

LEVELLING VAGUENESS
- A STUDY OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN AN
INTERNATIONAL PROJECT GROUP



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LEVELLING VAGUENESS
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El amor, como lo bueno, lo verdadero y lo bello, es una invención, puro artificio humano para recrear el mundo a imagen y semejanza nuestra. Nada en la Naturaleza corresponde a estos conceptos: nada indica qué es lo bello, ningún suceso lleva el marchamo de lo bueno, y la verdad es una pretensión del intelecto. Estos conceptos sublimes, base de religiones, éticas y rebeliones, son inventos humanos, modelos elegidos por el cerebro para relacionarse con el mundo, entendiéndolo y modificándolo a su manera.

Luis Racionero, *El Mediterráneo y los bárbaros del Norte*, p.125

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Ester Barinaga

Stockholm, February 2002

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INTRODUCTION



It could be said that I began with this thesis long before I enrolled in the PhD program. For almost a year I had worked in Sweden for an American telecom consultancy. Work in that type of company is organised in groups that co-operate on projects for a more or less limited period of time. Given the circumstances and my cultural background, I always landed in groups composed of North Americans, Swedes and Spanish-speaking people. These groups, it seemed to me, were more extreme than those groups composed entirely of North Americans, or exclusively by Swedes (there were too few Spanish-speakers to run a whole project). We seemed to meet more often, have longer discussions, spend more time e-mailing, experience the project as too diffuse and stay longer at the office. This impression caught my attention, but not until much later did I have enough time to reflect upon it.

I moved back to my home country, Spain, where I began the PhD program. While reading for the courses, I started to research articles on multicultural groups. They confirmed my initial suspicion – if given enough time, culturally diverse groups did in fact come up with more creative solutions to the same set of problems. They needed a longer time though, as their beginnings seemed to be more tortuous. These studies wrote about individual effectiveness, group productivity, ability to make decisions, group performance and cohesiveness. They even wrote about the degree of cooperation in the group. However, they wrote about all of this in terms of results, as the final products of interaction. They neither told me about the increased number of meetings we had at the company, nor about the never-ending discussions. They also remained silent about the sometimes uncomfortable feeling that both the project and our role in it were far too diffuse. I knew nothing about

the actual interacting *process*. I grew curious to the point that it became the subject of my dissertation.

Around that time, personal reasons moved me back to Sweden. In Scandinavia there has been, and still is, a long tradition of conducting qualitative research and ethnographic studies. From my very first day in the country, I had a chance to attend the Centre for Advanced Studies in Leadership at the Stockholm School of Economics, a research institute with a strong focus on empirically driven and ethnographic research. Immersed in that academic atmosphere I started thinking about studying, from *within*, interaction in culturally diverse groups. I decided to follow, for a prolonged period of time, an international group and participate in all of its activities.

The circumstances of the places where I have worked and studied have strongly influenced the question and the form of the study in this thesis. These have also influenced its initial assumptions. In the company, we tended to think of the borders of culture as being equivalent to national borders. Culture is commonly viewed as some sort of entity that exists somewhere “out there,” that is independent from us and that influences the way we behave and think. The articles I had reviewed adopted, without even a discussion, that view. They assumed cultures to equal nations, drawing a distinct line between what culture was and what nature was. They studied culture by splitting it into variables and measuring them. We become part of the conversations around us, and therefore I assumed those assumptions as my own.

In Stockholm however, I got in touch with a group of researchers engaged in a rather different conversation. Some of the students at the Department for Industrial Economics at the Royal Institute of Technology, were reading and discussing Wittgenstein. They talked about all philosophical problems as a confusion rooted in a misleading use of language. This happened at the time of the generation and analysis of my empirical material. Hence, I started to think of culture, and the ontological and epistemological problems it poses, in terms of language. I began to doubt culture as some sort of objective entity that could be measured. Instead I pondered on all conversations where the word “culture” pops up; contemplated the situations in which the group I studied referred to that term; reflected on the concrete circumstances where “culture” was used and on the consequences that followed that use. What did group members do with the word “culture”? Why did they need to apply it? Culture became a word. The problems raised

around that word became a confusion in its use. The interacting process in a culturally diverse group centred mainly around conversations and language use.

A course in Gothenburg with Bruno Latour and a reading circle of his texts strengthened the change in direction Wittgenstein had provoked. In Latour's studies I saw the empirical implementation of many of the ideas of the philosopher from Vienna. Another way of saying that all philosophical problems are grounded in language confusion is to say that reality is flat. Latour does not consider the difference between macro-variables and micro-variables to be a matter of level. Rather, he brings all macro structures back to micro-situations and micro-scale interactions. It is the chain of micro-situations that ultimately becomes a macro actor. Attention is brought back to the local, concrete interaction and, thus, culture ceases to exist as an independent macro variable, to instead become a word used in the *here and now* and the images associated with that word. Reality becomes dimensionless, and macro structures can suddenly be treated as the result of language confusion.

This change in perspective is reflected in the thesis. Implicit to the literature reviewed lies the assumption that culture influences group members' behaviours. Yet, the questions raised from that review introduce a concern for the various meanings a term may have: Depending on how culture is approached and cultural diversity understood, the group interacts and performs in one or another way. The research question formulated, hence, wonders about the uses cultural diversity may have in a group's organising process: How does the organising process of an international group develop? What role does cultural diversity play in that process? As the thesis proceeds and the analysis develops, culture becomes a word group members use to do things, and interaction is described in terms of their talk and the actions that are woven into talk. Although I realised this slide in perspective, I decided to keep the question untouched. After all, the insight gained is a result in itself: Culture taken as a variable could not explain how group members interacted; the term "culture" however explained what they did. Besides, a changed question would have pointed towards a different beginning than the one I had, a beginning that would have led me, most likely, elsewhere. It would have been an altogether different research question, and thus a different thesis.

The thesis begins by dealing with these issues. Chapter 1 exposes the research question, advances the ideas learnt from philosophy of language, and sketches a perspective to look at human interaction processes in general. Chapter 2 discusses the issue of different levels of reality, developing the “flat” perspective – a perspective that treats local actions, utterances and environments with the respect they deserve. What is open to the eye, the *surface*, moves to the centre of attention.

Once the ontological and epistemological grounds are settled, the thesis sets the stage for the study. Chapter 3 presents the group studied: a group of researchers coming from different countries, from diverse educational backgrounds, from both genders and from various age groups. We can also read about the group task, the time scope, and the conditions under which the members met.

Chapter 4 and 5 follow the group for 15 months. These two chapters present the difficulties the group stumbles over when trying to reach a common understanding concerning what they are to do and how they are to do it. Focus on the surface directs attention towards the contextual conditions and what is said and done under those circumstances. A Wittgensteinian perspective on language reveals vagueness as pervading any interaction grounded in discussion and conversation. Vagueness, we will see, initially paralyses group interaction. As time went on, however, group members learnt to deal with that vagueness and agreements were reached.

In an attempt to cope with the overwhelming vagueness, group members continuously redefine their identities. Chapter 6 describes how identities are positioned. We will witness how the definitions of identities transform along with the reaching of an agreement on what the group is to do. We will see how identity definition and redefinition are used to cope with vagueness and to coordinate the interaction of group members.

Chapter 7 focuses on national culture. In line with a modern view of language, we see how the term “culture,” or the idea group members have of “national culture,” is used to make sense of what happens around them, to position themselves *vis-à-vis* the group, to justify decisions and to perform various duties. “Culture” is used to soften vagueness and make group interaction possible.

Chapter 8 collects and synthesises the insights reached in, and scattered throughout, the story presented through out the thesis. The insight of the

story is that the organising process of international groups develops by a continuous and delicate levelling of vagueness. Finally, Chapter 9 draws conclusions on vagueness and meaning as a base for collective action.

WHEN DIVERSITY REIGNS



notes for a play...

Act I

(January 29, 1999, 11:00 am, Uppsala, Sweden.)

(Curtains open. On stage, a group of researchers sits at a round table. They come from different countries: 1 from Spain, 3 from Sweden, 1 from The Netherlands, 2 from the UK and 2 from the United States, or more exactly, from California. Their educational backgrounds differ as well: organisation studies, labour law and sociology. They are men and women of ages spanning from the early 30's to the late 50's. For some of them, it is the first time meeting. They have been discussing the issue of contingent employment for a while now, possibly their phenomenon of study for the coming years. It is cold and beautifully snow-white outside.)

FLAVIUS: I think we should stop the discussion about reasons or 'why' for it [contingent employment]. Because Pindarus and I have been talking about considering non-rational reasons for the increasing use of contingent employment. Already others do it.

GAIUS: Maybe later on we could do brainstorming and ask why firms do it, economic reasons, rational reasons, non-rational reasons.

TREBONIUS: In practice, it might not be possible to find a coherent definition, but I think we have to understand the types of a new phenomenon. We have a new pattern. Maybe, for a definition, we could work with the dichotomy core-periphery: what has moved out to the periphery and what never will.

FLAVIUS: It's in our interest to broad up the definition on contingent employment because it enhances the relevance of our work.

PINDARUS: Even more important. With a broad definition, the research can take several perspectives.

FLAVIUS: Important because if a narrow definition then... It is a methodology for all countries. We'll have to study the same for all countries, which might

be absurd. Maybe a country wants to study other specific phenomena... So it's good with as a broad definition as possible.

(Curtains fall. 15 minutes for the audience to have a coffee break.)

Act III

(September 30, 1999, 18:30, Bath, UK)

(Curtains open. Our group of researchers sits around several tables that have been set together. The slide projector shows an image of three circles of equal size and three lines joining them together. There are some new faces: I from Spain, I from The Netherlands and I from the UK. The atmosphere is more upbeat than in the previous scene. They talk lively and joke with each other. It is grey with a melancholy rain outside.)

TULLIUS: a question that shouldn't be asked: what do we really mean by "contingent employment"?

FLAVIUS: in work package I, it is the statistics of the use of contingent employment.

TREBONIUS: in Holland it is...

A play of the process I have studied could be sketched out in this manner. In the first act most of the players have never met before. The official reason they get together is to discuss a research proposal coming from the Swedish National Institute for Working Life and Sweden's central trade unions. All they know at their first meeting is that they have to design a research project on contingent employment. However, they seem to have different understandings of what contingent employment is, what it involves and how it is to be studied. They keep bumping into difficulties when looking for a definition of "contingent employment" that everybody is satisfied with.

Over half a year after the first act, "contingent employment" is a phenomenon with a sharp silhouette. When talking about it, they draw on a piece of paper three circles joined together with three lines. They write "Intermediary," "User" and "Employee" in the three circles. Not only do they now have a shared way of representing and talking about "contingent employment," they have also agreed upon how to study the phenomenon, how to structure the project and who is responsible for what. They have decided on deadlines, on articles to write, on discussions to take and discussions not to bother taking.

What has happened from the first act to the last? How did “contingent employment” transform from a phenomenon with a blurry contour to one with a well-delimited silhouette? How did group members reach an agreement on how to look at contingent employment? How did the group structure the project? How did they organise work? Did cultural diversity have any role in the play, and if so – which? These are questions that have captured my interest when studying an academic international research project group.

The objective of this thesis is to understand the *process* by which a group of people with different cultural backgrounds aligns *meaning* in order to enable coordination of their *actions*. Research on culturally diverse groups assumes that cultures vary in the way the world around us, and our relation to it, is understood. As a consequence of the lack of shared understanding, people from different cultures encounter difficulties when collaborating. In other words, I wish to shed some light on how agreement across different understandings is achieved. I shall make my case by telling the story of how a group of researchers, different in many aspects and with varied understandings of what they were to study, reached an agreement that enabled them to work together. The story focuses on the organising process of an international research project group, and the role cultural diversity plays in group interaction.

CULTURAL DIVERSITY

- A PUBLIC DEBATE

It is often maintained that one of the main characteristics of what is called the “new economy” is the extreme ease of moving capital and production across country borders. Financial investments move to countries with high interest rates, whereas labour-intensive production facilities move to countries with low labour related costs, less demanding trade unions and a more flexible workforce.¹ Suppliers and customers are located in countries different than the companies they sell to or buy from. The big multinational companies have both their production and their markets spread across the globe. In this context, it is not uncommon that teams of managers from the various countries where the company operates, meet to decide, for instance,

¹ Castells 1998, Ch. 5.

on global marketing strategies. It is also common that a company operating abroad employs labour both from the home country of the company, and from the country of operation.

Another contemporary feature is the increasing concentration of skilled labour. Those regions and companies utilising the most advanced production and management systems, increasingly attract the talents of the world. Silicon Valley, the world's leading region in the manufacturing of IT, can only keep its prime innovation rate by recruiting thousands of engineers and scientists from India, China, Taiwan, Korea, Israel, Russia and Eastern Europe. The same thing is happening in other regions, such as Bangalore, Bombay, Campinas or Seoul.²

Research and supranational institutions are other spheres where cultural diversity is a matter of everyday life. The utmost expertise within technology and natural science which leads the general technological development, is concentrated into a few dozen research centres around the world, mainly in the US, Western Europe and Japan. Russian, Indian and Chinese engineers can only carry out their research if they affiliate with those centres. In addition, in an attempt to deal with the global flows of information and capital, national states join together in supranational institutions, such as the ASEAN, EU, IMF, Nafta and other regional cooperations.

