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Making Sense of Culture in International Business: Some Theoretical and Methodological Reflection

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Abstract

When analysing modes of navigating cross-cultural business communities most IB studies employ an *etic* approach that delineates how ethnically owned companies thrive and manoeuvre in complex cross-cultural business environments. This approach implies employing theoretical models and empirical observations that from a methodological point of view identify a local entrepreneur either as an objectified agent or as an anonymous 'other' thus pointing towards the assumption that such an approach has its roots in an ethnocentric academic tradition. This article goes beyond an *etic* approach and introduces an *emic* approach in which it is the local entrepreneurs themselves, who provide the main bulk of data on why and how they position themselves in a cross-cultural business environment the way they do. The main objective of this study is thus to show how local entrepreneurs develop business strategies so as to navigate and grow their companies in a complex cross-cultural business environments. The discussion on local entrepreneurship begins by outlining a theoretical framework for how to approach *emic* studies and from there proceeds towards suggesting a methodological approach that is capable of providing the empirical data that supports a theoretical framework based on an *emic* approach. The focus in this paper is thus to excavate how local entrepreneurs manoeuvres in a multi-cultural business context by combining both an *etic* and *emic* approach.

Keywords: *cross-cultural business, ethnic entrepreneurship, etic, emic, culture, semiotic, semantics*

Introduction

When analysing modes of navigating cross-cultural business communities in Asia and Southeast Asia in particular most international business studies employ an *etic* approach that delineates how, for example, different ethnically owned companies thrive and manoeuvre in complex cross-cultural business environments. This implies that from a methodological point of view local entrepreneurs are turned into objectified agents or as anonymous 'others' thus indicating that such an approach is based on an ethnocentric theoretical tradition. This paper goes beyond such an *etic* approach and introduces an *emic* approach in which it is the entrepreneurs themselves that provide the main bulk of data on why and how they position themselves in a cross-cultural business environment the way they do. To avoid having to choose between an ethnocentric or localised approach this paper is based on a combined *etic* and *emic* approach to show how local entrepreneurs develop business strategies to navigate and grow their companies in complex cross-cultural business environments.

The paper begins by discussing how to think the notion of culture. When studying multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic business communities the notion of culture is often used as an explanatory framework in itself. Belonging to a culture makes one behave according to certain prescriptions and act according to certain norms and values. Such a notion of culture lays the foundation for the creation of sophisticated stereotypes that representatives from foreign companies visiting a local market employs when trying to make sense of what is going on in that particular market. This paper attempts to go beyond such prescriptions by focusing not of culture per se but rather on social strategies that on the basis of tacit knowledge results in specific local business strategies. When doing that the notion of culture does not constitute an explanatory framework. Rather it constitutes a reflection of such local processes and should be regarded as such.

Key approaches employed in the following theoretical analysis are constructions and employment of tacit knowledge that provides point of departure for making strategies based on a semiotic and semantic reading of a given (business) context. By emphasising context in this connection, a holistic understanding of social and political markers after which local entrepreneurs navigate when realising business strategies is made possible.

After having delineated the theoretical approach that this paper is based on questions of how to collect data for validating such a theoretical approach automatically surfaces. In answering this question the paper suggest focusing, methodologically speaking, on *emic* data, that is, data that originates from the informants own perception of how they build business strategies and how they navigate complex multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic business communities. In order to positioning the informants in his or her business context, the paper combines the informants' narratives with semi-structured interviews so as to create an overall frame within which the informants live and work. By combining *etic* knowledge and *emic* personal accounts a validation or falsification of the theories employed in this paper is made possible.

Finally a word on the empirical background for this paper. The background for this study is emerging markets in Southeast Asia, in particular the Malaysian market that is especially well known by the authors. Unfortunately, the reader will not find a detailed discussion of the particularities of those markets as this present paper is mainly focusing on theoretical and methodological issues. This means that further research is needed to follow up on the empirical sources that this paper is based on. There are several articles and books in the list of references to this paper that alludes to this kind of further empirical studies.

