members and maintaining a work-life balance.

4.1. *Sharing decision making power*

In the interviews all our participants commented on significant differences in the expectations of what constitutes 'effective' leadership behaviour among expatriate leaders and local Hong Kong Chinese subordinates. The general perception among participants was that while what they considered to be 'Western' notions of doing leadership often involve attempts to share responsibilities and decision making power (for example, by involving team members in these processes), 'Asian' notions of leadership centre around subordinates' expectation to be led, not to question authority, and to be only minimally involved in decision making processes. Although we take a more critical perspective towards these generalisations, as we elaborate below, and although we are aware that the labels 'Western' and 'Asian' are rather ambiguous and can be used to refer to a vast number of cultures and languages (for further discussion see e.g. Bargiela-Chiappini 2005), our use of these terms here reflects participants' own perceptions and experiences.

There is a substantial body of leadership literature that supports some of our participants' assumptions and that argues that culture is one of the most prominent factors that have an impact on defining 'the array of preferred and acceptable leader behaviours' (Cullen 1999: 527; see also Guirdham 2005; Chee & West 2004; House et al. 2004). The main argument of this literature is that different expectations about appropriate ways of doing leadership are often linked to culture-specific values, and as a consequence, notions of 'effective' leadership vary considerably across cultures. In high power distance cultures, for example, such as Hong Kong, superiors are typically seen as 'benevolent autocrat' or 'good father'. More senior people are expected to be faithful and caring while more junior staff are expected to be loyal and obedient (Redding 1990; Westwood 1992; Selmer & de Leon 2003). In cultures with low power distance, on the other hand, such as, for example, the UK and Australia, leaders are often viewed as a 'resourceful democrat[s]' (Hofstede 1995: 151) who take into account the views of their subordinates. However, these claims are challenged to a certain extent by a study by Wong et al. (2007) who found that such differences in leadership perception and power relations are considerably less pronounced in multicultural workplaces. In contrast to their hypotheses based on previous intercultural research, the researchers did not find significant differences in the ways in which Western and local Hong Kong Chinese managers perceived themselves.

A lot of these cross-cultural studies have been heavily criticised, in particular for their rather essentialist and static conceptualisation of culture. More recent approaches conceptualise culture as a dynamic performance, as something people *do* rather than as a static and fixed construct (Roberts & Sarangi 1993; Street 1993; Sarangi 1994 [2011],

2010). Recent research has shown that although it may seem pervasive to use culture as an explanatory variable this runs the danger of over-generalisation and producing or reinforcing (often negative) stereotypes (e.g. Cheng 2003; Scollon & Scollon 2001; Sarangi 1994 [2011]; Hartog 2006). One way of avoiding these pitfalls is to take a more ‘dynamic view of culture’ (Sarangi 1994 [2011]: 416) and to focus on the ‘actual use of language by actual people from different cultures doing actual things with language in actual situations’ (Cheng 2003: 10). Thus, rather than dealing with culture in what Sarangi (1994: 416) calls ‘an unproblematic way’, it is more promising to shift the analytic focus onto exploring how interlocutors ‘mediate, negotiate and modify the values, beliefs, norms, attributes and language that they bring along into the conversation’ (Cheng 2003: 10).

We have chosen four examples to illustrate how two of our participants, Susan and Janet, conceptualise and actually enact the processes of decision making and exercising power with the members of their teams. Examples 1 and 2 are taken from the interviews with the leaders and examples 3 and 4 are from their daily workplace interactions.

(1) *Context: Interview after data collection with Susan, the Head of one of the departments in a major international financial corporation, company K. R – Researcher; S – Susan*

1. R: [...] if you could just tell us a little bit about your leadership style ?
2. S: What changed me (.) I swore I’d never let this happen because when I arrived,
3. I saw people, I saw managers and senior managers and partners doing things
4. that I thought were really really not (.) not appropriate and quite a dictatorial
5. style and definitely (.) power (.) use, and powers came from (.), it was
6. positional power. People are supposed to be using expert power. So I, you
7. know, the use of relational power, I don’t think it’s effective. Um, and
8. coming to China (.) what I realized is that the culture (.) requires you in a way
9. to do this, it actually requires you to act in ways that as a Westerner,
10. foreigner, you find um, um, (.) surprising. I don’t think I’ll have any difficulty
11. when I return to work in other cultures. (.) But you’re always expected to act
12. that way. If you don’t, it confuses people, I think. It confuses the Chinese
13. people who are working for you. And I think what I learnt was that, um, (.)
14. that it worries the Chinese employees if you don’t act this way. They actually
15. don’t know what to do if you don’t use the hierarchical or positional power.
16. Um, and they become worried and concerned and I call it, I call it “the
17. worried Chinese look” which is “Oh my god, she’s not doing what should be
18. doing.” So you are forced in a way to change your management style and I
19. find that odd. But then you have to do, what you have to do.