These tendencies have made cultural diversity a matter of public debate. Newspapers and magazines write articles on the positive effects of workforce diversity. Others frame their doubts with the question "Does diversity pay?"³ An article in *Dagens Industri* on February 3, 1999, exemplifies this debate well. Cultural diversity, some argue, originates too many difficulties and conflicts to make its potential benefits worthwhile. Besides, when working in projects and workgroups, many prefer to work with those having the same cultural background as their own. But, those in favour of diversity respond that if you never confront different views, if no new solutions are initiated and if you remain closed to unusual ideas, then both personal and organisational development stops. This means that the competitors may take over the market. Cultural diversity, the proponents continue, is an ongoing source of new views, solutions and ideas. The exciting and the unexpected happen

² Castells 1999, p. 54.

³ SAF-tidningen, January 30, 1998, *Lönar sig mångfald?*

when differences meet. They then go on giving advice on how to proceed to overcome the obstacles cultural diversity raises and how to take advantage of its possibilities.⁴

This is the type of discussion that woke my initial interest: How do international project groups work *de facto*? How is interaction organised in such groups? What role does cultural diversity play in group interaction? In an attempt to find answers, I turned to the research literature.

THE RESEARCH LITERATURE PARTICIPATES IN PUBLIC DEBATE

Cultural diversity is an area that has interested, and still interests, a wide variety of disciplines. This becomes especially evident at international conferences where sociologists, social and cognitive psychologists, anthropologists, linguists and even organisational researchers are put together under a theme such as “When Cultures Meet.” Not only is cultural diversity a multidisciplinary research area, it has also been studied with focus on a variety of aspects. Comparisons among management practices,⁵ perceptions of outstanding leaders,⁶ images of leadership,⁷ diversity management,⁸ intercultural communication,⁹ ethnic conflict resolution,¹⁰ expatriates,¹¹ recruitment policies,¹² intercultural skills,¹³ training programs,¹⁴ meetings and negotiations¹⁵ are only a few of the aspects studied, hinting how large the research area is.

Common to the wide array of studies is the question of effective action and productive interaction under circumstances characterised by diversity of values and behaviours. Research concerning international situations is framed

⁴ See for instance “Dra nytta av olikheter” (Take advantage of differences) in *Chef*, February 2001, p. 60-61.

⁵ Laurent 1992; Trompenaars 1993.

⁶ Holmberg and Åkerblom 1998; Zander 1997.

⁷ Holmberg and Åkerblom 2001.

⁸ Adler 1997; Schneider 1992; Tayeb 1996.

⁹ Biernatzki 1991; Gudykunst and Kim 1997; Guirdham 1999; Hall 1959; Larkey 1996.

¹⁰ Billig 1976; Isajiw 2000.

¹¹ Dalton and Wilson 2000; Kilduff and Corley 1999; Selmer 1999; Shaffer, Harrison, and Gilley 1999.

¹² Segalla, Jacobs-Belschak, and Müller 2001; Segalla, Rouziès, and Flory 2001; Segalla, Sauquet, and Turati 2001.

¹³ Dinges and Baldwin 1996; McEnery and DesHarnais 1990; Munter 1993.

¹⁴ Gibson and Zellmer 1997; McMillen, Baker, and White 1997; Nemetz and Christensen 1996.

¹⁵ Schwartzman 1989; Strauss 1978.

in terms of cultural diversity. The researchers' point of departure is the assumption, evidenced by significant research on culture,¹⁶ that national cultures¹⁷ differ. Differences which are taken to be problematic for management in general and, more relevant for this thesis, teamwork in particular.¹⁸ In short, questions regarding international groups are formulated as questions about culturally diverse groups.

LITERATURE ON CULTURALLY DIVERSE GROUPS

Research on culturally diverse groups is nevertheless a mere drop in the big ocean.¹⁹ In 1991, Bettenhausen identified only one article from the period 1986-1991.²⁰ Six years later, in 1997, things were not much better. In an extensive literature review carried out by Wise et al., only fourteen articles were found.²¹

Despite the scarcity of literature on culturally diverse groups, the insight it reaches is significant and consistent. First, studies concur in maintaining that national culture influences group behaviour, with different cultures having different patterns of group interaction. A representative study by Cox, Lobel and McLeod clarifies in what sense national culture affects group behaviour. The study found that at an individual level, people of collectivistic cultures had a more cooperative orientation to tasks than those coming from more individualistic heritages. They also found that ethnically diverse groups composed of people from both collectivistic and individualistic cultures acted more cooperatively than those composed exclusively of people with individualistic heritages.²² This is an important insight as it points to different

¹⁶ Hofstede 1980; Maznevski et al. 1997.

¹⁷ Most of this research equals culture to nationality. This assumption is questioned in the last chapter of the thesis.

¹⁸ There is extensive literature written on heterogeneous groups in general. The curious reader will find a comprehensive review in Tsui, A. S. & Gutek, B. A. (1999) *Demographic differences in organizations*. In the thesis I have focused on a special type of heterogeneous groups: international groups.

¹⁹ Granrose and Oskamp 1997.

²⁰ Bettenhausen and Murnighan 1991.

²¹ Wise et al. 1997.

²² Based on previous research on dimensions distinguishing cultures (Hofstede 1980; Triandis 1995), Cox, Lobel, and McLeod select one of those dimensions, the individualism-collectivism polarity, to choose students and divide them into groups. The aim of their study is to test the hypothesis that groups composed of people from collectivistic cultures do cooperate more often than groups of people from individualistic cultures. Thus, the research task the students were set to perform was one especially adequate for the matter, a two-party Prisoner's Dilemma. To measure the level of cooperation, Cox, Lobel and McLeod noted the total number of cooperative responses and analysed the reasons each group member gave for their personal choice (Cox, Lobel and McLeod 1991).

interaction patterns between culturally homogeneous and heterogeneous groups.

In a similar study, Earley confirms and extends the results of Cox, Lobel and McLeod. Not only does the degree of individualism or collectivism present in a group affect the patterns of interaction, individual performance is also influenced. The performance of individualists working in groups was lower than if they worked alone, whereas the performance of collectivists was lower working individually than working together.²³

A second conclusion that studies in the field agree on is the difference in the performance of culturally homogeneous groups compared to heterogeneous ones. Such differences are acknowledged in terms of individual effectiveness, group productivity, creativity, ability to make decisions, group cohesiveness,²⁴ etc. Disagreement exists, however, regarding what types of groups perform better, although the bias is also, here, in favour of those who claim that the diversity of viewpoints inherent in culturally diverse groups is a potential for higher performance than their homogeneous counterparts.²⁵ The explicit heterogeneous composition of groups, it has been suggested, is one of the remedies for the phenomenon of “group-think.”²⁶ For that potential to be reached (and this is a third point dominant research in the field seems to agree on) time is needed.²⁷

Watson, Kumar and Michaelsen’s study is a good example of studies attempting to shed some light on the different interaction patterns between culturally homogeneous and heterogeneous groups. Their aim was to study the impact of cultural diversity on group process and problem solving. “What effect does a high degree of cultural diversity have on group interaction?” was the question they posed.²⁸ The study reports that culturally

²³ Earley 1993.

²⁴ For some examples see Bochner and Hesketh 1994; Kirchmeyer and Cohen 1992; Maznevski and Chudoba 1997; Milliken and Martins 1996; Thomas 1999; Watson, Kumar, and Michaelsen 1993.

²⁵ For an example of a study in favour of culturally homogeneous groups, see Thomas 1999.

²⁶ Janis 1982.

²⁷ Kirchmeyer and Cohen 1992; Maznevski and Chudoba 1997; Watson, Kumar and Michaelsen 1993.

²⁸ To answer their question, Watson, Kumar and Michaelsen placed students in groups of four or five persons. Students remained in the same group all along the study, a little over four months, during which they had a wide variety of opportunities to interact. Among these, each group had to do, with an interval of a month, four case studies describing situations common in “real-life” companies. Performance was measured on the basis of the range of perspectives taken to analyse the case, the number of potential or existing problems identified, the generation of multiple alternative solutions, and the quality of the recommended solution (Watson, Kumar and Michaelsen 1993).

diverse groups had greater difficulty agreeing on what was important. They had more trouble working together as well, since they more commonly had members trying to be too controlling, thus hindering contributions of other members. However, these difficulties and troubles seemed to disappear as group members gained more experience in working together. Although performance improved for both types of groups, homogeneous and heterogeneous, the improvements in process and performance were more rapid for the culturally diverse groups. At the end of the study, culturally diverse groups had become more effective in identifying problem perspectives and in generating alternative solutions. Watson, Kumar and Michaelsen concluded that performance characteristics of newly formed groups are unquestionably different than those of longer-term groups. This insight is worth emphasising, since it draws attention to the benefit of carrying out longitudinal research to better study interaction in culturally diverse groups.

Dominant research gives another useful piece of advice for designing studies on the issue: in that studies should be performed in real life situations.²⁹ Most research in the field is carried out in laboratory settings, with groups of students gathered for the purpose, and rewarded for their participation – a fact that cannot be forgotten as it has direct consequences regarding group members' commitment to the task at hand.

In 1998, however, an entire issue of *The Journal of Managerial Psychology* was dedicated to culturally diverse groups in real life settings. A particular type of group was used, though: AIRT, or Academic International Research Teams, such as the one in my study. While corroborating the advantage groups gain by having a diversity of cultures present and, what seemed even more problematic to the authors in that journal issue, a variety of research paradigms within the team, the articles raise an interesting matter. As soon as the group moves to real life circumstances an overwhelming amount of practical matters overtake the group, affecting interaction among its members. Concerns about time and resources, the choice of partners, the management of the process, the design of a research plan and many other technological and contextual factors occupy most of the time and energy of

²⁹ Some authors acknowledging the lack of studies in real life circumstances are Kirchmeyer and Cohen 1992; Watson, Kumar and Michaelsen 1993; Wise et al. 1997.

the group.³⁰ The relevance of situation-specific and contextual aspects may explain why interviewed managers who had participated in an intercultural communication training did not recognise any parallel between the problems occurring during the meetings and the solutions discussed in the training.³¹

Authors of the mentioned journal issue complain that research in the area of culturally diverse groups fails to explain how intercultural interaction proceeds.³² In an attempt to account for that, Bournois and Chevalier provide a project life-cycle framework, depicting the stages associated with successful collaborative research ventures (defining project objectives, structuring task and research methodologies, data collection, analysis and interpretation, and research dissemination).³³ A similar life-cycle approach is found in Bennett's model regarding the role that cultural differences play in the development of culturally diverse groups. The stages in Bennett's piece are denial, defence, minimisation, acceptance, adaptation and integration.³⁴

Development models are attempts to give a standard description of the evolution of group life. Since they state a standard, they fail to account for the practicalities and the unexpected of everyday life. Sauquet and Jacobs reject such models by arguing that they are far too linear to explain the complex patterns of interaction in multicultural research groups – a limitation they extend to any attempt to adapt existing group models, since these have often been developed based on culturally homogeneous groups.³⁵ Furthermore, I would add, life-cycle models succumb to the temptation of giving static descriptions of what is a dynamic process. By dividing a more or less prolonged period of time into phases, and characterising these phases using participant attitudes and behaviours, such models are condemned to remain but static descriptions. The very form of life-cycle models of group processes leads them, paradoxically, to disregard the dynamism inherent in any process. Linear group development models fail to account for the dynamism of the process itself because they use static descriptions of the stages without getting a firm understanding of how movement from one

³⁰ Bournois and Chevalier 1998; Collett 1998; Flory 1998; Hoogendoorn 1998; House 1998; Mayrhofer 1998; Müller 1998; Sauquet and Jacobs 1998; Segalla 1998; Turati, Usai and Ravagnani 1998.

³¹ Wolkenauer, 1996, cited in Sauquet and Jacobs 1998.

³² Müller 1998; Sauquet and Jacobs 1998.

³³ Bournois and Chevalier 1998.

³⁴ Bennett 1986.

³⁵ Sauquet and Jacobs 1998.

stage to the next is accomplished. Such models show us what phases a group has moved through, from a disorganised to an organised stage. Yet, we remain curious about how the actual movement of the process is made. In sum, life-cycle group models both remain silent about the jumbled interaction patterns of culturally heterogeneous groups and fail to catch the dynamism of their interacting process.