Navigating differences

The critical issue when collecting data on locally perceived notions of cultural differences in a cross-cultural business environment is how to develop a theoretical framework that is capable of understanding and explaining local perceptions of how to navigate this particular type of complex business

environment. Within international business studies, a general mode of doing that is to employ an *etic* approach. The linguist Kenneth L. Pike originally coined the notion of *etic* in 1967. He defined it as a description of a norm or belief formulated by an observer that is external to the unit studied. This means that by employing international business studies to explain local business practices and network modes pertaining to, for example, emerging markets so as to explain how local entrepreneurs grow their businesses, it is the opinion of the researcher and not that of the local businessman, who describes how they do business or employ various network strategies (Beh Loo See 2007; Carney and Yang 2009; Gomez and Hsiao 2001).

Focusing in particular on emerging markets in Asia they are mainly termed multi-cultural business environment in international business studies due to their multi-ethnic composition (Ahlstrom and Bruton 2010 ; Peng and Meyer 2011). When dealing with these types of business environments it is important not only to focus on the impact of perceived cultural differences ascribed to local entrepreneurs by employing, for example, Hofstede's cultural dimensions (Hofstede 1991) and Western conceptions of Asian modes of doing business (Redding 1996), but also on how the researcher perceives the entrepreneurs in these kind of markets. In several academic writing, these differences are often discussed in terms of sophisticated stereotypes in order to make sense of perceived different business practices employed in these kinds of markets compared to those found in developed markets (Osland and Bird 2000).

In order to debunk this kind of ethnocentric perceptions of different non-Western modes of doing business it is possible to argue for an alternative approach that is not based on notions of cultural specificities as being the driving forces behind local modes of navigating these complex business environments. The approach employed in this paper takes its point of departure in an *emic* interpretation of these markets to go beyond such culturally informed modes. Returning to Pike, he likewise defines *emic* approach as a way of describing behaviour or beliefs that are meaningful (consciously or unconsciously) to the actor; that is, an *emic* account comes from a person who originates from the

culture under investigation.ⁱ Most accounts that are recorded directly from an indigenous informant contribute to building up an *emic* perspective. In order to elaborate on the *emic* aspect in cross-cultural business studies the theoretical approach taken in this article is based on six interrelated assumptions. By doing this the authors expect to provide the basic building blocks towards constructing an overall triangular framework for understanding local entrepreneurship in a multi-ethnic business environment, a triangulation that is based on the relationship between social interaction, language and a specific societal context. Combined the three points in the triangle constitute a holistic approach that is capable of dealing with both local and foreign modes of doing business in complex markets (Chen 2002).

Assumption I: Culture as process. When discussing the impact of culture on business performance in a multi-ethnic market setting sophisticated stereotypical perceptions of entrepreneurship are generally employed and framed as a kind of background for understanding behavioural difference between various groups of entrepreneurs. This is generally organised along an East - West axis or as specific combinations of dimensions characterising a society and people in a given market or society as is seen in the works of Gesteland (2004), Hofstede (1991), Nisbett et al. (2001).

One of the consequences of such approaches is that an individual is conceived of as a representation of a particular culture and is thus expected to act accordingly. Arguably, suppose culture instead of being perceived as an explanatory framework itself constitutes aggregated reflections of coordinated social processes that is not based on perceived cultural differences of 'the other', but rather on different types of social strategies that are constructed in order to safeguard or justify one's position in the local business community?

If we are to adopt such an alternative perception of culture then it is important to delineate the origin and context of these processes to map the social landscape. In order to understand how agents navigate such a landscape studies of social processes are imperative (Jakobsen 2015).

Arguably, the notion of culture can be understood as an aggregated sum of social and strategic processes in a given societal context why the notion of culture per se cannot constitute an explanatory framework in itself. To engage this aggregation of social and strategic processes to identify the constituting elements behind these processes the analyst has to move beyond an *etic* perspective and employ an *emic* one. This means that the analyst have to move towards an actor-oriented perspective that, according to Weber and Glynn, is governed by processes of sense making of his or her immediate social environment, who because of this perceive, interpret and react according to changes taking place there. This enhances his or her strategic positioning in that particular environment (Weber and Glynn 2006:1641).