In the interview Susan emphasises the impact of cultural expectations on the ways in which people (including others and herself) do leadership. She recounts how she was surprised to find Western ‘*managers and senior managers and partners*’ display leadership behaviour which she considered to be ‘*really really not (.) not appropriate and quite a dictatorial style*’ (lines 4 and 5). She particularly comments on what she describes as culturally-motivated differences in exercising power (lines 5-7): While, according to her, Western cultures often appreciate expert power, i.e. power

which derives from an individual's 'knowledge, aptitude, and ability' (Dwyer 1993: 557; French & Raven 1959), Eastern cultures, on the other hand, she claims, tend to value position power, i.e. power that is based on an individual's position in an organisation (Northouse 1997; French & Raven 1959).

However, what is particularly interesting about Susan's comments is that she explicitly describes culture as having an impact on the leadership performance of expatriates: '*the culture requires you in a way to do this, but actually requires you to act in ways that as a Westerner, foreigner, you find um, um, surprising*' (lines 8-10). Thus, in her view, in order to do leadership effectively in the multicultural context in which she works, she feels required to act in ways that are in accordance with the expectations of her local Hong Kong Chinese staff and which may often be in conflict with her own ('Western') ideals of doing leadership and exercising power. In particular, as she describes, in order to prevent her subordinates from being confused and worried (lines 12-17) she tends to adapt her leadership style to what she perceives to be their expectations (lines 17-19). And although she does not seem to enjoy these 'Chinese' ways of doing things (as is reflected, for example, in her choice of words '*forced to change*' (line 17), and '*odd*' (line 18)), she seems rather pragmatic about it: '*you have to do what you have to do*' (lines 18-19).

In the interview, then, Susan describes a close link between the ways in which she constructs herself as a leader and the opposing cultural expectations that she perceives: She portrays herself as having to negotiate her own ('Western') ideals of exercising power with the expectations of her Chinese staff. And perhaps even more than that: Not only does she negotiate culturally influenced norms and practices but it almost seems as though she is adopting Chinese ways of doing things in spite of her reluctance. In this excerpt (and throughout the interview) she thus portrays herself as an expatriate who is '*forced*' (line 18) to adhere to the norms and expectations of the culture she works in at the expense of what she believes to be '*appropriate*' to her own culturally influenced ways of conceptualising leadership. However, as we will see in example 3 below, in the actual reality of doing leadership on a day-to-day basis with her local Hong Kong Chinese staff, culture seems to be much less of an issue and Susan's leadership performance effectively combines elements of various ideals of doing leadership.

The next example is taken from the interview with Janet, the owner of a language teaching company, Lingsoft Inc. In describing her leadership style, Janet comments on similar issues as Susan.

(2) *R – Researcher; J – Janet*

1. R: How would you describe your leadership style?
2. J: Um (2.1) I would describe that- (1) two main aspects of it (.) one is um (1.2)
3. essentially trying to get the democracy (.) going in the office, doesn't work a
4. hundred percent because I'm working with Chinese people, um but that (.) that
5. would be my ultimate goal is that they work fully as a team and they they're
6. fully democratic in the decision making hmm but having said that um (.) that
7. doesn't work, so that I get quite (frustrated).

When asked how she would describe her leadership style Janet portrays herself as a democratic leader who puts great emphasis on empowering and involving her

subordinates in decision making processes (lines 3-6). However, she also acknowledges that these ideals of doing leadership may not be the most effective in the context in which she operates. She explicitly mentions that she works ‘*with Chinese people*’ (line 4) which she perceives as having an impact on her leadership performance: Rather than being able to achieve her ‘*ultimate goal*’ (line 5) of democratic or participative leadership, Janet seems to struggle (as she admits in line 7) to combine her own ideals of doing leadership with the reality of working with people from another culture. In the interview, then, Janet constructs her professional identity as a leader by showing her awareness of what she perceives to be tensions between Western ideals and Chinese expectations of leadership: She positions herself in-between the antagonistic discourses of democracy and empowerment on the one hand and Chinese expectations (which she does not elaborate in more detail here) on the other.