These shortcomings are starting to be seriously considered in Scandinavia. Research projects have begun where researchers go into the field and, for a long period of time, participate in its activities. Sten Jönsson and Anders Edström are good examples of this type of research. They have participated in and filmed development projects in a joint venture between companies from two different countries and with radically different organisational cultures. Although these projects were carried out by culturally diverse groups, the researchers' focus was not directly set on the organising process of these groups. Rather, Jönsson and Edström focused on isolated confrontational events and their immediate consequences.³⁶ Not content with only acknowledging the lack of studies in real life circumstances and admitting the need for longitudinal studies, researchers in Scandinavia question the very research perspective. Vedran Omanovic considers the expression "cultural diversity" using three research approaches (the functionalist, the interpretative and the critical approaches), recognising what has long been recognised in other research areas, that different research approaches address different discussions and raise different questions.³⁷ The dominant approach concerning cultural diversity in general has been strongly functionalistic, shaping its questions in a cause-effect form and limiting its concerns to the products of diversity.

The review of the literature on culturally diverse groups gave me some answers: The mechanisms behind interaction in the groups studied seemed to be cultural differences, which the studies had recognised in the form of various cultural dimensions.³⁸ For instance, the dimension individualism-

³⁶ Jönsson and Edström, 2001; Jönsson, Edström and Ask, 1998.

³⁷ Vedran Omanovic, forthcoming.

³⁸ Dominant research on culturally diverse groups are often grounded on previous research regarding cultural dimensions. Differences in cultural dimensions are argued to be the cause of different interaction patterns, when compared to culturally homogeneous groups. After the empirical study, this conclusion will be reinterpreted and complemented in Chapter 9.

collectivism predicted the level of performance and the degree of cooperation of a person working in a group. If that person belonged to an individualistic culture, his/her performance and level of cooperation in the group would be lower than if he/she belonged to a collectivistic culture. Cultural diversity, it seems, plays a role in the interaction patterns of group life.

Yet, the approach to culture as a collection of variables influencing behaviour does not allow the consideration of the dynamism of processes. An approach that assumes a cause-effect relationship between culture and behaviour, or between cultural differences and group interaction, does not permit the consideration of the link between these. The link, and the movement it implies, is a taken-for-granted. As an answer to the causal question (“What is the effect of cultural diversity on group interaction?”) such research enumerates and describes the *outcomes* of group interaction. Questions arise, however, concerning the *processual* aspect of group interaction. How is interaction organised in an international group? How is agreement achieved across differences? What role does cultural diversity play in daily group life? If I wanted to get some answers, it seemed I had to reformulate the question, and in addition, look for an approach that concedes dynamism.

“CULTURAL DIVERSITY”

- AN EXPRESSION WITH VARIED MEANINGS

In a recent article in *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Ely and Thomas attempt to explain the disagreement concerning what groups perform better, culturally homogeneous or culturally diverse ones.³⁹ The perspective on cultural diversity that a group holds, they argue, accounts for the mixed results on the relationship between cultural diversity and work group outcomes. Indirectly, the article questions the research approach dominating current studies of international groups and hints at an approach where the interacting process in those groups could be made comprehensible. I will therefore develop their argument here.

From qualitative research in three culturally diverse organisations, Ely and Thomas identified three perspectives or understandings of cultural diversity: the integration-and-learning perspective, the access-and-legitimacy perspec-

³⁹ Ely and Thomas 2001.

tive and the discrimination-and-fairness perspective. The integration-and-learning perspective is based on the assumption that cultural differences give rise to different insights, knowledge and experiences which can form alternative views of work and how to best accomplish it. Employees with different cultural backgrounds are potentially valuable resources that the group can use to rethink its primary tasks and to redefine its markets, products, strategies and business practices in ways that will advance the group's mission. Cultural diversity, in this perspective, becomes a resource for learning, which enhances the group's work.

The access-and-legitimacy perspective builds on a recognition that the organisation's markets and constituencies are culturally diverse. It therefore behooves the organisation to match that diversity in its own workforce as a way to obtain access to and legitimacy with those markets and constituent groups. This led, in the groups studied, to race-based staffing that matched the racial make-up of the markets served. This in turn fostered perceptions of white-staffed jobs as higher status, racially segregated career tracks and opportunities, and ambivalence on the part of ethnic minorities about their significance at work. The resulting interracial tensions inhibited learning and individuals' effectiveness in their work. Cultural diversity becomes, under this view, simply a key to access critical markets.

The discrimination-and-fairness perspective is characterised by a belief in a culturally diverse workforce as a moral imperative to ensure justice and fair treatment of all members of society. Efforts towards cultural diversity focus on providing equal opportunities in hiring and promotion, suppressing prejudicial attitudes and eliminating discrimination. A culturally diverse work group, therefore, is meant to be an evidence of just and fair treatment of employees. Discussions on cultural diversity, Ely and Thomas observe, were restricted to discussing the meaning of differences on moral grounds, which led to strained personal relations characterised by competing claims of innocence. This hindered people from bringing all relevant skills and insights to the workgroup, compromising their ability to learn from each other and to increase effectiveness. Cultural diversity becomes, in this perspective, a moral end.

Differences in the consequences of these perspectives were obvious in various areas: how people expressed and managed tensions related to diversity; whether those who had been traditionally underrepresented in the

organisation felt respected and valued by their colleagues; and how people interpreted the relevance of their racial identity at work. These, in turn, had implications for how well the work group and its members functioned.

This result signals that cultural diversity is a *construct* that can be understood in various ways, the specific understanding having far-reaching consequences in the behaviour of those participating in culturally diverse work groups. It thus questions the dominant research approach – an approach which seems to take both culture and cultural diversity as something with an external, independent and objective existence, and that therefore can be dissected (in cultural dimensions) and measured. The observations made in the article tell us that there is no such thing as a cultural diversity that influences group interaction; but rather understandings of and attitudes towards cultural diversity and hence towards those members who represent that diversity. The understanding that organisational actors have of cultural diversity seems to be far more relevant than the actual variety of their countries of origin.

Ely and Thomas, however, did not observe this relevant point. Even more, the point they believe to have made is contradictory to the insight reached. Literally, they maintain to have “developed theory about the conditions under which cultural diversity enhances or detracts from work group functioning.” That is, they still treat cultural diversity as if it were some sort of independent objective reality which exerts its effects on group interaction. The only difference from previous studies is that Ely and Thomas believe that independent reality can exist under various conditions. In any case, what is to be retained here from Ely and Thomas’ study is that the understanding group members have of “cultural diversity” influences group interaction.

To recapitulate, the research literature on culturally diverse groups advises the performance of a long-term study in a real life situation. It also explains the fact that culturally homogeneous groups have different interaction patterns than heterogeneous ones. The questions addressed by the reviewed literature are of a rather static nature, though. They are concerned with the effects of diversity on individual performance or group productivity; that is, with the outcomes of diversity, and not with the process leading to the outcomes. Hence, its results raise new questions regarding the actual interacting process and the role of cultural diversity in that process.

The view of culture adopted in the literature on culturally diverse groups, is consistent with the character of its research question. Culture is seen as a system of values and rules of behaviour, a system which varies across cultures but which remains, for the effects of each single study, static over time; culture treated as another variable such as age, gender or education, which thus acquires a separate existence. If the character of the question changes to focus on processes, another approach towards culture seems to be needed – one that acknowledges the various meanings that “culture” and “cultural diversity” may have for different groups; one that weaves culture with what group members make of it.

NARRATING CULTURE

Culture is not a term without controversies. It has been given many definitions, numerous schools have dealt with it and many conceptualisations have been made about it. Kroeber and Kluckhohn counted 164 different definitions of culture⁴⁰ only within the field of anthropology. More recently, Kuper has shown us the genealogies of culture: from German romanticism, to British classicism or French rationalism.⁴¹ So, when I state the narrative nature of culture, I am merely making reference to a specific view of it, however extended this view may be today.

For Clifford Geertz, culture “denotes a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about attitudes toward life.”⁴² He adheres to a semiotic definition of culture, believing culture to be the webs of significance in which man is suspended. The study of such webs of significance or systems of meaning are, for him, not an experimental science but an interpretive one.⁴³

Along the same avenue as Geertz, Jerome Bruner maintains that culture provides interpretive devices, allowing us to give meaning to our environment and to interact in it with others. In that meaning-making process,

⁴⁰ Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952.

⁴¹ Kuper 1999.

⁴² Geertz 1973a, p. 89.

⁴³ Geertz 1973b, p. 5.

Bruner argues, we serve ourselves with the narrative and symbolic resources that culture stores. Culture, he claims, gives meaning to action by situating its underlying intentional states in an interpretive system.⁴⁴ In this way people from the same culture belong to a community of shared meanings (or at least shared meaning-making devices). Sackman talks about sensemaking mechanisms that are typically used in a certain cultural setting.⁴⁵ Furthermore, Bruner adds that culture gives us shared modes of discourse for discussing and negotiating the differences that may surge in meaning and interpretation.

When Bruner talks of narrative tools, he is making reference to devices such as drama, sequence, selective criteria, plots and story lines⁴⁶ – all characteristics of every narrative.⁴⁷ We transform events into episodes by embedding them into a sequence of time and space, with the sequence itself constituted by a plot. The selective criteria tell us which events to turn into facts, what is and what is not relevant for the narrative at use, and therefore how to continue writing the more specific narrative, plot or reality we are in. The reading *and* writing of plots, the discovery *and* invention of facts, the interpretation *and* construction of reality – such is the dual character of the narrative quality of culture. Bruner acknowledges the duality when he says that the “culturally prevalent narratives lead us to not only interpret facts in a particular way but also to generate those very facts through the acts we perform in consonance with these narratives.”⁴⁸ Not only do we interpret events according to a certain narrative plot given by culture, we also construct and maintain such plots by selecting which events to interpret and react to. As Weick would put it, culture enters sensemaking in both the authoring and reading of reality.⁴⁹

What is for Geertz a web of significance giving meaning to our actions, is for Bruner a storage of narrative tools permitting us to make sense of what goes on, to act in accordance and to negotiate a common reality in case of dispute. Although differently expressed, Geertz and Bruner both adhere to a

⁴⁴ Bruner 1990.

⁴⁵ Sackmann 1991.

⁴⁶ See Bruner 1986, Ch. 2.

⁴⁷ Czarniawska 1998; Somers 1994.

⁴⁸ Bruner 1998, p. 17.

⁴⁹ Weick 1995.

constructionist⁵⁰ perspective where the symbols and stories (or narratives) of culture provide us with the means to create the facts, to maintain up a certain reality, and act accordingly.

Two qualities are salient in a narrative view of culture: (1) the relevance of language⁵¹ and narrative resources in the construction of reality - culture is evidenced through language - and (2) an emphasis on process and action - it is the narrating process that transforms events into episodes. Both qualities, we will see, are central to the question concerning interaction in groups of people coming from different countries.

WHEN NARRATIVES DISAGREE - THE RESEARCH QUESTION

What happens then when two persons from two divergent communities of meaning attempt to work together? Not only do they differ in how they understand what is going on and select different events to construct reality, they disagree on which tools to use when negotiating the differences in meaning and understanding. In a sense, it could be said that these two persons live in two different worlds. Paradoxically though, both worlds are equally real. It is not a reality defined in terms of either/or, as we are used to; rather, it is a reality framed in terms of both/and.⁵²

Yet, for two persons to be able to interact in a meaningful way, their realities need to match to some extent. A simple example: To play chess, both players need to have a similar idea of what a game is, they need to know the rules of chess and these rules must be the same for both players, because what game would it be if one moved his pieces according to the game of chess while the other followed the rules of dames? For the game to proceed both players must share their understanding of chess. The same insight

⁵⁰ Jörgen Sandberg notes the difference between “constructivism” and “constructionism.” Although both terms are sometimes used indistinctly in the social sciences, they have different origins. The term “constructivism” comes from the Piagetian theory of perception, while “constructionism” refers to Berger and Luckmann’s work on the construction of reality (Sandberg 2001). Since Geertz’s and Bruner’s concerns are more related to Berger and Luckmann’s ideas, I qualified them with the term “constructionism.”

⁵¹ Language could be understood in the sense of the various languages spoken around the globe. I refer, however, to the specific use of words in a given context. In this second acceptation, narrative resources and linguistic resources would be concepts alluding both devices and tools woven into talk. Later in this chapter I develop, in more detail, the view of language I make reference to here.

⁵² Smith and Berg 1997.

extends to the coordination of action when more persons are involved. It is generally assumed that for a group to be able to work together, a certain degree of shared understanding is required, even if disagreement exists about how much needs to be shared.⁵³ As Geertz might have put it, for people to be able to coordinate action, they have to be suspended in the same web of significance, they must belong to the same community of meaning.

Given the various realities of a group of people with different educational backgrounds, coming from various countries and having a diversity of other life experiences, how is it possible for them to coordinate their actions? How do they succeed to work together? Do they reach a common understanding enabling them to collaborate? If so, how is it done? Stretching the narrative metaphor: How does a group of people with different cultural backgrounds co-author a shared reality? What devices do they use during their writing process? And, what role does cultural diversity play in that co-authoring?