Assumption II: *A processual approach towards culture avoids a separation between structure and agency.* Such an assumption is almost a given as the structure or context in which an agent finds him or herself basically conditions each other. The basic theoretical presumption taken here is based on institutional logics as outlined by Thornton et al (2012).ⁱⁱ According to them an intricate, multi-level analytic world that lays out an inter-institutional system and specifies the organizational processes through which institutional logics are enacted, recomposed and even created anew, as well as positing individual-level processes by which agents both reproduce and transform that system fits nicely into the approach forwarded here.

Structures understood as societal institutions in whatever form thus constitute opportunities as well as constraints on agency. A pertinent way of studying this dialectical relationship between structures and agents is to employ the notion of practice. An *emic* account is generally based on practice, as behaviour based practice can be understood as a representation of specifically selected extroverted experiences, - experiences gained during interaction within a given societal context that govern 'navigation' in known as well as unknown socio-economic and political contexts.

Assumption III: *Agency is never purely individual as it always takes place in a*

social context: The basic thought behind this is, according to Simpson, "...as transactions are mediated by significant symbols, social agency can never be attributed to any singular actor. In other words, a gesture has no agency capacity unless it calls out some sort of response" (Simpson 2009:1336).

In a sense, such a perception gives credit to sociological hermeneutics. By this is meant that hermeneutic encompasses everything in the interpretative process including verbal and nonverbal forms of communication as well as prior aspects that affect communication, such as presuppositions in relation to a given context (Gadamer 2004). Here we are returned to the close relationship between structure and agency that is guided by and spelled out in practice. This will be further spelled out in detail in Assumption IV.

Bringing the notion of identity into this discussion it is important to stress that the construction of identity is closely related to this on-going process. Identity formation is thus a computation of the interface between structure and agency. As the latter is always dynamic so is identity formation. This also indicates that a person can have several identities, which one to play out depends on a given situation or context. This relates nicely to how Maitlis and Sonenshein describe the relationship between agency and context, namely that the concept of enactment underpins the statement that people generate the (societal) environment through their actions and through their attempt to make sense of these actions (Maitlis and Sonenshein 2010).

On the basis of this the classical notion of culture as constituting an explanatory framework for different 'culturally determined' types of behaviour thus has to be refuted, as it is not capable of neither identifying or dealing with the dynamic processes between structure, agency and practice.

Assumption IV: *'It is in practice that social meanings are used, reused, created and disrupted and simultaneously the way we understand each other and ourselves as mutually and socially constituted.* This relates closely to what Simpson writes about transactions in which we re-negotiate the content of the significant symbols that we hold in common and which as a system reflects the general attitudes or culture of a community that Mead (1934) labelled the 'generalized other' (Simpson 2009).

This furthermore resembles what Clifford Geertz referred to in his definition of 'culture': *'The concept of culture is essentially a semiotic one. Believing that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of a law but an interpretive one in search of meaning'* (Clifford 1973: 5). Here Geertz' relegates the notion of culture to a peripheral existence, as it only reflects the processes that govern the relationship between meaning and agency. The concept of culture is thus replaced by a semiotic understanding of social interaction that is based on *'webs of significance he himself has spun'* that again is played out in practice and interpreted as culture by the 'other'.

In order to catch the dynamic aspect in this semiotic understanding of the dynamic drivers behind 'culture' it seems relevant to replace the rather static concept of 'structure' with the more dynamic notion of 'structuration' as defined by Anthony Giddens. For him, human agency and social structure are not two separate concepts or constructs, but are two ways of considering social action. According to him there is a duality of structures that on the one hand is composed of situated actors who undertake social action and interaction, and their knowledgeable activities in various situations.

On the other hand, there are also the rules, resources, and social relationships that are produced and reproduced in social interaction. Structuration thus means studying the ways in which social systems are produced and reproduced in social interaction (Giddens 1989 pp. 25-6, p. 376).

This definition of the relationship between structure and agency fits the empirical context behind this study, namely ethnic entrepreneurship in Penang, Malaysia. Here the focus is on the way in which entrepreneurs perceive and thus structure their reality. By doing that they map the societal (business) landscape in which they are engaged when attempting to identify the societal markers that provide them with hints of how to navigate this particular landscape and thus how to grow their company in this specific landscape.