What is interesting in Susan’s and Janet’s accounts is the observation that in both cases participants bring in culture or, more specifically, different cultural expectations as having a considerable impact on their leadership style – although we did not specifically ask about culture in this question. There thus seems to be a strong belief among participants that culture has a crucial impact on how they do leadership and how they construct their professional identities as leaders in the multicultural workplace in which they work.

We now look at two examples of how Susan and Janet actually *do* leadership in their everyday working lives. The examples that we have chosen are instances of decision making taken from weekly meetings between the leaders and their local staff.

(3) *Context: This is a weekly meeting of the administrative team of Susan’s (S) Department. The meeting is chaired by Cheryl (C), a Senior Administrator, who is also the team leader. The third participant in the extract is Julia (J) who works as an Administrator. The participants are discussing problems with the room-booking caused by changes in the schedules of the training courses they organize for Company K’s employees.*

1. C: Do we have any:: changes, I understand that we might be some changes on the
2. ((name of the course)) schedule, is this still needs many amendments?
3. J: Hmm hmm a:h actually I have received some amendments yesterday but ah it
4. just a minor amendments (.) it should, it should be Okay.
5. C: Hmm hmm can you book, can you change the room with your revised time
6. table?
7. J: Ahhh I’m err I’m looking for the rooms but ahh ahh need to update it and check
8. it with Angela later on.
9. C: Hmm hmm
10. J: Hmm
11. S: Okay, if we need to reschedule some management skills programmes to meet
12. your need, then you’ll let me know, then we’ll figure it out.
13. J: Hmm, okay. Thank you.
14. C: Okay.

This example illustrates how decisions are typically made in Susan’s team. And while there is a lot to say about this example we concentrate here on Susan’s performance. At first Susan does not actively participate in the discussion (lines 1-10)

but leaves the negotiations to Cheryl, the team leader and chair of the meeting. Susan then joins the discussion in line 11 in what seems to be an attempt to clarify matters and bring the negotiations to an end. The utterance initial 'Okay' (line 11) indicates that the discussion is reaching a new stage and that a topic is about to be closed (Fung & Carter 2007). What is particularly interesting is Susan's use of pronouns when formulating the ultimate decision: She uses the inclusive pronoun 'we' to signal that the issue under discussion is a group problem which needs to be solved in a conjoint effort ('we'll figure it out' (line 12)), but she also uses 'you' to specifically address Julia who is responsible for the schedule changes. Interestingly, Susan uses the first person pronoun 'me' in 'you'll let me know' (line 12) thereby positioning herself as being ultimately the one who is in charge of the team's performance. She thereby takes over part of the responsibility and portrays herself as the leader of the team (for a more detailed discussion of the ways in which Susan and Cheryl share leadership roles see Schnurr & Zayts 2011). However, Susan's display of power and authority in portraying herself as the most important person responsible for dealing with this issue is mitigated to some extent by her final comment 'we'll figure it out' (line 12). The use of the inclusive 'we' in this utterance once more stresses that finding a solution should be a team effort.

This short extract is a good example of how Susan shares decision making power with the other members of her team: She typically keeps herself in the background and lets her team members discuss the issues first. Susan tends to join these discussions when they whither away or when a final decision needs to be reached. Often she is the one to formulate and thereby ratify the decision that her subordinates have made. In this way, her leadership performance as reflected in the actual workplace discourse draws on elements that index autocratic as well as democratic leadership styles. An autocratic leadership style refers to ways of doing leadership in which the leader keeps control over decision making processes and makes decisions almost unilaterally without encouraging subordinates' contribution; such ways of doing leadership have often been associated with the Chinese culture (e.g. Cullen 1999; Chee & West 2004). A democratic leadership style, on the other hand, describes leaders who distribute the responsibility (e.g. for decision making) among team members and who empower their subordinates; this way of doing leadership is more participatory than autocratic leadership styles and is typically ascribed to Western cultures (e.g. Hofstede 2001; Northouse 1997).

In this short excerpt, then, Susan shifts between autocratic and participatory leadership styles: She portrays herself not only as the most important person and displays her power overtly (e.g. by ratifying the decision) (autocratic leadership style), but at the same time she plays only a minor role in the discussions and finding solutions that lead to the decision (participatory leadership style). In her everyday workplace discourse Susan thus portrays herself as a confident leader who has found ways of doing leadership that take into consideration and combine the different, culturally specific expectations of the people she works with and of herself.

The next example is taken from a weekly meeting at Lingsoft Inc. and illustrates how Janet and her team make decisions.