More concretely: *How does the organising process of an international project group develop?* Only by studying such a process can we answer the second (although not less relevant) question: *What role does cultural diversity play in that process?* These are the two questions on which I wish to shed some light.

To understand the process of organising interaction I still needed a perspective that allowed me to follow processes – a perspective respecting the dynamism of processes and acknowledging the role played by language. To develop one such, I used literature on organising.

LANGUAGE ORGANISES

An easy way to start outlining a perspective for the study of organising in international project groups is to study the simplest form of organisation: face-to-face interaction. Using an everyday example, banal to the point of almost being childish, Bruno Latour explains what “organising” is, or how interaction is structured.⁵⁴ At an EGOS Conference, he asks his friend Bernard Joerges to see him in the main room after the conference – a petition to which Bernard agrees. With no other explanation mediated, they part to continue their respective days. This simple linguistic exchange has important

⁵³ Donnellon, Gray and Bougon 1986; Weick 1979.

⁵⁴ Latour 1998.

implications, though. As soon as Latour poses his question, he creates what he calls a manuscript, a plan of action positioning the two friends. Once the two interlocutors part to await the end of the conference, they go their separate ways, each with a role to fill in the manuscript. The manuscript delegates certain behaviours, which adhere to a specific plan and completion of inscribed actions. Even if it was initially Bruno and Bernward who produced the manuscript, it is now the manuscript telling the two friends what to do and how to perform. During the time between the authoring and the completion of the manuscript, both actors follow the development of the manuscript and seek to fulfil its conditions by getting to the *Aula Magna* at 12:30 pm.

One of the simplest examples of organisation, the coordination of two friends, builds upon what Latour sees as a special act of delegation. I distinguish three main elements of this act: a text, a frame (a term I borrow from Weick, as you will read later) and a connection. The text is the explicitly uttered words in a language which all interlocutors are able to understand. These words could have been, for example, "I'll see you in the main conference room at the end of the morning lectures." Even if Bruno and Bernward both spoke fluent English, those words would have no meaning unless our friends could put them into a context: "What is the main conference room? What conference does he refer to? At what time do the presentations end? Is he referring to the same time conventions as the ones I follow? What does he mean by he'll 'see' me?" Strictly speaking, mere words do not have a specific meaning unless they are put in relation to something else. Words thus need a frame and a connection to acquire a meaning. Otherwise they are sets of possible readings. The frame is a certain understanding of reality, the broader play where words are inserted. Its inside could read: "We are in the academic world of conferences where researchers, besides presenting their papers, meet and socialise to bring about new research projects, talk about funding, discuss possible visits with each other, etc. Here we have two friends who want to meet and seriously consider an academic matter." Ok, now we understand that with "see," Bruno does not mean to stand up and provocatively stare at Bernward, but rather to talk about something more specific. However, the "here" and "now" of the play can be as many as the scenes that can be set up. Just a frame and a text are not enough to determine the meaning of the linguistic act. We still lack the connection between

the two, which leaves the when and where unspecified. This is the indexicality ethnomethodologists refer to. I take the connection to be reified by the concrete local interaction with all its characteristics: a very specific EGOS conference at a given university, utilising its acknowledged time zone and a rigid time schedule... The uttered words, the frame and the local interaction – together, these three allow Bernward and Bruno to make sense similarly, align their understandings and execute the manuscript. They coordinate their actions to meet at 12:30 pm in the *Aula Magna* of the university.

Although never reading one another (or at least never citing each other), I believe there are strong parallels between Latour's act of delegation and Weick's sensemaking. "The substance of sensemaking starts with three elements: a cue, a frame and a connection."⁵⁵ For Karl E. Weick, none of those three elements mean anything on their own; meaning comes from the simultaneous awareness of all three. He makes the analogy of cues and frames to vocabularies. The more abstract words of the frames signal to the less abstract words of the cues, cues becoming sensible within the context created by the more comprehensive vocabulary. Meaning is thus, for Weick, a relation among vocabularies. Coming back to the three elements I distinguished in Latour's example of delegation, Weick's cue would stand for the uttered text, the connection for the concrete local interaction, and, as you might have already noticed, I borrowed Weick's frame to name the third element.

I do not want to leave our two friends without eliciting another characteristic, one of relevance for the study of any long-term interaction. Latour's manuscript, the plan of action, manages to bridge the distance in time and space.⁵⁶ The two friends meet, spend some time together, talk and then part. Later they meet again at another place and another point in time. The local interaction ceases for a while and continues, so to speak, in another medium, the manuscript's account, before it is once again picked up somewhere else. Bruno and Bernward never leave the local interaction. Even though each continues his own way. The manuscript somehow controls the two friends and directs their interactions in the way they initially inscribed it. By acting from a distance and displacing time and space, the manuscript is a way to

⁵⁵ Weick 1995, p. 110.

⁵⁶ Latour 1998, p. 283.

jump from place to place without our friends losing sight of who they are and what they are expected to do. It is, concludes Latour, a special form of delegation – one that protects our space-temporal continuity even in our absence.

So have we learnt anything from this apparently trivial example? Well, we learned at least three lessons relevant to the scope of this thesis, the organising process in diverse groups. First, *words do things*. The simple utterance “I’ll see you in the main conference room at the end of the morning lectures” initiates a plan of action that the two friends will carry to an end. Second, *the meaning of an utterance is not directly given by the literal utterance*. To understand what Latour means by “I’ll see you,” Bernward needs to put those words into a specific context. In a different situation, the same utterance could be understood, for instance, confrontationally. And third, since the inscribed utterance bridges time and space, *the secret to follow the process of organising* seems to lie in the ability to recognise a manuscript and follow it from its origins to its completion. In what follows I shall develop these three lessons.

I. WORDS DO THINGS

– THE PERFORMATIVE NATURE OF LANGUAGE

A second parallel between Latour and Weick is rooted in a modern conception of language. Organisation – Latour’s act of delegation – and sense-making do not take the meaning of words or of cues to be those objects existing in an external world of outside reality. Meaning is not a one to one relation where words lie on the side of humans and language, and what they stand for lies on the side of artifacts and non-humans. It is not objects versus subjects, nature versus society, causal explanation versus interpretation.⁵⁷ Wittgenstein was the one to revolt against the previous Augustinus view of language, where words were the mere labels of things.⁵⁸ Surely, observes Wittgenstein, whoever defends a referential view of language “... has in mind the way in which a child learns such words as ‘man’, ‘sugar’, ‘table’, etc. He does not primarily think of such words as ‘today’, ‘not’, ‘but’, ‘perhaps.’” That is like describing a game of chess without mentioning the existence and

⁵⁷ See Chapter 2 for another view of explanation, a view closing the gap between explanation and interpretation.

⁵⁸ Wittgenstein 1953, §1.

operations of the pawns.⁵⁹ Such a description of the game would be incomplete.⁶⁰

Wittgenstein's criticism of the traditional view of language goes further. Do words just name and designate? Think of statements such as "Fire!," "Out," "Very good" or "I love you." "Are you inclined still to call these words 'names of objects?'"⁶¹ In fact, as Austin would reply, these words are *doing* very heterogeneous things: warning, ordering, praising or declaring a beautiful feeling. *How To Do Things With Words*, the title of Austin's book, very well illuminates the performative function of language,⁶² a function which is beautifully illustrated in *El Sí De Las Niñas*,⁶³ a theatric play from Spanish literature. Written in the dawn of the 19th century, the "yes" pronounced by the girls on occasion of their imposed weddings with much older men, involved renouncing their biological families for the sake of adopting and being accepted into the families of their husbands, changing deeds and often even friends, social circles and lifestyles. That "yes" performed a very different act than the "yes" given in response to "Do you want a capuccino?" or "Do you live in Stockholm?" Each "yes" might sound the same, but it *does* different things, *paves the path* to different consequences and *defines* different actors.

The meaning of a word is not, as Augustinus thought, an outside reality.

2. MEANING AND UNDERSTANDING

If meaning is not the referent of the outside world, what is the meaning of a word? Not yet content with simply discarding the view of a referential meaning, Wittgenstein goes on rejecting the question itself, "What is meaning?" as he maintains that it produces a mental cramp within us. Even if we feel we ought to point to something in reply to the question, we are indeed

⁵⁹ A short incise to briefly expose the chess analogy, as it serves Wittgenstein in investigating language and meaning, and thus it will be useful for my purpose of deploying an alternative perspective. Wittgenstein draws a parallel between language and the game of chess, and thus the various pieces of the game stand for words, the rules of the movement of the pieces on the board stand for the rules of the use of words in the language (Wittgenstein 1953, §108) and the shape of the chess pieces correspond to the sounds or shapes of words (Wittgenstein 1953, §31).

⁶⁰ Wittgenstein 1958, p. 77.

⁶¹ Wittgenstein 1953, §27.

⁶² Austin 1975.

⁶³ Literally translated as *The "yes" of the girls*. Moratín 1945.

unable to point to anything.⁶⁴ A common temptation is to answer the question by pointing to the mind, as if meaning, and the understanding of it, were some sort of mental processes, or hidden mechanisms. However, Wittgenstein opposes the idea of a private meaning; a meaning only known by the person who utters the word or sentence. That would be, he compares, as if the person he is playing chess with gives the white king a paper crown, leaving the use of the piece unaltered, but telling Wittgenstein that the crown has a meaning to him which he cannot explain by rules. Wittgenstein replies, “As long as it doesn’t alter the use of the piece, it hasn’t what I call a meaning.”⁶⁵ We see here that meaning has to do with use, but also with rules. Or aren’t the pawns governed by rules for their movements? Change the rules and you would have another game.

We are, however, prone to argue that the signs of our language – sounds if spoken, lines if read – seem dead without the mental processes. If asked about the relation of a name and what it names, we are inclined to answer that the relation is a psychological one, maybe recalling the mechanism of association. It seems that the action of language consists of two parts: an inorganic and observable part, the handling of signs; and an organic and hidden part, understanding these signs, meaning and interpreting them, thinking. These organic activities seem to take place in the queer medium of the mind. To avoid the partly occult appearance of the processes we believe occur in the mind – thinking, imagining, interpreting, meaning, or understanding –, Wittgenstein replaces any of those processes with a process of looking at an objet – by painting, drawing or modelling it. As soon as we do this, as soon as we read or hear the sign along with the painted image and as soon as the image therefore loses its occult character, the mysticism of its previous invisibility dissolves. “Why,” asks Wittgenstein, “should the written sign plus this painted image be alive if the written sign alone was dead?” Suddenly, the hidden meaning we thought of ceases to impart any life to the sentence at all.⁶⁶

The meaning of a word is not inside our heads, no matter how strongly we may feel it; nor is understanding a mental process.

⁶⁴ Wittgenstein 1958, p.1.

⁶⁵ Wittgenstein 1958, p. 65.

⁶⁶ Wittgenstein 1958, p. 3-5.

3. FOLLOWING A PROCESS

– MEANING IS IN USE

So far we have learnt that the belief in meaning as an object existing in an outside reality, and the belief in meaning as some sort of image existing in our heads are both misleading beliefs. Both beliefs are fruits of the same mistake: “We are looking for the use of a sign, but we look for it as though it were an object *co-existing* with the sign. One of the reasons for this mistake is again that we are looking for a ‘thing corresponding to a substantive.’”⁶⁷

Still, the question remains unanswered. If it is neither an external referent nor an internal image, what then makes the sign alive? (I no longer dare stating the, so far, firmly rejected question). In fact, in the hands of Wittgenstein, the question “What is the meaning of a word?” transforms into the question “What is an explanation of meaning?”⁶⁸ The transformation has at least two advantages which are of interest for this thesis. First, it enables avoidance of speculations about meaning and all the confusion adhered to it. Instead, explanations are *concrete* and nearer to us; they don’t mislead us to chase shadows, as meanings did.⁶⁹ “Roughly: let’s ask what the explanation of meaning is, for whatever that explains will be the meaning.”⁷⁰ The second advantage of the transformation is that it takes us back to ordinary linguistic practices – ordinary linguistic practices such as explanations. Explanations are not discoveries, but descriptions often given by means of examples of what speakers of the same language understand by a given word or expression. This renders meaning *public* (shared by all speakers of a language) and *immanent* (accessible to us and surveyable by us).⁷¹ “If I need a justification for using a word, it must also be one for someone else.”⁷² This is a point worth retaining since (1) it rules out the appeal of subjective perceptions as grounds for affirmations, “interpretations by themselves do not determine meaning”⁷³ and (2) it gives way to consensual action, since where an expla-

⁶⁷ Kenny 1994, p. 61; emphasis in the original.

⁶⁸ Wittgenstein 1958, p. I.

⁶⁹ Baker and Hacker 1983, p. 35.

⁷⁰ Wittgenstein 1958, p. I.

⁷¹ Baker and Hacker 1983, p. 36.

⁷² Wittgenstein 1953, §378.