The label 'generalised other' is very useful here, as this is how, for example, Chinese entrepreneurs 'read' and position the 'other', that is, their Malay competitors as well as representatives from the political and bureaucratic establishment. It also goes, however, for their Chinese and Indian competitors including foreign entrepreneurs, in this landscape before they actually get into various kind of contact with them. We are thus not talking about a landscape that consists of cultural different 'others', but rather different 'others', who have their own (business) agendas to address framed by how they 'read' this particular part of the societal landscape.

Assumption V: *Assumptions that structure the self differ in different societal contexts, and so will the ways in which alterity is apprehended, constructed, maintained and performed – in short navigated.* As mentioned above this navigation is an on-going process and based on retrospective interpretation of past events based on experience and sense-making of current event, familiar and unfamiliar. This author finds the notion culture as an explanatory framework in this context problematic, as it contains prescriptions of how to navigate a particular context and interpret events within it.

If we disregard the notion of culture and instead concentrate on the notion of contextualisation then we are capable of understanding how agents construct a 'room for manoeuvring' that have the capability of changing the context itself according to the agents own strategic agendas.

Because of this we are able to delineate how a dynamic contextualisation of an otherwise unbounded chaotic reality looks like. According to this the outer boundaries for such a 'room' can thus be described as a representation of an aggregated sum of dynamic social and strategically oriented processes that together constitutes the above mentioned 'room' and not a static explanatory sophisticated stereotypical representation of the 'other' as forwarded by, for example, Hofstede (1991) and Gesteland (2005).

A more precise concept of 'otherness' is perhaps the notion of alterity. This refers to a state of being different, especially with respect to one's perception of one's identity within a culture (Chan-Tai et al. 2009). This seems to be a more illustrative way of describing the production of the borders between different types of aggregated sums of processes each of which constitutes one of the before mentioned 'rooms'. Alterity can thus be employed in constructing the notion of 'ethnic alterities' when describing interethnic relations in Malaysia, thus disregarding the notion of ethnic boundaries between, say, the Chinese, Malays, Indians and foreign businessmen that otherwise indicate clear-cut and more or less locked borders between different culturally defined ethnic groups.

Assumption VI: Cognitive dissonance – threatened sense of self when behaviour and ideals don't match, leading towards a need for rationalizing decision making. The word, 'cognitive dissonance' is interesting in this context, as it provides us with an explanation of what happens when we run dry of preconceptions and tacit knowledge thus forcing us to invent new modes of relating to or understanding the mechanics behind the notion of alterity.

Such an insight would constitute a good point of departure when working on identifying the societal markers that different ethnic entrepreneurs create and/or look for when navigating a dynamic and complex business environment as the one found in Penang, Malaysia.

In summing up, the six assumptions discussed above this paper argue that it is still possible to take a point of departure in various notions of culture but now with another reading of the term 'culture'. According to this, culture is not to be conceived of as constituting an explanatory framework in itself but rather as a reflection of social and strategic interactions within a given societal cum business context.

On cognitive dissonance and the construction of business strategies

Now, the notion of cognitive dissonanceⁱⁱⁱ is a key concept for understanding changing social strategies in a given context. An individual's perception of being confronted with contradictory beliefs, ideas, or values relates closely to the hermeneutic understanding of the dynamic relationship between the individual and context. This relates closely to what Blasco et al writes about when discussing the relationship between culture and context, namely that, '*Culture is defined through a demarcation and identification of who is inside and who is outside our community. Culture will therefore always change depending of the contexts in which this demarcation and definition takes place*' (Blasco et al. 2012: 237). The same goes for a shared language, as it constitutes the corner stone for a mutual comprehensible communication of common notions of demarcation and identification in a social context thus avoiding the development of alterity among group members thus threatening the coherence of the group. The language encoder and decoder as identified by Brannen (2004) are thus ideally on the same level reinforcing the specificities and coherence of the context.