- (4) *Context: This is a weekly meeting of the administrative team of Lingsoft Inc. Participants in the conversation include Janet (J), the head of the company and chair of the meeting, Valerie (V) and Ivan (I), two employees. Lingsoft Inc. offers*

English tutoring in some public schools in Hong Kong, and the participants are discussing running new English classes in a particular school.

1. J: Either we (.) suggest the minimum numbers to our students, (.) or we ask for
2. the price.
3. V: Yes.
4. J: Or we have two prices, one for groups of, say, six. (0.6) Or is that gonna be
5. too complicated?
6. V: That's too complicated for the parents.
7. I: Yeah, that'll be too complicated, yeah.
8. J: Okay. ° Okay.°
9. (0.4)
10. V: Why not just try one thousand five hundred for ten sections (). I think they,
11. they can afford.
12. I: For all (.) for all class, right? For all class, for all class, okay.
13. V: If they don't have, any similar organization provide (.) English teaching, I
14. think, should be alright. Because we just compare of, of other subject. Piano
15. or swim, ah! Not piano. Swimming or some o-other I-other interest course.
16. J: So what are you suggesting Vicky? One?
17. V: One thousand five hundred for ten sections.
18. J: Oh! One thousand five hundred for- instead of?
19. V: One thousand for ten sections. Now they are paying one thousand for ten
20. section and we got seventy percent. (.)
21. J: If we, if we, if we lose, if we lose thirty percent, what's thirty percent of
22. fifteen?
23. V: I don't know.
24. J: So we
25. I: Seventy percent, one hundred and fifteen.
26. V: One hundred- U:h, one hundred and five ah.
27. J: One hundred and five. Okay, so we get a little. hhhhh. Okay.

In contrast to Susan, Janet is clearly leading the discussion in this excerpt. She plays a very active role in finding a solution: She offers different solutions to her subordinates (see for example the 'either or' constructions in lines 1-2, 4-5), she asks clarifying questions (e.g. lines 16 and 18) and she specifically requests feedback (e.g. lines 4-5) thereby actively involving the other team members. The other members of her team seem happy to be involved in the decision making process and actively participate in finding a solution: They offer their views (e.g. lines 6 and 7) which Janet takes on board (line 8) and they provide alternative suggestions (lines 10 and 11). However, in the end, it is Janet who summarises the outcome of the decision (line 27) and who signals that the discussion has come to an end (see her repeated use of 'Okay').

In this example Janet portrays herself as a democratic leader who puts great emphasis on empowering and including her team members in the decision making processes. Thus, in contrast to her comment in the interviews that this kind of democratic or participative leadership style 'does not work' in the context of her workplace, this example nicely illustrates the opposite: In this decision making episode at least all participants contribute to the discussion and a solution is found conjointly. However, although the overall discussion is clearly a collaborative effort, there is at the

same time little doubt about the fact that Janet is the one in charge: She displays a range of behaviours indexed for leadership, such as asking clarifying questions, and she is the one who summarises the outcome of the discussion and who has the last word on this matter.

In the next section we focus on another topic that was mentioned repeatedly in the interviews with the expatriate leaders, namely maintaining a work-life balance. Like sharing decision making power, our participants perceived practices to balance work requirements and personal life to be culturally influenced. They thus play a role in how our participants construct and negotiate their professional identities in their multicultural workplaces.

4.2. *Maintaining a work-life balance*

Finding and maintaining a balance between work and personal life is an issue that has been identified by many expatriate participants in our corpus. Most of them have specifically commented on the norm in their Hong Kong workplaces to work late (and overtime) on a regular basis. Indeed, Hong Kong employees are known for working long hours at the expense of time spent on their private lives: A recent survey commissioned by an NGO in Hong Kong showed that Hong Kong employees are working 48.4 hours a week on average which, according to the survey, 'is 21% higher than the 40 hours recommended by the International Labour Organisation.' (Ng & Bernier 2009: 2)

Regular long work hours are an issue for many expatriates who come to Hong Kong after having worked in other (often Western) cultures: In the vast majority of our interviews with expatriates this issue was brought up by participants. And often this aspect of workplace realities in Hong Kong was perceived as being a crucial part of the local culture which is '[c]haracterised by an immigrant population, whose hard work and determination transformed Hong Kong from a small fishing village on the edge of the South China Sea into the economic powerhouse it is viewed as today.' (Vernon 2009: 6) Thus, working hard (as typically measured in the long hours spent at the workplace) is often believed to be one of the reasons for Hong Kong's economic success.