⁷³ Wittgenstein 1953, §198.

nation ends lies agreement about the use of the word in the language of the speakers.⁷⁴

Having transformed the question, the answer indeed sounds trivial. “The meaning of a word is what is explained by the explanation of the meaning.”⁷⁵ That is giving a question as an answer to a previous question, we could argue, because what is explained when we explain the meaning of a word? Its use,⁷⁶ answers Wittgenstein, the rules governing the use of the explained word.⁷⁷ More often than not, we explain the meaning of a word or of an expression by giving examples of various cases where the word is used.⁷⁸ For instance, to explain the meaning of the term “game,” we talk of board games, card games, ball games, Olympic Games and so on; we present a wide variety of instances where the word “game” is used correctly. We would however be unable to put into words what is common to all those uses, because, Wittgenstein notes, there is no single characteristic that is shared by all of them.⁷⁹ He thoroughly examines the various examples given to explain the word “game,” with the result of his examination being “a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail.” He calls this net of similarities “family resemblances.”⁸⁰

In summary, Wittgenstein’s advice if we want to understand the meaning of a word or expression, is to *look and see* how it is used. To study how the meaning of a particular word is understood, Wittgenstein observes how the staging of the word is performed, chases the praxis of its use, analyses the circumstances under which the word is applied and describes its immediate experience surrounding it. This is how he proceeds when investigating such philosophically contentious terms like “time,”⁸¹ “knowledge,”⁸² or “inten-

⁷⁴ Wittgenstein 1953, §241.

⁷⁵ Wittgenstein 1953, §560.

⁷⁶ Wittgenstein 1953, §432.

⁷⁷ Wittgenstein 1953, §81-82.

⁷⁸ Wittgenstein 1953, §71-75.

⁷⁹ In fact, he gives this reason for not giving any proper definition of “language game.” Even if he, in §7 of *Philosophical Investigations*, explicitly points to a performative view of language when he indicates that when talking about “language game,” he refers to both the language and the actions into which it is woven.

⁸⁰ Wittgenstein 1953, §65-67.

⁸¹ Wittgenstein 1958, p. 26.

⁸² Wittgenstein 1953, §148-151.

tion,”⁸³ to mention a few. Some have argued that Wittgenstein is thus not offering a theory of meaning, but simply giving a piece of methodological advice: “Don’t think, but look!”⁸⁴ Nevertheless, that methodological indication could not be understood without a certain understanding of the concept of meaning,⁸⁵ because what would we look at if we still understood meaning as something hidden in our heads? What sort of conclusions could we draw from merely looking at objects in the street? Very flat conclusions, indeed.

COORDINATING ACTION

Latour seems to have retained the advice and puts it to use when studying natural scientists. He looks and does not think (in the good sense of it, of course). Latour does not think that the knowledge natural scientists construct comes from their heads. He does not believe that the understanding scientists develop of the phenomena they study is somehow developed inside their minds.⁸⁶ While Wittgenstein observes a word and follows its various uses in differing circumstances, Latour observes the “circulating reference” and follows its various applications in varied milieus.

“Circulating reference” is the series of translations⁸⁷ of the referent; that is, of the specific natural phenomenon studied by Latour’s scientists. Latour trails that process by tracing the transformation of a crumb of earth in the Amazons to a scientific journal in France,⁸⁸ or by tracking the transformations of rats and chemicals into a scientific article.⁸⁹ He turns his eyes (and his genius pen) towards the place indicated by the finger tip; he follows the tiny gesture pointing at the referred thing; he sees the differences, acknowledging the nuances of their use, the circumstances of term-giving and the varying shapes it takes along the process of mutations. “Acts of reference ... rely not so much on resemblance as on a regulated series of transformations,

⁸³ Wittgenstein 1953, §641-648.

⁸⁴ Wittgenstein 1953, §66.

⁸⁵ Glock 1996, p. 377.

⁸⁶ Latour 1986.

⁸⁷ Note that Latour uses “translation” in two ways: “transformation” and “translocation” (Latour 1997). Both meanings arise from the double *use* of the term, corroborating what Wittgenstein taught us, that meaning is in use.

⁸⁸ Latour 1999, Ch. 2.

⁸⁹ Latour and Woolgar 1979.

transmutations and translations.”⁹⁰ Wittgenstein taught us differences; Latour points them to us. Following and deploying the circulating reference is analogous to tracing and describing the language game through which meaning is performed and the world is organised.

Now, you could argue that I am mixing Wittgenstein’s ideas concerning meaning and understanding with the more down to earth act of organising. I do not think, however, that I am being too polemical when treating meaning like organising. After all, Weick defends a similar view when he maintains that sensemaking is enactive of sensible environments, and even treats organisations as sensemaking mechanisms or systems of meaning.⁹¹ Understanding is the organising of the environment into a comprehensible world. In this sense, understanding is as much an action putting the environment in order as organising is. Wittgenstein’s later philosophy acknowledges this.⁹²

Call it delegation, sensemaking or language game, Latour, Weick and Wittgenstein are concerned about closely related (if not identical) matters: the alignment of action, the coordination of the actors towards an attuned aim, the understanding of others to make co-existence bearable. That is an everyday phenomenon. How do two friends arrange a meeting? How do two adversaries play a game of chess? How do two colleagues from different organisational departments hold a meaningful meeting? How does a group of scientists organise a joint research project? The performative nature of language contributes to the coordination of action. Collective action, the coordination of all actors, is achieved by writing a common manuscript for everyone in the play to follow. As we will see, the international group of researchers will be able to work together because they manage to agree on what set of words and metaphors to use to describe what they do. They reach a common understanding, which aligns meaning⁹³ and coordinates the action of the players.

⁹⁰ Latour 1999, p. 58.

⁹¹ Weick 1995.

⁹² The perspective of language presented in this chapter and used along the thesis equates talk to action. Although much against the common wisdom condensed in the complaint, “That’s mere talk!”, it is a view that has gained acceptance in the field of organisational theory, specially since the ‘80s (Czarniawska-Joerges 1988; Brunsson 1989; Rombach 1986; Goodman 1978).

⁹³ Since meaning is the body of rules governing the use of words, the linguistic practices in which talk is woven, a common understanding is the alignment of those rules and practices. This idea will be developed further in Chapter 9.

ON METHOD



Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveller, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I-
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Robert Frost, The Road Not Taken,
in *Mountain Interval*, 1921

“Poet a prisoner of his own making, followed the path ‘less travelled by’ and strays from conventional patterns. A moment which, he says, has defined his life since. I liked the poem at school but I am not so sure now. The poet is constrained by the idea that one must always follow paths: why not break off into the undergrowth? If his path has diverged so far from the other he might have chosen, and he can’t remember his route back, why not just strike off left, leave the path altogether, if he wants to? Why not do that anyway? He could discover all sorts of unknown, unimagined places, intersect other paths, join them, leave them at will. He says he took the path less travelled, but in 1999 almost everyone does that in some way or another, to a certain degree. His poem now looks much more like the path more travelled.” (James, English historian)

“This is one of my favourite poems and one that has often guided me in decisions about my life. I think this poem is what sent me to Israel, to Thailand, to India, to Indonesia, and not to Europe where all Australians are primed to go when they finish school. At essence, I see this poem as being about risk taking; closing your eyes and stepping off the diving board, and trusting that, not only is this the road you’ve chosen, but that this is the one that will provide the most learning for you. The other thing that I get from the poem is the sense that even though decisions may seem difficult at the time, ‘way leads on to way’ and your life continues in the direction that it is meant to with those decisions just as turning points to mark the way.” (Natalia, Australian lawyer)

“The main point of the poem is that it is worth to choose a way in your life that not everybody takes. It is not always the best just to follow the crowd. Sure, that is a safe and popular choice, but maybe less interesting and maybe boring and so normal because everybody does the same. But if you choose the less-travelled way, okay, at the beginning, you might be alone and some kind of a stranger just to go your own way. But while travelling on you will meet other ‘strangers’ with the same courage that you showed by taking the other way. These ‘strangers’ are surely more interesting people with new ideas. They have well more space to develop on the less-travelled way. The poem encourages people not to be too ‘lagom’. Here and there it is an interesting and self-developing chance to be a ‘stranger’...” (Aino, German secretary)

The chosen constraints of a poet, the blind acceptance of risk taking in life, the choice of an unusual life. All those and more could be a “not taken road.” Just as many points could probably be found in the material I have collected. In my research, I am myself a victim of what I research. In the eyes of another person, from another country, of a different age or of the other gender, the account I present in this text could vary. No narrative can be voiceless; they all need a perspective from which it is told, the narrator’s perspective,⁹⁴ and I have my own: Spanish, young, woman, acculturated in organisational theory, with the experience of having lived in several countries, most recently in Sweden. Having made this confession, I do not pretend to wash my hands and move on with these unnoticed, in the most genuine Pontius Pilate’ style. “A common enemy of field research within the researcher’s own society,” says Barbara Czarniawska, “is the taken-for-grantedness of meanings and their modes of construction.”⁹⁵ That is the object of this chapter: to ponder on those taken-for-grantednesses, to reflect over the choices they led me to make, and to discuss how I have actively worked with them along the research process.

Another view of Robert Frost’s poem would be the wood I have not chosen, but somehow I chose the road. I never decided to be Spanish and a woman (although I am very happy that I am), but I was there when deciding the method of inquiry.

⁹⁴ Bruner 1990.

⁹⁵ Czarniawska 1997, p. 60.

Many roads diverged in a rainbow field,
 and sorry I could not travel all
 I trotted one, and bent my back
 Yet knowing how method leads on to results,
 I doubted if I could ever leave that track.

SELECTION OF THE GROUP

One afternoon in January 1999, Flavius, who was casually accompanying a colleague, dropped by at the research centre where I work. Hastily, in the corridor, I learned that he was arranging a three day workshop in Uppsala with a group of researchers from several countries. The workshop was set to discuss and sketch a future common research project. His problem was that in this group there was a Spanish researcher who hardly spoke English. The workshop was going to take place in two weeks, so time was pressing. My problem at the moment was finding a group I could follow and study for my research. That is how the group I studied emerged. An incidental visit joined together two problems into one solution, a reminder of the “garbage can” model of decision-making.⁹⁶ Flavius got a translator and I got a group.

This group was appropriate for my research question for several reasons. First, it was an international group. Group members came from various countries – Spain, Sweden, The Netherlands, UK and the US. Variety in country of origin was an initial selection criteria. Along the study, as we will see, the group showed itself to be diverse in other aspects that also became relevant. Group members belonged to different generations, represented both genders and had diverse professional backgrounds – law, organisational theory and sociology. This, however, was not a condition of the study but part of its results.⁹⁷

Second, group members did not share a past. Bettenhausen and Murnighan have pointed out the need, in groups where there is no common history to refer to, to “spend considerable time ‘getting to know’ one another and

⁹⁶ Cohen, March, and Olsen 1972.

⁹⁷ As the attentive reader may have already noticed, I started with the same assumption as dominant research in the field has made (see the literature review in Chapter 1). That is, I equated culture with nationality. In Chapter 9, however, as part of the conclusions, I question such an assumption and extend the idea of culture to other spheres (such as professional experience, educational background, gender and hobbies, to name a few). Furthermore, I challenge the often held idea that the type of diversity in question matters. Diversity, I will argue, is a linguistic resource used to make sense out of what goes on (see *Extending Vagueness*, Ch. 9).

establishing a shared understanding of the group's mission and the actions that are appropriate for its performance."⁹⁸ To organise interaction and the project, group members could not look back to a precedent. I could study the interacting process and the organising of a project from a point with no past.

Third, the group was self-organising. Group members did not count on any formal structure, clear goal, developed set of rules, appointed leader, or well-defined role profiles to guide the group action and member interaction during the initial phases.⁹⁹ Mayrhofer maintains that the lack of formal and legal structure, the vagueness of goals and the large levels of personal freedom are characteristic of international research networks. These are self-organising and unstructured networks.¹⁰⁰

In the final conclusion to their well-known article, Smircich and Morgan suggest that

... the study of non-leadership situations would focus attention on a phenomenon of some importance. Patterns of organisation that replace hierarchical leadership with patterns of more equalised interaction in which each has an obligation to define what is happening, and respond accordingly, changes the very basis of organisation. Such arrangements increase the adaptive capacity or organisation.... These embody a model of human development in line with the ability of human beings to take responsibility for their actions. In situations of more equalised power, this obligation and ability is more widely spread. Members of a situation are unable to look to authority relations to solve problems; adaptive capacities have to be developed at the level at which they are needed, increasing the learning and adaptive ability of the whole. *Autonomous work groups and leaderless situations of all kinds present concrete opportunities for the study of emergent principles of organisation* that offer alternatives to the dependency relations that have permeated Western culture as an organisational norm.¹⁰¹

Unable to look to authority, with no past to resort back to, and facing multiple national realities, the group of researchers had nothing to refer to. They had to negotiate as much of a shared understanding as the tools they used to handle their discrepancies. Newly begun academic international research

⁹⁸ Bettenhausen and Murnighan 1985.