As a kind of confirmation of this Norman Fairclough wrote, '*Language is as it is because of its function in the social structure, and the organisation of behavioural meanings should give some insight into its social foundation*' (Fairclough 1992: 26).

From the above discussion of the relationship between social interaction and a given context we now incorporate language as a means of further linking social

interaction to a given societal context. To move this discussion to a lower level of abstraction it might be fruitful to construct a simple triangulation between social interaction, language and a given societal context in order to investigate the relationship between the three points in the triangle. The critical question to pose here is what happens to the explanatory power of such a triangulation if the encoder and decoder are not on the same level. Arguable, the notion of 'foreignness' or alterity arises when there is no sematic fit^{iv} between agents, who then develop a semiotic^v of alterity thereby laying the foundation for a recontextualisation of the context and thus alterity based on one's own ascription or perception of differences along an 'us-them' axis thereby producing sophisticated stereotypes.

Returning to Fairclough and Blasco et al, here we are again confronted with the importance of context when interpreting the outcome of the above-mentioned triangular relationship between social interaction, language and societal context. For a start, concepts of culture understood as a stereotypical 'frame-maker' can be employed as an initial mode of understanding the different flow of communication within the triangle. When moving further on in the analytical process, however, the true 'frame-maker', if a singular form can be employed in this context, turns out to be an aggregated and interrelated understanding of how the flow of communication in terms of social strategies and unifying language systems are taking place between the three points in the triangular structure.

When employing this 'frame making' approach then we are free to move on to the next level of analysis, namely how individuals within such a triangle relate to each other regardless of whether it is a simple or complex multi-cultural and/or multi-language based context. Blasco et al (2012: 237) identified the individual level of meta-cognition as one of the most important indicators of what governs inter-personal relations and here they are not talking about strategy, - at least not in the beginning.

According to this, we are continuously expanding our meta-cognitive capabilities whenever we engage in actions that do not find a match in our repertoire of

experience. Again, culture, understood as the main producer of signs that convey meaning, is not the main signifier here. Rather it is social interaction per se, the interpretation of that interaction and the ability to construct social strategies on the basis of those interpretations that are the true produces of signifiers. As mentioned previously such a perception of culture returns us to Geertz's perception of culture understood as a semiotic based web of meaning.

After having excavated theoretically how agents have the capabilities of navigating complex multi-cultural business communities and having shown how imperative it is to integrate actual societal factors in these studies, it is now important to ask the question how to analyse such business communities in order to test the above discussed theoretical assumptions.

For example, how to retrieve data that shows or document that culture is a process; that context is the key to identifying processes of cognitive dissonance; and that business strategies are based on tacit knowledge that is steeped in multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic mores?

On *emic* studies in cross-cultural business studies: some methodological considerations

To be able to discuss these questions we now turn our attention towards studies on ethnic entrepreneurship in Asian markets, especially those that focus on different kinds of business practices, modes of networking and changing ownership forms within companies (Beh 2007, Gomez et al. 2001). These studies show that ethnic entrepreneurship constitute a rich source of data on what it takes to become a businessman in these kind of markets, as they on a daily basis are confronted with a complex business community in which multi-ethnic and multi-language environments influence their ability to navigate these kind of business communities.

To make things even more complex, the latter are constantly being re-modelled due to political engineering initiated by the political establishment and well as

impacts from global competitors.

It is interesting to notice that ethnic entrepreneurs themselves do not speak of this complexity in terms of cultural differences, but rather in terms of more or less access to resources and political influence, why various (business oriented) strategic initiatives, either ethnically or non-ethnically designed and carried out, are of utmost importance to them in growing their companies (Jakobsen 2015).

This insight prompts further investigations into how these entrepreneurs' rather pragmatic view of complex business environments impact on them when designing specific business strategies.

Important questions to be asked in this connection is whether those entrepreneurs are knowingly or unknowingly trying to generate semantic fits in their dealings with business partners, understood as a mutual exchange of *signifiers*, such as words, phrases, signs, and symbols in order to create a common platform on which to negotiate?