We have chosen three examples here that are representative of the data we have collected to illustrate how our expatriate participants perceive this aspect of Hong Kong's culture. Our particular focus is on the ways in which the issue of work-life balance is perceived as playing a role in participants' professional lives and how it impacts on their professional identities.

(5) *Context: Interview with Tobias, the managing director of a major local company providing telecommunication services, Telenor. R – Researcher; T - Tobias*

1. R: Any interesting experiences, any cultural shocks? ehthhhh
2. T: Well yeah, the first thing that was evident for me, and remember that I'd been
3. coming to Hong Kong for many years before that, was coming four times-
4. (or) five five times a year on business trips, so I really knew this anyway, but
5. you know the evident thing was that people seemed to work very long hours,
6. but they didn't really, they spent most of the day (.) actually not being very

7. productive working in a way which wa::s being to do with people networking-
8. making sure people understood, yududuhduhduduh and then they sort of came to
9. the realization around four or five o'clock that they hadn't done any work and
10. then spend the next four hours working, so that's why they didn't leave the
11. office before nine o'clock
12. R: Do you think it applies to both locals and expats? ehh
13. T No
14. R: Expatriates or mainly local?
15. T: Local (.) local, I mean you know in due course expats may be sucked into it, I
16. guess, because often if you talk to Chinese about expat (.) work behavior, they
17. express some surprise >you know< he gets in at seven o'clock in the morning
18. and leaves at five, (.) this type of stuff, he gets in at seven and works for three
19. hours before anybody else turns up
20. ((3 turns are omitted))
21. T: So I think whilst these are sweeping generalizations, massive generalizations,
22. there is a different work culture
23. R: It's interesting that these long hours come up time, after time, after time, when
24. we talk to people (.)
25. T: But it's not productive, long hours, it's highly unproductive, (long hours), and
26. you start to live with it, you're not going to change this enormous culture,
27. that's just what it is, and the thing, I think you asked me about tips for
28. newcomers, the first thing I would tell newcomers is to learn the art of
29. patience, it's really important, cause you know what? the outcome that you
30. want, if you manage it well, it will, will come. It just may come in a route that
31. you don't expect it or in a way that you don't expect it, so when these people
32. out here in my office set out to do something, to achieve something, they
33. almost invariably achieve it, still achieve it in the way that I might have
34. considered to do it fourteen years ago. Now, you know, I often think, yeah
35. they'll be doing what they do best and they'll get to the right results. So you
36. know, you have to be adaptable, obviously.

In this example Tobias positions himself in opposition to '*these people out there in my office*' (lines 31 and 32), i.e. to the Hong Kong local staff who work for him. He describes some of the working practices of '*these people*' (in particular, regularly working long hours) as resulting from '*a different work culture*' (line 22). In the beginning of this extract Tobias is very critical about what he considers to be the norm in Hong Kong, namely to work long hours (e.g. lines 5-11, 25). And while he acknowledges that his perceptions are '*sweeping generalisations, massive generalisations*' (lines 21 and 22) he makes it very clear that he considers this kind of behaviour to be '*highly unproductive*' (lines 25, 6-7).

However, in spite of having some reservations about these practices of his local staff, Tobias also acknowledges that they are part of the local culture and that he needs to find ways of accepting if not adapting to these different ways of doing things: '*you start to live with it, you're not going to change this enormous culture, that's just what it is*' (lines 26-27, 36). Towards the end of this extract Tobias even seems to change his tune a little and to almost adopt a 'different but equal' discourse describing cultural expectations and practices as different but equally valid. This discourse stands in contrast to his earlier comments about the unproductivity of local practices. Towards the

end he almost seems to revise his original claims to some extent and he maintains that the ways things are done by his Hong Kong local staff may differ from his expectations but they are still leading to good results *'they'll be doing what they do best and they'll get to the right results.'* (line 35).

In this episode, then, Tobias portrays himself as an expatriate leader of a team of Hong Kong locals who seems to experience some tensions between his own ideals of best and most productive practices on the one hand, and the norms of the local Hong Kong culture as reflected in the practices of the people he works with, on the other hand. It is in this perceived tension that he negotiates his professional identity as an expatriate leader by drawing on the almost stereotypical discourses of *'adapting to the other culture'* (e.g. line 36), *'being patient'* (line 29), and *'different but equal cultural practices'* (lines 30-36), while at the same time expressing his frustration with some cultural differences (this frustration is also reflected in other parts of the interview, for example when Tobias talks about the *'culture of hierarchy'* within the company and with clients; or when he complains about his staff not strategizing their actions, or, as he puts it, *'not thinking beyond the next action they need to take'*).