⁹⁹ A collaboration between the Swedish National Institute for Working Life and Sweden's central trade unions took the initiative to start a research project regarding contingent employment and to bring the group into being (see Ch. 3).

¹⁰⁰ Mayrhofer 1998.

¹⁰¹ Smircich and Morgan 1982, p. 271-272; emphasis is mine.

project groups, including the one we will follow along the thesis, are adequate to study how an organising process emerges. Within the framework set by the organising process, it will be possible to look at the role cultural diversity plays in group interaction.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SURFACE

Adam Kuper claims that culture has often been used as a macro explanatory factor when it is actually culture in itself that should be explained. His complaint is pertinent, especially in the last few years when culture has been used to explain “everything, from civil wars to financial crises and divorce rates.”¹⁰² How do you, then, study interactions among people with different cultural backgrounds? How do you consider culture? You cannot see it acting in its own right on the surface of the field! At the most, you see it acting through people’s beliefs and accounts. That is, as I see it, the core of the micro-macro debate. Empirical data, from which macro variables are added, are consummated in concrete micro situations. Hence, one cannot directly observe culture or any other macro structure, but is instead confronted with a myriad of particular locals. How is the macro level then to be considered? Two articles, Callon and Latour’s *Unscrewing the Big Leviathan; or How Actors Macrostructure Reality, and How Sociologists Help Them To Do So?* and Knorr-Cetina’s *The micro-social order – Towards a reconception*, might help answering that question.

ON THE MICRO-MACRO DEBATE

Callon and Latour reformulate the question to “How does a micro-actor become a macro-actor?”¹⁰³ They find the answer in Hobbes’ social contract. The sovereign has taken onto his person the authority to represent his people’s wishes and desires. He is not a tyrant, as he says and does nothing without first having been authorised by his people. The sovereign thus is not above his people, but “is the people itself in another state.” Such political representation is a specific instance of the more general phenomenon which Callon and Latour call *translation*, with which they understand all sorts of

¹⁰² Kuper 1999.

¹⁰³ Callon and Latour 1981, p. 279.

means by which an actor accepts the authority to be a spokesman for another actor. Through translation micro-actors transform into macro-actors, people into States. Macro is not above; there are no different levels of social structures; society is dimensionless. What traditional sociology (in Parssons' spirit) takes to be macro structures actually consist of the translation of micro-situations and micro-actors.

I agree with Callon and Latour in that macro-notions ultimately refer to micro-scale interactions, and that the chain of interrelations among micro-situations translates into a macro-actor. However, their notion of macro leaves the question of how to study culture unanswered. Culture is not a State or nation in whose name collective actions and policies are undertaken. Translation (or representation in its political sense) explains what macro-actors consist of and how they behave, but it does not explain how micro-actors act, feel and perceive. The question of how to consider culture when studying the local interaction remains open.

Knorr-Cetina's representational hypothesis of the macro comes to our rescue.¹⁰⁴ Like the previous authors she starts conceding the chain of micro-episodes, which interrelations lead the immediate situation to transcend beyond. For Callon and Latour the links of the chain consist of "all the negotiations, intrigues, calculations, acts of persuasion and violence, thanks to which an actor or force takes, or causes to be conferred on itself authority to speak or act on behalf of another actor or force."¹⁰⁵ However, for Knorr-Cetina those links are formed by "participants' concrete projects, by mutual expectations, imputations of interest, fears, grudges or misread communications."¹⁰⁶ Here resides the origin of the difference between these authors. When focusing on the interrelationships among locals, Callon and Latour put the emphasis on the interactions of the actors; Knorr-Cetina on the representations by which participants construe such relationships.

Consequently, in Knorr-Cetina's view the macro is a:

... summary representation actively constructed and pursued within micro-situations... [I]t is seen to be part of these micro-episodes where it results from the structuring practices of participants. The outcome of these practices is typifications of various degrees of abstraction which 'stand for' the events

¹⁰⁴ Knorr-Cetina 1988.

¹⁰⁵ Callon and Latour 1981, p. 279.

¹⁰⁶ Knorr-Cetina 1988, p. 38.

they typify. Participants work out and employ these typifications to represent and interpret their situation-transcending involvements and other aspects of the more global circumstances of their life. I shall call Representation Hypothesis the view that the macro-order is first and foremost an order of representation, that is, of summary references pursued within micro-situations.¹⁰⁷

The macro is thus constructed in the concrete interactions between participants, resulting in typifications. Typifications, which are the macro-variables, are then used by participants to interpret and make sense of their immediate situation.

All three authors have often been misinterpreted, which Latour himself acknowledges and tries to correct.¹⁰⁸ Not one of them maintains that the macro does not exist. On the contrary, Callon and Latour, as well as Knorr-Cetina, recognise the existence of the macro. What they put into question is the traditional nature of the micro-macro relationship, dismissing the micro-macro dichotomy as one of different levels and ontologies. They argue that micro and macro have a similar nature, and thus make the point that neither concept should be studied distinctly.

The direction of their arguments is, however, opposed. Therefore their similar, though slightly different solutions, complement each other. With Callon and Latour we understand how the micro is translated into the macro; with Knorr-Cetina we understand how the macro influences the micro. The substance of their differing ideas is their conception of the interrelationships between micro-episodes. Whereas the first two authors think of them as translations, the other sees them as the participant definition of the concrete situation. Interaction vs. representation. The distinction is summarised in the two senses of the term *representation*: political for the first, pictorial for the second. Together they give a complete view of the reciprocal relationships between micro and macro.

But how does all this discussion translate into a method for considering culture? Knorr-Cetina calls it “methodological situationalism;” Latour and his colleagues “Actor-Network Theory.”¹⁰⁹ Both stress the analytical primacy of the concrete situation (in Knorr-Cetina’s terms), or the local (in Latour’s

¹⁰⁷ Knorr-Cetina 1988, p. 39-40; emphasis is mine.

¹⁰⁸ Latour 1997.

¹⁰⁹ Latour makes clear the misunderstandings introduced by the term “theory” in Actor-Network-Theory. ANT is not a theory, he maintains, but a research method consisting of following the links among micro-situations (Latour 1997).

terms). This is to say that all actions, behaviours, utterances, and environments are important in themselves. What is open to the eye, the surface, is acknowledged. They prompt sociologists to go into the field, treating the micro and the macro in the same manner, with equal respect; that is, for the generation of field data, ethnography. As for its interpretation, Knorr-Cetina's representational hypothesis of the macro advocates studying how the participants themselves use their idea/typification of culture to make sense of the situation – an analytical strategy loyal to the performative view of language defended in Chapter 1.

GENERATION OF FIELD MATERIAL

Participation in the activities of the actors is as much a way of generating research material as it is getting access to the meaning that situations have for the actors studied.¹¹⁰ The ethnographical approach elevates the micro-situation, facilitating the researcher in tracing the chain of events. It makes it possible to observe the organising process prospectively; in the making. Focus is set on the performative aspect.

The concrete characteristics of my field influenced the choice of methods used to generate data. The organising process I was to follow was fragmented in time, condensed in space and the interacting partners were geographically dispersed. The group came together for the workshops, dissolved after each workshop and regrouped again at the next workshop.

Between workshops group members worked at home and all contact among them was via e-mail or telephone. This meant that if I wanted to follow the group as such, when all members (or most of them) met, I had to participate in every workshop. That turned out to be an advantage: I could register a 15-month long interacting process without long months of participation in the field. I followed the group of researchers wherever they met and took part in all workshop activities. I participated in every work meeting and social event, registered all the meetings and filmed some of them, talked to each group member, took notes frantically, and collected every single document that was written by, or distributed in, the group.

¹¹⁰ Baszanger and Dodier 1997.

In between workshops group members were geographically dispersed, and thus the contexts in which they mainly worked were inaccessible to me. To compensate for this lack of access, following each workshop I sent an e-mail to every participant asking them to describe their impressions of and reflections on the workshop. “If you took the workshop as a trip, how would you describe your trip?” In this way I got the participants to make sense of the recent workshop from the contexts of their home offices. The diversity of geographical contexts shone through the personal experiences, giving space to the plurality of voices and accounts coming from the field.¹¹¹

Time fragmentation and geographical dispersion had another consequence. How could I observe the interaction process while group members were at home? In addition to the returned e-mails with thoughts and accounts of the last workshop, I got access to the e-mails exchanged among them between the workshops. That gave me the possibility of following the doings of the group while its members were scattered.¹¹²

Participation during the intensive weekends they met, access to their e-mail communication when they were apart and e-mails with their reflections of the past gave me a huge pile of material, and an excellent chance to prospectively follow the process of organising a joint research project.

TIME SPAN IN THE FIELD

SALTSA¹¹³ was the initiator of the group and funded the first meetings. However, it soon became obvious that SALTSA was not going to fund the project the whole way. In January 1999, on the last day of the workshop in Uppsala, Cassius, the representative for the Swedish National Institute for Working Life, announced this fact to the group informing them of the need to look for other funding sources. SALTSA was to finance their travels and meetings for the coming year, but from then on, if they wanted to continue and to enlarge the project they had to search elsewhere for resources.

¹¹¹ Salzer-Mörling 1998b.

¹¹² In her recent doctoral thesis, Galit Ailon-Souday observes how technologically-mediated communication, such as e-mail and conference calls, are used to manage identity boundaries. With the help of the mute button in conference calls and the addressee selection option in e-mail exchange, participants can be included or excluded in a conversation, narrowing down communication channels and enabling the manipulation of boundaries of identity to a member's own advantage (Ailon-Souday, 2001). In this sense, I might be unaware of whether or not the international researcher group studied took advantage of the e-mail addressee selection option to exclude me from their conversations, drawing a boundary between “us” and “her.”

¹¹³ In Chapter 3 I write in more detail about SALTSA.

The search for funding sources other than SALTSA actually helped me to limit the time frame of my study from January 1999, when the need to find other external funding was made explicit, until April 2000, when the group met for the first time financed by a grant from the European Union. The main purpose of the group during this period was to design a research project and write a research proposal in order to get funded. As Kelly and McGrath have shown, interaction patterns developed before the group's first deadline persist during the following tasks.¹¹⁴ The first deadline the group had was the EU deadline for the application of research funds.

ON BEING IN THE FIELD

Practising ethnography is studying the actors *in situ*. The researcher, however, enters those situations with his/her own fears, ideas and biases. As a researcher all I can do is reflect upon these, reflect upon their influence on the generation and interpretation of the material, and reflect upon how, once in the field, they could sometimes be turned into an advantage.

At the first meeting my presence was rather ambiguous since I had a double role and a double identity. I was a translator and therefore a member of the group, while at the same time I was researching them and keeping a distance. I was the interpreter for the Spanish member, while living in Sweden and participating thanks to the Swedish members (on one occasion I was even introduced to a newcomer as a Swede). The dual role of participant-observer / insider-outsider, made me feel insecure about how to behave, and how closely I should interact with them. The dual character of being Spanish-Swedish, made them see me as an interlocutor for the other partner I represented since I "could understand his culture," as Lepidus, a Swedish trade union representative, put it when asking me to mediate between her and Lucius concerning another research project. They both spoke fluent German and knew each other from previous work, but Lepidus still wanted me to talk to Lucius as "you understand my Swedish view and his culture." This dual character which I perceived as problematic at the beginning, showed to be an advantage since it allowed me to access information which otherwise would have been difficult to obtain.

¹¹⁴ Kelly and McGrath 1985.

Such ambiguity gradually disappeared, with my presence, questions and uncomfortable e-mails becoming taken for granted, a given part of the workshops and even a target for jokes. Since they themselves were researchers, I did not encounter the suspicion, skepticism and mockery that other ethnographic researchers often face.¹¹⁵ On the contrary, they ended up approaching to me with suggestions on what I should do, ask and look for when researching them. Calpurnia tipped me on filming, Portia on considering gender differences and Tullius on reflecting upon the proximity between personality and culture. The observed became observers of my own work! This could be made for a beautiful case of simultaneous anthropology. I listened to their suggestions and followed their reasoning. Often these gave me a deeper insight on their reflections and thoughts concerning what was going on in the workshop, moving me closer to their sense-making process.

Being in the field can be a tense and hard time, sapping one's emotional energy.¹¹⁶ One of the most controversial accounts of such tension is Malinowski's diary, *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* (1967). Although he spent his career building the image of the ethnographer as an empathetic person who is extremely sensitive to the world of the natives, and is patient and tactful with them, the posthumous publication of his diary showed the human drama that doing field work may imply. Malinowski only wrote rude words about the people he studied, was crude and far from empathetic. He spent most of his time wishing he were elsewhere. This shows the pressure of being in the field, the diary used as an escape, a peaceful way to distance oneself from the locals, to keep being an outsider while acting as an insider. My experience in the field has not been as dramatic as that of Bronislaw Malinowski, but still I experienced some uneasiness.