These kind of questions leads to other questions such as what is the relationship between and consequences of shifts in business context that consequently leads to processes of recontextualisation of the partners one deals with. What impact does this have on the entrepreneurs' ability to setup webs of significance, the value of which depend on the time and state of a given context when doing business? Again, these theoretically interpolations prompts the question, how to retrieve data on this in order to validate the findings these inquires might lead to?

To collect especially primary data on these theoretical issues poses rather serious methodological question. What to focus on here is how to collect primary data of an *emic* nature. This demands the development of methodological tools that are capable of extracting *emic* data, as they are based on tacit knowledge that entrepreneurs employ when developing strategies to navigate these multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic complex markets.

The ultimate goal by extracting these *emic* data is to test whether the triangular relationship between social interaction, language and a societal context as discussed above is a promising approach.

For a start, we argue that it is imperative to collect data in the ethnographic tradition of 'thick description' as recommended by Geertz (1973) in multi-cultural and multi-linguistic (business) communities. According to this tradition, a description of the pertinent context in all its complexity is a must, as it is the sum of the parts of that context that makes us capable of understanding the role of the individual part in that context. Taking our point of departure in this, we suggest, from a methodological point of view, to employ a method that we have developed and termed a 'narrative pictogram' mode of data collection.

By employing such an approach, an informant from a pertinent local business community is empowered to speak and reflect actively on how he or she is navigating that business environment rather than responding passively to questions posed by the researcher according to a semi-structured interview. By doing so, the local business informant is positioned at the centre of the research rather than them being relegated as the peripheral 'other' by the researcher. Furthermore, by employing this methodological approach the researcher is provided with a host of tools for moving beyond the confinement of ethnocentric modes of data collection due to *emic* nature of the data provided by local informants.

As a way of initiating this particular kind of data collection in a business community we have divided the methodological approach into two complementary approaches, which can be termed a first and second generation mode of collecting data. The first generation is based on an *etic* approach, where data collection are conducted through semi-structured interviews with local business informants. These first generation interviews are then followed up by an *emic* approach, which we have termed a 'Narrative Pictogram Data Collection Method'. Each business informant is thus interviewed twice.

The first interview provides the researcher with data on how to position the

informant in a local business context, whereas the second interview provides the researcher with a personal account from the informant him or herself that were locally positioned in the first generation interview. The reason for applying this mode of double interviewing is to create a multi-dimensional data set on each individual business informant.

Conducting semi-structured interviews is probably the most generally employed mode of collecting primary data (Saunders et al. 2012) whereas the employment of a narrative pictogram data collection mode is relatively new.¹ Instead of forwarding pre-formulated questions to the informant, an open-ended dialogue based on a theme provided by the researcher and excavated from the data collected during the first generation interview, guides the relationship between the informant and researcher. In the beginning of the interview the informant is asked to draw on a blank piece of paper a graphical representation of the constituent elements of his or her business community and relate it narratively to the before mentioned theme. The researcher then probes the mind of the informant by asking simple questions like 'why do you draw such a mark or include this institution?', 'why do you draw it in the top corner of the paper instead of at the centre of the paper?', or 'why do you connect this mark with that institution rather than another institution?' During the interview, the researcher tries to avoid directing the dialogue, but instead push the informant to actively think and make connections between the drawn elements as he or she sees it thus narrating on the linkages between the different elements in the drawing/pictogram.

The merit of an *emic* approach to data collection in a business environment is that the data collected represent the opinions of the informant rather than that of the researcher.

Furthermore, the data that this method produces combines a graphical representation of the business community in question as well as a narrative that depicts the relationships between the individual elements in that community,

¹ Narrative pictogram modes are generally used within the arts and computer software development. For an attempt to combine narratives with pictograms in an interview context see Skinner (ed.) 2012.

which help the informant to navigate the complexities found there in order to grow his or her company.

The quality of data generated on the basis of this mode is of a very different kind compared to those data generated from a semi-structured mode. It is simply not possible to collect data emanating from the narrative pictogram mode in any other way, as it is impossible for the researcher to ask the pertinent questions to recreate the narratives as otherwise provided by the informant, as the researcher does not have access to the *emic* or tacit knowledge compared to the informant. Another finding from the test interviews that we have conducted was that collecting data in this mode was not possible if a semi-structured interview has not been conducted prior to the narrative pictogram one. The point is that positioning the informant in a company cum business community context is essential in order to be able to understand the importance and nuances of the individual narrative that informatively links the different elements within the pictogram to each other thus creating a holistic business context according to the ethnographic tradition of 'thick' description.