In the next example, Susan reflects on the issue of working long hours.

(6) *Context: Interview with Susan, the Head of one of the departments in a major international financial corporation, Company K.*

1. S: Every country is different. Each partnership is different.
2. So, you do have a radically different em working environment.
3. I mean I (would think of) a beautiful story I have (just to summarize this).
4. I (worked) with the China team (who was) complaining about one of the
5. Australians ((inaudible)). They're saying oh you know he gets to six thirty, you
6. know, he leaves. And I said oh (did he complete his work)? Yeh yeh he has
7. completed his work. So why shouldn't he leave? Oh no, you should stay back
8. (.) and be with the team 'cause the rest of the team is working. That's to do
9. things in China. And I, to me, I find that quite amusing yeh. Finished his work,
10. and it's done, what you're meant to do? But you shouldn't leave because the
11. people in the team haven't done. So you should be there and you should stay at
12. work. (.) That summarizes the difference. In Australia, everyone leaves at
13. whatever time. You finish your work, it's done.

In this example Susan tells a short anecdote to illustrate how her ideals of work-life balance have clashed with the expectations and practices of some Chinese people she worked with some time ago in Australia: The members of the Chinese team were surprised to see a member of the Australian team leave once he had finished his work. According to the expectations of the Chinese team *'you should stay back and be with the team 'cause the rest of the team is working'* (lines 7-8). Susan (like Tobias) perceives these differences in working hours to be rooted in cultural expectations and norms (lines 8 and 9). And indeed, these differences have often been explained by reference to the cultural dimension of individualism versus collectivism (Hofstede 1980): Working long hours and staying in the office until the last person has finished his/her task could be seen as an expression of the high collectivism in the Chinese culture which values cooperation, interdependence, and group harmony (Wong et al.

2007: 96). And although, as Tobias acknowledges in example 5, these perceptions may be ‘*massive generalisations*’ (line 22), it is interesting to note that they came up in most of the interviews that we conducted with expatriates. We thus believe that they play a crucial role in how expatriates construct their professional identities – in particular when negotiating them with their own and their subordinates’ cultural identities.

In telling this little story, then, Susan portrays her professional identity as a team leader (of an Australian-Chinese team) who is aware of but at the same time amused by (line 9) cultural differences regarding working hours. In her account she sets up a relatively explicit and distinct subject position for herself almost in opposition to her Chinese colleagues. She thus not only portrays herself as a leader but as someone who believes in specific (and what she describes as ‘Western’ or ‘Australian’) values and practices, including flexible working hours and employee independence and responsibility for their work. As we will see in the next example, the issue of work-life balance also comes up in the authentic workplace data that we have collected in Susan’s department: Work-life balance seems to be an issue that she is very passionate about and that she wants to improve for her team.

The next example shows Susan talking to her second-in-command, Cheryl, about implementing shorter working hours for the administrative team.

(7) *Context: This is a one-to-one meeting between Susan (S) and Cheryl (C). Cheryl is a Hong Kong Chinese and has just taken over the leadership role for the administrative team in the department that Susan is heading. In the conversation Susan mentions Peter who is Susan’s boss.*

1. S: .hh I'm- I'm- still I kno:w that people work: (.) quite long, I know that people
2. work longer hours, I'm just wondering hmm (.) because over time it's harder to
3. prove, is there anything that we can do: I'm thinking, if peop-, if people don't
4. have a programme=
5. C: =Hmm
6. S: (.) because we know they are going to stay past five thirty, °we know they're
7. probably going to stay till six o'clock°
8. C: Hmm
9. S: It's your choice, it's your team, but >if people don't have a programme< do you
10. want to start them at nine o'clock?
11. C: °Hmmhm° mhm uhmmm, if they do not have a programme you mean (.) uhm
12. wu- wu- wu- whether I feel happy to let them=
13. S: =start at [nine o'clock]
14. C: [start at nine] o'clock
15. S: Because we know they don't leave at five thirty
16. C: >hmmhm hmhm<
17. S: We know, most people=
18. C: =hmmhm
19. S: Most evenings leave, a quarter to [six, six] o'clock=
20. C: [Hmm hmm]
21. ((8 turns are omitted))
22. S: Maybe we can start at nine o'clock and people can then st- finish their normal=
23. C: =hmm

24. S: quarter to six- six o'clock, what do you think [will that work]
25. C: I think it's a good idea
26. S: Yeah
27. C: But I don't know (where) to approach our (inaudible)
28. S: If you want me to do that,
29. C: Hmm
30. S: I will organise it with Peter.

