

PREFACE

I remember it was a Monday morning during my Bachelor studies in Groningen. At the Prins Claus Conservatoire I met with my new music ensemble. Together with three young and talented musicians I kicked off the new academic year by playing Bach's trio sonata in E-flat Major. We were all new to the school and hence, while unpacking our instruments, we introduced ourselves. It was this moment that I realized playing music in this ensemble would be far from ordinary.

The ensemble consisted of four musicians. There was Zanna from Belarus playing harpsichord, Beitske from the Netherlands playing cello, and with Yoko from Japan and myself on violin. Aside from our different instruments, and having received our music education in different countries, there was another problem that we all spoke different languages. Next to Japanese, Yoko only spoke English. Zanna, however, only spoke Belarusian, Russian and German. Besides Dutch, Beitske had working knowledge of both German and English, yet found herself unable to switch between the two languages. As you may expect, it was me who got the job of translating communications – speaking Dutch with Beitske, English with Yoko, and German with Zanna.

Yet, there was another reason why I expected our ensemble practice would be a little challenging: the music piece we got assigned to play. While Bach's trio sonata was originally written for organ, our ensemble consisted of a harpsichord, cello, and two violins. Important decisions had to be made about how we were going to play the piece in this novel arrangement, divide the piece into four individual parts, while remaining true to Bach's original interpretation. Hence, in addition to our diverse backgrounds and the absence of a shared language, it was also the complexity and novelty of the task itself that posed challenges to our collaboration. And so, while we were united in our passion for music motivation to realize a great performance, the many differences among us could easily prevent us from achieving this.

To start our rehearsals, we cut the original score into pieces and turned them into individual parts for each instrument. We spent many hours rehearsing and enjoyed ensemble lessons to improve our technique and develop a joint interpretation of the piece. Zanna made us aware of the harpsichord's limited volume range and stimulated us to search for interpretation in other directions, such as varying the pace and combining different

playing techniques. Yoko, in turn, proved to be an expert in bowing techniques. As we went along, the music score provided the common ground that brought our ensemble together and, with my best efforts to translate communications, we managed to combine our individual efforts and turn them into a beautiful performance.

It was this experience of working together with people from different cultural and expertise areas that motivated me to continue my undergraduate studies with a pre-master in Culture, Organization, and Management and subsequently a MSc in Social Research at VU Amsterdam. I remember how I wrote in my application letter that I wanted to combine my interest in social sciences, culture, and the humanities, and learn to apply it within the context of management and organizations. In particular, I wanted to learn more about cultural processes, organizational structures, and intercultural management. This would help me understand why it was so often in organizational settings that differences between people resulted in significant problems and obstacles to collaboration, whereas in my personal experience, these differences actually contributed to our performance as a music ensemble.

After having followed a Minor in Japan Studies, I decided to further specialize in contemporary Japanese management. I performed my master thesis research on the challenges of Japanese firms as they globalized their businesses and expanded operations overseas. In this context, I conducted a one-year ethnographic study of cross-cultural collaboration within the Japanese multinational “Mirai Corporation¹”. However, the more I got immersed in everyday organizational life at Mirai Corporation, the less I felt existing cultural frameworks were helpful in making sense of what was going on in this global workplace, and hence alternative understandings were needed.

In a first attempt, I turned to social identity theory and focused my master thesis on the way senior managers in Japan and Europe ‘mapped’ their own and other’s cultural identities within the highly politicized context of a post-acquisition integration process. But despite the success of my research (resulting in two conference papers), I wished to look further and dig deeper. I felt more was to be done in order to really capture the collaboration dynamics that I observed during my fieldwork at Mirai Corporation.

¹ Due to anonymity agreements as a premise to carry out the research, all names of respondents and key characteristics of the organization have been disguised. Therefore, the names of the companies and project members are all pseudonyms.

What especially puzzled me was the way people referred to specific differences to distinguish ‘themselves’ from ‘others’. Why was it that at executive levels people at first pointed towards differences between national cultures when making sense of the challenges and frustrations they encountered in their managerial work, while in the context of technology and innovation people often recognized their synergies? And why was it that the latter group instead referred to differences other than culture, yet highly valuing them? Obviously, these findings showed that working together across cultures not necessarily had to be rife with problems. Moreover, they showed that problems experienced when working across cultures were not always caused by (national) culture. That is, at Mirai Corporation collaborations not only crossed cultural boundaries but also various other boundaries. And hence, using the term ‘cross-cultural collaboration’ became increasingly problematic in my opinion.

I felt theory development was needed about when, how, and why people draw upon particular differences to demarcate distinctions between them. Such theorizing should be focused on differences in a more general sense and be sensitive to the context in which such relational processes take place. It should also be able to explain how these processes impacted the objectives that brought people together in the first place (e.g., the work they were expected to do). For instance, for my research on (now) ‘cross-boundary collaboration’ at Mirai Corporation this meant going beyond people’s cultural identity-talk and figure out when, how, and why they used particular differences to demarcate boundaries between them – as well as their consequences.

The generous support from Mirai Corporation and Yanmar Europe helped me to turn my study into a doctoral research project. Inspired by the work of other social science scholars, I narrowed down my research interest: focusing on the processes around boundaries, which I call ‘boundary work’, and why such processes sometimes form an opportunity but can also pose challenges to achieving collaboration outcomes. A second fieldwork period followed, in which I returned to Mirai Corporation and the collaborations I originally studied as well as new ones. This allowed me to investigate the questions that had remained unanswered during my previous fieldwork and to collect additional data. For this, I adopted a relational ontology and studied these collaborations from a practice-theoretical perspective.

Looking back, studying these often complex inter- and intra-organizational

collaborations at Mirai Corporation over a four-year period has been an amazing journey. There were many happy moments such as the moment when Hogo-members received approval for building a production site for their newly invented product Exomin. But I also became aware of the impact the global financial crisis had on in technology firms, for instance when Mirai abruptly had to abort one of the projects I studied: the Gyakuten Project.

In this thesis, I will summarize and reflect upon the main insights of my doctoral research, by reporting findings of three instances of cross-boundary collaboration at Mirai Corporation. In past decades, advances in digital technologies have helped organizations to collaborate across distance. Yet, digital innovations continue to transform the models, processes, and practices of modern-day work and organizing. My journey is therefore an ongoing one and I hope this dissertation stimulates us to think – and motivate further inquiry – into how digital technologies are transforming the boundaries of work and organizing.