There are, however, some challenges for a researcher who adopt an *emic* approach to data collection. One is that the interviewer has to have a good (*etic*) empirical understanding of both the specific societal environment as well as of the specific business environment he or she wants to study prior to the interview. Another challenge is that the researcher has to build and establish a good relationship with and gain trust from the informant. This can be done during the semi-structured interview. Finally, only if the researcher has a clear-cut theme to research as well as a sophisticated pre-conception of the context to be studied can a narrative pictogram interview be made. An *etic*-based 'traditional' mode of data collection in the form of semi-structured interviews are thus a precondition for employing the *emic* based narrative pictogram method.

Studying culture as process in cross-cultural business communities: Some concluding remarks

When going through the literature on cross-cultural business studies discussed from the perspective on cultural intelligence and meta-cognition, the literature on semiotics and semantics in this context as well as on cognitive dissonance and sense making in complex inter-ethnic business communities, it all becomes rather abstract and sometimes quite remote from the reality that we as researchers are confronted with when conducting fieldwork. Processes of objectifying entrepreneurs to agents with powers to influence the functionality of institutional setups as well as to agents that are capable of looking through the complexities of various business landscapes do not too fit into the local reality that researchers dig into.

However, remote as these theories might be there are some aspects to them that have the capability to explain the at times chaotic and impenetrable interethnic business communities as the latter represent themselves to the researcher. In the first half of the paper, we constructed a theoretical approach that were capable of debunking the notion of culture as an explanatory framework in itself. From there we moved on to focus on the intrapersonal processes in the form of tacit knowledge behind the development of business strategies that showed to be conditioned by the context in which they are conceived. This lead us to focus on the importance on context understood as a triangular construct that consisted of the relationship between social interaction, language and a specific societal context. The key word here was the construction of a holistic understanding of a multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic business community based on a combination of *etic* and *emic* approaches.

Insightful as such a framework might be an important question almost immediately turned up. How to collect data to verify or falsify the explanatory power of such a framework? Here we introduced from a methodological point of view a combination of semi-structured modes of collecting data and a novel mode of data collection that we termed narrative pictogram data collection method.

The first one is, despite having an ethnocentric or *etic* aspect to it, important as it positioned the informant in the community under investigation. The second one is based on a combination of narratives and images compiled by the informant him or herself found important thus moving beyond the *etic* aspect and into an *emic* one. When combining the two modes of interviewing we became capable of collecting data that were of relevance for the more theoretical extrapolations.

Arguably, this paper has tried to develop a theoretical approach for understanding how entrepreneurs navigate a cross-cultural business environment. We have shown that it is necessary to combine an *etic* and an *emic* perspective so as to excavate the driving forces that make entrepreneurs survive in complex business communities, and at the same time make use of existing theories as a way of understanding how those entrepreneurs survives and on what grounds. By doing so we live up to the ethnographic notion of 'thick' description, thus answering the call from Geertz that a description of a given context in all its complexity is a must, as it is the sum of the parts of such a context that makes us capable of understanding the role of the individual part in that context. According to us such an approach constitutes the crux of the matter when studying cross-cultural business communities.

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ⁱ For a more detailed discussion of etic and emic see Zhu et al. (2013).

ⁱⁱ See also Scott 2010 for further discussion on institutional logics.

ⁱⁱⁱ According to Leon Festinger (1962), cognitive dissonance is the mental stress or discomfort experienced by an individual who holds two or more contradictory beliefs, ideas, or values at the same time, performs an action that is contradictory to one or more beliefs, ideas or values, or is confronted by new information that conflicts with existing beliefs, ideas, or values.

^{iv} Semantics is the study of meaning. It focuses on the relation between signifiers, such as words, phrases, signs, and symbols, and what they stand for.

^v Semiotics discusses the relationship between signs and the things to which they refer.

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