Talking to Cheryl about ways of cutting down the working hours of team members, Susan makes work-life balance an issue in her everyday workplace interactions. And although culture is not explicitly mentioned in this extract, the close link between her team's behaviour and culturally influenced perceptions of regularly working long hours are well motivated by Susan's comments and explanations in the interview (see example 6).

Susan starts the discussion of the long working hours with Cheryl by stating that '*people work quite long*' (line 1). After having repeated this fact (line 2) the illocutionary force of this utterance is mitigated considerably throughout her next utterances, for example by starting to provide an explanation for her concerns (lines 3 and 4), and by repeatedly using the inclusive pronoun 'we' to signal that she and Cheryl are on the same side. In line 9, then, Susan explicitly emphasises Cheryl's responsibility of this issue: '*it's your choice*', and she directly asks her what she thinks about a possible solution (namely to let people start their workday later) (lines 9 and 10). When Cheryl does not immediately provide an answer, Susan repeats her previous arguments and suggestion (lines 15-22). However, Cheryl still only produces minimal replies in answering her boss's questions. In line 24, then, Susan utters a direct question in which she explicitly asks Cheryl for feedback on her suggestion: '*do you think will that work*'. Cheryl's reply is positive ('*I think it's a good idea*' (line 25)) and receives approval from Susan ('*yeah*' (line 26)). After having agreed to Susan's suggestion, however, Cheryl mentions the problem of how to put Susan's suggestion into practice (line 27), which is then solved by Susan who takes over this responsibility by offering to organise a programme that will help implement shorter working hours.

In this extract Susan skilfully constructs and negotiates her professional identity while paying particular attention to allowing Cheryl to play a role in the decision making. In particular, rather than simply telling Cheryl what to do, Susan spends some time convincing and almost guiding her through the decision. In doing this Susan displays a wide range of behaviours typically associated with a participative leadership style, such as making sure that decisions are reached by consensus rather than being implemented from above. Moreover, Susan's behaviour in this example almost resembles that of a mother who acts in the best interest of her children (here: Team members) and who wants them to make their own decisions in ways which she believes are in their best interest. Like a mother, Susan thus portrays herself as caring for the wellbeing of her staff members (who are regularly working long hours) while at the same time being very clear about what she considers to be the best solution for this problem. And constructing herself as a mother, as someone who is caring while also holding a powerful and authoritarian position, enables her to position herself in ways that combine different expectations of appropriate leadership behaviour including participative and authoritarian behaviours.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this paper was to explore how the professional identities of expatriates who live and work in Hong Kong are constructed and negotiated in multicultural workplaces in ways that reflect participants' cultural assumptions, expectations, values and practices. A particular focus was on the complex interplay between the processes of adapting to, negotiating and rejecting aspects of the local culture, and their impact on constructing professional identities.

We have looked at examples from participants' interview discourse providing valuable insights into their self-perception and interpretation of the situation. Insights gained from this data source were then complemented by participants' workplace discourse which illustrated how interlocutors actually construct their professional identities in their everyday workplace encounters when interacting with their local staff members. Our particular focus was on two aspects that repeatedly came up in the interviews with participants, namely sharing decision making power and maintaining a work-life balance.

We have approached these multicultural encounters from the viewpoint of making sense of 'complex institutional processes in which the shifting nature of 'culture' is embedded' (Sarangi 1994 [2011]). Therefore, in contrast to many previous intercultural and cross-cultural studies that approached culture from a more static viewpoint and used it to 'explain away' the challenges of multicultural encounters, in our analysis we have looked at culture from a more dynamic perspective. In particular, our focus was on how 'culture' or 'cultural differences' were constructed in participants' discourse and how interlocutors actively oriented themselves to the cultural issues that they had brought up.

In the interviews our participants emphasised the impact of what they described as cultural expectations on their leadership behaviour. In particular, they elaborated on how they have to negotiate their own ideals of doing leadership (which they often perceived as being 'Western') with those of the local culture. One of the themes that came through in all the interviews was the difficulties our expatriate leaders experienced in sharing decision making power with their subordinates. We have argued that it is in this perceived tension of having to juggle the sometimes opposing expectations of 'effective' leadership that participants constantly construct and negotiate their professional identities as 'effective' leaders.