LIKE A STONE IN THEIR SHOES. Mounting the video camera, placing the tape player in the middle of the room, changing the cassettes when they finished and clicked, requesting of the group the extra effort of answering my e-mails (as if they didn't have enough work already), asking for their time to talk

¹¹⁵ Van Maanen tells us of those from the field using epithets such as "dull visitors," "hopeless dummies," "social creeps" or "management spies" to describe the researcher carrying out ethnographic work (Van Maanen 1988, p.2).

¹¹⁶ Sanday 1979.

about matters other than those they were there for... I often had the feeling that I was disturbing them in their intense work, especially since they met for only a few, concentrated days. As time went by I learnt how to hang around, how to ask, and by the end of the research I sometimes even forgot what I was there for. On one occasion at the meeting in Bath, while conversing happily over a glass of wine just before dinner, one member woke me up with a sudden “so now, what do you see in us?”

FEELING LIKE A GOSSIPMONGER. As my presence became more natural, I could ask more sensitive questions. Sometimes they simply came to me to tell me how they felt about something or someone else. Although getting important information, I felt like it was gossiping. I felt sort of like a priest, when someone confessed to me “I haven’t done my exercise since I didn’t read the document.”

INTRODUCING ME AND MY RESEARCH. Correctly introducing oneself and one’s research project is very important in two respects. It is a way to legitimise one’s research and one’s presence. “Who am I to do this?” as Agar puts the problem of authority.¹¹⁷ It also set the scene for me to get the right information and not the information they thought I wanted. I was not interested in cultural stereotypes, so I did not want them to tell me theirs. I could easily be seen as a seeker of racial problems like when, in one of my first interviews with another group, the interviewee abruptly interrupted me to say “Here, we don’t have any problem. Everybody is equally treated” with his arms crossed in a defensive gesture and a cold face.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TRANSLATOR AND TRANSLATED. I had added uneasiness due to my translator hat. The relationship between translator and translated is a tortuous one that could be the subject of another thesis. Sometimes I faced suspicious mistrust on the literacy of the translated words: “Translator, traitor.” Other times I was his chum, “We’ll show them how we South Europeans are!”

¹¹⁷ Agar 1996.

INTERPRETING THE FIELD MATERIAL

Knorr-Cetina and Callon & Latour dismiss the idea of the micro-macro distinction as being one of levels. For Knorr-Cetina that means acknowledging the way our typifications of macro-phenomena influence participant actions and interactions in the micro-situation. For Callon and Latour that means following the chain of micro-situations until they translate into the macro. All of these authors advocate the here and now. They focus on the local; on the micro-episodes. They do not search for hidden structures.¹¹⁸ Their strategy is coherent with Wittgenstein's advice, "look and see." The surface is rewarded with the respect it deserves. Such a view has direct consequences on how the field material is to be interpreted.

Recalling from Chapter I: First, words *do* things. I focused on how the researchers, in their discussions, *did* things with words. Confronted with the field material I went back and forth between questions like "What do they do when they use the term 'culture' here?" "What are they doing when they say this or that in this situation?" "What do they talk about and what do they avoid talking about?" "How do their saying 'x' constructs the situation?" or "What needs to be motivated again and again?" In such a way, "culture," "cultural diversity" and other terms are treated as typifications (in Knorr-Cetina's sense) or sense-making devices used by the participants in the concrete situation. We see how the macro influences the micro.

Second, meaning is *use*. Meaning is not a mental image, nor is understanding a mental process. Meaning is the linguistic practices and actions around the use of words. To study the development of a shared meaning of the participants' research phenomenon, contingent employment, I have focused on their use of that term, "contingent employment." Inspired by Wittgenstein's later philosophy and Latour's empirical implementation of it, I follow a circulating reference. My reference, however, is of a different nature than that of Latour's natural scientists. Mine is not tangible in the same sense a crumb of earth, or rats, can be, but as intangible as words and concepts are. My referent is the expression "contingent employment," a phenomenon that

¹¹⁸ For this reason, I have chosen not to talk about intentions behind actions of group members. These are not open to the eye; they do not pertain to the surface. Otherwise we would be able to read people's thoughts and intentions as we read them in a comic. Besides, Wittgenstein's view of language, condensed in the formula "meaning = use," advocates the importance of the surface, of the concrete here and now, of the circumstances of use. His advice "Look and see," as we saw in Chapter I, re-proves every attempt to search for hidden structures and occult dimensions.

my researchers tried to understand. This has helped me select and prioritise among the immense amount of empirical material. More importantly, “contingent employment” has been the link across micro-episodes. By following it, and looking at the circumstances of its use, I have been able to see the organising process of an international project group. We see how the micro is translated into the macro.

Summarising. Culture, in the interpretation of the field material, will not be considered a transcendent macro-structure telling why those in the field act, feel and perceive the way they do. Instead, I have observed group members and listened to what they said, noting their arguments and justifications. In the analysis, I have used culture only to the extent they used it themselves to make plans, legitimate their actions, justify their doings, etc.¹¹⁹ Acknowledging the performative nature of language dissolves the micro and macro distinction by treating both alike.

PRESENTATION OF THE FIELD MATERIAL

“Notes for a Play.” Those are the first words of this thesis. The theatre world has been used by many as a metaphor to interpret field material.¹²⁰ Reality is seen through concepts such as act, scene, agent, agency and purpose,¹²¹ or frontstage, backstage, performance, character, role, public and impression management.¹²² I have used the theatre metaphor for another aim: to present the field material so that it emphasises the surface.

The primacy of the surface traduces into a strategy which elevates the concrete situation to the importance of the macro phenomenon; a strategy that sinks the general structure to the level of the micro-episode. It means focusing on the here and now. It means treating the everyday with attention and care. It means building up a story with things that might seem most trivial. Theatre often does that. It makes us laugh, cry and reflect upon the banal details that inundate a normal life. The micro is placed at the centre.

¹¹⁹ See Ch. 7.

¹²⁰ For a recent example see Schwartz 1997.

¹²¹ Burke’s pentad (Burke 1945, *A grammar of motives*).

¹²² Goffman 1959.

Chronology, the main organisational device of any story and certainly of a play, fits with the unfolding of micro situations. The chain of events is best presented chronologically. Chapters 4 and 5 follow that structure; together they tell the story of the group's organising process as it develops. Chapters 6 and 7, each deal with one aspect of that story – identity, or the character of the actors, in Chapter 6; “culture,” or the use of a representation, in Chapter 7. Chapter 6 goes back to the beginning of the story and presents that particular aspect as it changes chronologically.

Controversy comes with the theatre metaphor. What is my role in the play? As a participant in the workshops I would be another *actor* – a secondary actor though since my performance in the play does not set the stage for the performance of the rest. Their performance, however, sets the stage for mine. As an observer of the group, my place is within the *audience*¹²³ – yet, a rather involved audience. I mingled and discussed with the actors, and I was the “English voice” (interpreter) of one of them. As Lucius' interpreter, I would be the *prompter* – although a rather active one. When confusion arose concerning what Lucius meant by his remarks, the group gave us time to take the discussion in Spanish. I would then turn to the group to report what Lucius meant, or what I thought he meant. As a researcher of the group interaction, my role is that of an *author*. After all, it is I who select and condense the events that make up the story. It seems I am a bit of all four, at least aware of the multiplicity in perspective and the polyphony of the field.

My prompter and actor roles raise questions about the influence I have had on the group interacting process. How much of a participant have I been? Atkinson and Hammersley, however, question the dichotomy participant vs. non-participant observation, for it seems to imply that non-participant observers play no role at all. They argue that, in a sense, all social research is a form of participant observation, because we cannot study the social world without being part of it. Participant observation is seen not as a particular research technique, but as a mode of being-in-the-world characteristic of re-searchers.¹²⁴

The relevant question thus is not whether or not I have influenced the group. Sure I did - just as much as they influenced me. Nor is it relevant

¹²³ Agar sees the ethnographer as a professional stranger (Agar 1996).

¹²⁴ Atkinson and Hammersley 1994.

what kind of influence their has been. This second question would be hard to answer, as I cannot be with the group to tell how its members behave without my observant and participant presence. The relevant question would be “Is it possible at all to delimit the researcher from the researched?” I observed group members, asked them questions, wondered about their doings and their sayings, but so did they. They observed me, wondered about what I was doing, speculated about what I saw, and posed me questions to me. This thesis, as most ethnographic research, is the result of such an interaction – an interaction where everyone involved was influenced.¹²⁵ That is the implicit purpose of ethnographic research - to get access to the various layers of meanings in the field. Hence, it does not suffice being a passive observer. The ethnographer must be an active listener and a diligent dialogue partner in order to get closer to the actors’ meaning-making process and build his/her own story from it.

ON SCIENTIFIC CLAIMS

“Among all possible stories to be played,” you may ask, “why should we trust the one you offer us? What makes it scientific?” To answer this legitimate, yet unpleasant question, let me start with a small detour.

One father, two sons. Today the Latin word *ex-plicare* has two uses. The first one, explanation, is often found in science, especially in the natural sciences (but since natural sciences have long been the model for social sciences, this type of discourse is also found among them).¹²⁶ It aims at supporting with theories and hypotheses the phenomenon of reality we want to understand. It explains with cause-effect laws and has the ambitious pretension of universalism. It often endorses a correspondence theory of truth; that linguistic symbols correspond to non-linguistic artefacts and facts.¹²⁷

More loyal to etymology is the second use of *ex-plicare*. *Plica* is synonymous to fold, or crinkle. A long time ago, books consisted of a long papyrus which was rolled in at both ends. To read it, one had to roll out the right end, unfolding the papyrus. This use of the term is common in everyday life, like

¹²⁵ Much has been written about this. For the curious reader, see Jeffcutt 1994, or Clifford and Marcus 1986.

¹²⁶ Latour 1991.

¹²⁷ The correspondence theory of truth is a consequence of the subject-object duality, where meaning is seen as the object co-existing with the word (see Chapter 1).

when we say “to explain a film,” unfolding the story of the book, the film, a happening, an idea or a concept and their connections to other books, films, happenings, ideas or concepts. It supports with narratives the event we want to understand. It explains (or should I say “explicates”?) with descriptions and stories and has the humble desire to understand a particular event with and within all its complexity of relations and connections. Cause-effect laws are replaced by narrative sequentiality; at best they are but a special type of narrative sequence. Metaphors and rhetoric tropes are resources used to deepen understanding, invalidating the correspondence theory of truth. Instead, it advocates a coherence theory of truth; that is, the course of the drama is consistent with a sequence of non-fictional things and events.¹²⁸ Since understanding is attained by portraying the unfolding of the phenomenon, “Why” questions become “How” questions. To answer “why X?” is to describe the flow of events, to tell a narrative of X, to deploy how X came to be; the chronological ordering of events suggesting some sort of causality.

Bruner maintains that both descendants of *explicare*, explanation and explication, correspond to two distinct modes of thought: the scientific and the narrative.¹²⁹ Lyotard, however, in his famous report on knowledge requested by the government of Quebec,¹³⁰ showed how even scientific thought, which boasts so much about having eliminated every kind of superstitious tale to account for knowledge, legitimates itself with a big narrative of human progress and emancipation. He showed that scientific knowledge used the same legitimising devices as those used by the discredited popular knowledge. Latour goes a step further revealing that the distinction between moderns and pre-moderns, scientists and primitive folk, what he calls the second Modernity’s Great Divide, is a mere chimera.¹³¹ Science and narration, after all, are not as distinct as Bruner suggests!

Etymology and legitimating discourse blurs the borders between science and narration. Interpretation and explanation might be closer than they have been thought to be, the cause-effect relation being just a special case of narrative sequentiality. I agree with Czarniawska-Joerges when she emphasises that “‘science’ is not separated from ‘narrative’ by an abyss; over and above

¹²⁸ Bruner 1986.

¹²⁹ Bruner 1986.

¹³⁰ Lyotard 1979.

¹³¹ Latour 1991.

the publisher's classification, we also attribute a work to a certain genre according to the frequency with which it uses certain rhetorical devices."¹³² Through the veins of science and narration, "explanation" and "interpretation," cause-effect laws and a narrative sequence, runs the same blood. If science serves itself with the same devices as folk-stories and literature, the problem of the demarcation of science loses sense. The question is not "What is the difference between science and any other kind of knowledge?" but "What are the criteria that make an account scientific?"

VERISIMILITUDE

Verisimilitude¹³³ is the appearance of truth or authenticity; truth likeness; plausibility; life-likeness; a neutral and consistent account of the events and facts studied. As Bruner eloquently puts it, "Verisimilitude is the mark of whether the illusion of reality is working."¹³⁴

After Thomas Kuhn's influential book,¹³⁵ the idea that scientific knowledge is socially constructed is quite widespread, even if he never actually mentioned the expression "social construction" in his masterpiece. Some philosophers and scientists welcomed the challenge set forth by Kuhn, extending the domain of Sociology to the laboratory. An excellent example of the recently inaugurated discipline, the Sociology of Science, is Latour and Woolgar's *Laboratory Life*.¹³⁶ It tells how neuro-endocrinologists construct scientific facts in their everyday interactions and conversations. Having admitted the constructed nature of knowledge, I am aware that the story offered here is my own construction of other people's constructions of what they and their colleagues are up to. It is not correspondent truth that is in question here; but rather the verisimilitude of the account presented.