Similar observations were made with regards to the topic of maintaining a work-life balance. In the interviews our participants commented on various issues they have with dealing with the expectations and practices of their local staff regarding working long hours. These practices were typically directly associated with cultural differences. Through evaluating these culturally influenced practices in the interviews, participants positioned themselves in relation to this 'other' (local) culture in complex ways: They not only constructed local practices as 'different' but they also partly rejected and partly accepted them (e.g. example 5). Thus, through these processes participants actively constructed their professional and their cultural identities in relation to the wider socio-cultural contexts in which they act: They typically portray themselves as non-members of the local culture who have to find ways of dealing with various cultural practices and expectations.

What is perhaps surprising in our data is that although Holliday (2010: 175) notes that 'individuals can have the capacity to feel a belonging to several cultural realities simultaneously', in the interviews participants took a clear stance as not belonging to the Hong Kong host culture. Rather, they typically positioned themselves in opposition to the local culture, for example by evaluating cultural practices, by creating 'us' and 'them' subject positions, and by making explicit reference to the 'other' culture. Thus, in contrast to the Western expatriate managers that Wong et al. (2007) interviewed, our participants did not consciously attempt to adopt elements of the Hong Kong local culture in order to be successful.

These self-portrayals of participants in the interviews, however, were complemented, and to some extent put into perspective by an analysis of their everyday workplace discourse. A detailed analysis of the ways in which participants actually interact with their Hong Kong Chinese team members indicated that culture was much less of an issue than claimed in the interviews. In particular, in all the examples that we looked at participants seemed to have found ways of constructing their professional identities as leaders by skilfully combining what they thought to be their own 'Western' and their subordinates' 'Chinese' expectations and norms. They have found ways of being empowering and encouraging their subordinates' participation in decision making processes while also displaying aspects of more authoritarian leadership styles. In these ways our participants managed to portray themselves as 'effective' leaders in ways that work in different socio-cultural contexts. In particular, when actually interacting with their Hong Kong local team members our expatriates were not caught in a static tension of conflicting demands but managed to carefully negotiate and combine the various aspects of leadership behaviour: In the decision making episodes, for example, they portrayed themselves as being empowering and encouraging others' participation while at the same time displaying and reinforcing their own position as the most powerful person.

These differences between participant's comments and self-reflections in the interviews and the complex ways in which they actually behaved in their daily encounters with members from another culture clearly demonstrate the usefulness of combining different types of data. And although obtaining actual workplace discourse is often a challenging task (e.g. Du-Babcock & Babcock 1996), the kinds of insights gained through an analysis of what people actually *do* (in addition to what they say they do) are not only informative about the complexities of identity construction but are also likely to provide valuable information about a wide range of other processes that take place in a workplace setting.

Based on our observations of the various processes involved in identity construction, then, we would argue that professional identities are to some extent influenced by participants' cultural expectations, assumptions and values. We would even propose that, at least in multicultural contexts, such as the ones we have looked at, professional identities and cultural identities are interlinked with each other in complex ways, which ultimately means that there are no 'culture-free' professional identities. Rather, professional identities – in particular in multicultural contexts – are constructed and negotiated in ways that always to some extent consider participants' perceptions and expectations about 'culture' and 'cultural differences' (whether real or perceived).

However, our study was exploratory in nature and has only looked at the discourses of three expatriate leaders in Hong Kong. Clearly, more research is necessary to further explore the complexities of identity construction in multicultural contexts. In

particular, multicultural workplaces where members often have specific (often stereotypical) expectations about what they perceive to be culturally influenced behaviours, norms, and values promise to be particularly rich sites for investigations into the complex processes involved in constructing and negotiating professional and cultural identities.

Transcription conventions

(.)	noticeable pause shorter than 0.5 second (including regular pauses between sentences)
.	falling intonation
,	level intonation
?	rising intonation
°XXX°	words are said softer than the surrounding items (not limited to the ending/onset position; can be anywhere in an utterance)
[the beginning of overlapping
]	the end of overlapping
A: XXX=	B's utterance is latched onto A's
B: =XXX	
A: XX[XX]XXX=	means line 3 is a continuation of A's utterance in line 1
B: [XX]	
A: =XXXX	
:	lengthened sound (more colons mean greater length)
> <	words uttered at a faster pace
< >	words uttered at a slower pace
<u>XXX</u>	words said with an emphasis
XXX	stressed words
Ehh, hhh	laughter particles
()	transcriber's best guess of uttered words
(())	non-verbal features or transcriber's comment

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