To reach verisimilitude, to deploy a consistent and plausible account of what happened in the field, one can follow two strategies. The first one consists of trying to get as near as possible to the actors' constructions. The second one consists of seriously reflecting on the biases introduced in my

¹³² Czarniawska-Joerges 1995, p. 14.

¹³³ Once again etymology can help us to understand the differences and similarities between the current two uses of one original word. In some Latin languages, two words derive from the Latin *veritas*, *verdad* and *verosimilitud* in Spanish, which respectively correspond to the English *truth* and *verisimilitude*.

¹³⁴ Bruner 1998.

¹³⁵ Kuhn 1962.

¹³⁶ Latour and Woolgar 1979.

own constructions of theirs, and openly presenting them to the reader. To follow through with both strategies, I have looked for inspiration in ethnography. Going to the field, collecting the stories people tell there, observing and taking notes of the things they do and trying to be one of them, is an important part of the ethnographic work. How do anthropologists then strive for a verisimile account of what they have seen, heard and done? To paraphrase Bruner, how do they mark whether the illusion of reality is working?

1. RELATIONIST. “Thick description” is the answer given by one of the most prominent anthropologists. In the amusing opening to the first chapter of his book, Clifford Geertz compares ethnography with the flood of details needed to distinguish a wink from a twitch, from a parody of a wink or the rehearsal of it.¹³⁷ The object of ethnography, he says, is “... a stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures in terms of which twitches, winks, fake-winks, parodies or rehearsals are produced, perceived, and interpreted, and without which they would not in fact exist, no matter what anyone did or didn’t do with his eyelids.”¹³⁸

That leads us to the view of the ethnographic account as *relationistic*, as opposed to relativistic.¹³⁹ Detail in the deployment of a process implies “relating to,” depicting the unfolding of the matter and its subsequent connections and relations – describing the links across micro-episodes. It pleads for a description that *explicates*, in the etymological sense of the term, by relating and connecting situations, things and actors.¹⁴⁰

Without drowning into the flood of detail of “thick description,” a relationist account presents contexts, describes situations and deploys relations. It gives the reader closer access to the material the researcher uses to construct her narrative, giving the reader the possibility of reinterpreting it. A dialogue between the reader and the text is favoured.

2. POLYPHONY...or letting the voices from the field be heard. Reality is abundant, giving rise to a multiplicity of opinions and experiences of the

¹³⁷ Geertz 1973.

¹³⁸ Geertz 1973b, p. 7.

¹³⁹ Latour 1993.

¹⁴⁰ Latour 1988.

same event. If the illusion of reality is to work, it must reflect the variety of participant views and perspectives. If plausibility is to be fended, it must open up to the standpoints of those involved. Moreover, the plurality of voices evidences the dichotomies and tensions of real life, which contributes to increased narrative suspense.

To achieve this, I have tried to be loyal to the interests, opinions and experiences of the protagonist of this research story. To hear the plurality of voices from the field, I present direct quotations, which is something characteristic of scientific texts. In addition, direct quotations allow the reader to contrast the author interpretations with what has been interpreted.

3. WEAVING THEORY AND FIELD MATERIAL. On the occasion of the first Social Science Prize award of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1974, Clifford Geertz presented a paper titled *On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding*.¹⁴¹ There, he distinguishes between “experience-near” and “experience-distant” concepts. The distinction is equivalent to that of first-order and second-order concepts,¹⁴² the first ones being those concepts spontaneously used by the people in the field when they define what they or their colleagues see, feel, think, imagine, and so on; the second ones being the concepts employed by the researcher to forward what those in the field do and refer to.

The question Geertz then addresses concerns the role played by both types of concepts in how anthropological analysis is conducted and how its results are framed. Geertz notices the characteristic intellectual swing between the terrestrial and concrete detail and the far and transcendent scientist jargon, bringing both into view simultaneously. Jumping back and forth between the whole and the parts, and the parts and the whole, with a continuous intellectual movement, the analyst seeks to turn them into explications of one another. Geertz’s argument is that this perpetual back-and-forth motion is typical of the hermeneutic circle central for interpretation, be it biblical, historical, literary, psychoanalytic or ethnographic.

Translating this idea into writing results in the weaving of the theoretical and empirical realms, showing the back-and-forth to the reader. Back and

¹⁴¹ Geertz 1975.

¹⁴² Van Maanen 1979.

forth from the detailed experience-near concepts to the more general experience-distant ones; swinging between field material and theory. This back-and-forth is essential to understanding the protagonists from their own stance, and how the researcher has made sense of it.

Furthermore, presenting the concrete practices behind the researcher's interpretation, and the theories supporting such interpretation, can serve as a device to reach contextual/textual legitimisation of the interpretation presented. This gives the author a chance to illustrate and defend why a certain theory is adequate to understand the phenomenon at hand. Theory widens and deepens as the story of the field unfolds, and it is through the simultaneous deployment of theory and field data that the reader may judge the verisimilitude of my interpretation.

4. OBJECTIVITY. No matter how strange this word may sound in an interpretive study, objectivity is central for verisimilitude, although objectivity in a slightly different sense: letting the protagonists of the story object to the author's account of it. In a laboratory, Latour tells us, things stubbornly object the theories and hypotheses of the natural scientist, allowing him to alter, transform or refine them until the things cease in their obstinate objection.¹⁴³ I presented my interpretation to the people I studied, allowing them to object to my account and contribute to its change, transformation or refinement. This process opens up the possibility of entering into a fruitful dialogue between scientists and practitioners. The consistency of group members' feedback with the final story told here gives evidence to verisimilitude.¹⁴⁴

Giving a relationist description, letting the polyphony of the field speak, weaving the material I construct from with the instruments I construct with, and letting the field object, all contribute to the cohesion of the scientific narrative. All four devices uphold the internal fit of the story presented and give the reader a chance to reinterpret, which I consider to be the best guarantee of verisimilitude.

¹⁴³ Latour 2000.

¹⁴⁴ The *Appendix* presents the objections of group members and shows their consistency with the interpretation offered in this thesis.

A NOVEL READING

“Another story. What makes this one worth reading?” As I see it, one of the contributions of research is the opportunity to study old riddles from a new perspective; the reformulating of old problems. The researcher brings to the field what Barbara Czarniawska calls a “novel reading.”¹⁴⁵ an account from a person that is not socialised into the same system of meaning, but is familiar enough with it to recognise it as a system of meaning. The gap between the researcher’s account and the account of those researched is a source of knowledge that introduces a new insight to an ancient shadow.

The point of all these efforts, however, is to come up not with “improved” stories from the field, but rather with a kind of alternative or competitive story in order to engage in a dialogue with the field. In such a dialogue, both genres – of theory and practice – can develop.¹⁴⁶

A novel reading enriches the dialogue between the scientist and the practitioner, and expands the conversation among scientists. My story is a novel one. The question I ask about an old phenomenon (human interaction in international groups) takes an unusual form: “How does the organising process of an international project group develop?” The second question, “What role does cultural diversity play in that process?”, can be answered only within the framework set by the first. Compare it to the most common cause-effect form: “What is the effect of cultural diversity on group interaction?”¹⁴⁷ My question opens up for narrative explication, whereas the most usual formulation leads to causal explanation.

Any concrete question presupposes a given perspective. As Johan Asplund argues,¹⁴⁸ you may try to establish to what extent there is a struggle among social classes in the industrialised State, but first you must have looked at society with Marx’s lenses; or, you may interview a sample of western men about their feelings towards their parents, yet you must first agree that family relationships may be seen as Freud saw them. It may happen that you find neither an Oedipus complex nor a class struggle. Still, it remains possible to see family relationships analogously to the myth of Oedipus. Likewise,

¹⁴⁵ Czarniawska 1998.

¹⁴⁶ Czarniawska-Joerges 1995, p. 19.

¹⁴⁷ See for instance Watson, Kumar and Michaelsen 1993.

¹⁴⁸ Asplund 1970, p. 127-128.

social reality may be seen as a class struggle. One would have accepted those perspectives when the question was posed. The question origin of my story is not causal; it does not presuppose a cause-effect mechanism between cultural diversity and human interaction. It is a performative question; it acknowledges the performative nature of language (which is a form of human interaction). A way to warrant a novel reading is to pose a novel question. As Asplund concludes, “routine science, with its proofs and receipts, is necessary. But at the beginning there was perspective.”¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁹ “Rutinvetenskapen, med sina belägg och kvitton, är nödvändig. Men i begynnelsen var aspektseendet” (Asplund 1970, p.128).



SETTING THE STAGE



BACKGROUND: THE SAL TSA PROGRAMME

SAL TSA is a programme for research on working life in Europe. It is a collaboration between the Swedish National Institute for Working Life and Sweden's central trade unions, that is, LO (the Swedish Trade Union Confederation), SACO (the Swedish Confederation of Professional Associations) and TCO (the Swedish Confederation of Professional Employees).

The SAL TSA programme encompasses three research areas, all connected with the conditions of working life: the Labour Market Programme, the Work Organisation Programme and the Programme for Work Environment and Health. The first of these three programmes concerns monitoring European employment strategies, scrutinising member states' compliance with EU labour law and observing the implications of economic and monetary union for the functioning of the labour market. The second programme, Work Organisation, studies the processes leading to segregation and exclusion from the labour market, as well as investigates the actual changes in the opportunities of employees to exert influence at work. Finally, the programme for work environment and health focuses on migration and on the health consequences of working life.

All this writing about SAL TSA is not gratuitous propaganda. In fact, the group of researchers that we are going to follow for over a year is the result of the efforts of this collaboration. The group actually got together, and their first meetings were possible, thanks to the SAL TSA people and funds. They

were from the very beginning inserted into the Work Organisation Programme.

In a marine-blue and wine-red pamphlet, under the heading “A European Perspective,” the SALTSA collaboration makes clear that:

Starting from a European perspective, the programme is to conduct problem-oriented research in the field of the labour market, employment, work organisation and the work environment and health. One condition of the programme is collaboration with international research institutes and close contacts with European institutions, organisation and industry.

The programme demands close co-operation between the world of research and the trade union organisations. In this way, a link will be established with the practicalities of working life.

Again, this is not gratuitous information. It is to point out three characteristics of the joint programme that tell much about the circumstances under which our group got together.

First of all, the programme is “to conduct problem-oriented research.” So much is this so that, contrary to the customary, it is not an already organised group who went to a research funding institution in order to get funds. Rather, it was SALTSA who actively looked for people interested in investigating a broadly defined research area (or “problem” as they like to call it), that of contingent employment.

Secondly, SALTSA made a point of researching from a “European perspective” and being a “collaboration with international research institutes.” I would instead have stated “an international collaboration with research institutes” since, in their search for researchers, they went to universities and research institutes in various European countries and in the United States.

It was SALTSA who defined the problem area, travelled to several countries to find someone interested in the matter and set up the initial conditions for the group that was formed. Most group members had never met before, nor had they discussed their concerns and research interests. When they, in September 1998, first met at a SALTSA Conference in Åkersberga, Sweden, the only thing they knew about each other was that they were all interested in contingent employment, and that they were going to try to work together. They were unaware of how the others focused the research problem, what methodology they preferred, how they were used to working, how much time they were ready to invest, how deep their interest was in this specific

research project, etc. The initial stage was thus one of incertitude about the commitments of the group members. That would later be a matter that would often come up in group discussions. “We need to discuss to create commitment, even if it sometimes may seem too much talk,” as Artemidorus put it.

A third characteristic of the SALTSA programme that I find relevant is the demand of a “close cooperation between the world of research and the trade union organisations” in order to establish a link “with the practicalities of working life.” This desire was translated into the fact that trade union representatives were being invited to join the researchers in the workshops. Their task, though, was not to define the concrete research question or to help redact the research proposal. Nor was it to help set up the project. Trade union representatives were present to remind the group of the initial problem and of what their interests in the project were. After all, it was trade unions that partially financed the workshops.

My study does not pay too much attention to trade union representatives. Their contributions were extremely sporadic and most of the e-mails were exchanged between researchers. Therefore, when I speak of “the group” I refer only to the researchers. They were the ones narrowing down the research question, setting up the research project and writing together a research proposal for EU funds. That is, they were the ones involved in the factual definition and organisation of the project.

STRUCTURE OF AN ACT: WORKSHOP IN UPPSALA

The first time I met our “actors” was during the workshop in Uppsala. For some of them it was their first workshop. For others, it was the second. The workshop in Uppsala lasted two and a half days. Meetings and discussions were intensive and lively, and although much work was on the agenda, there was always time for a coffee break, a historical walk in town, a nice dinner or even a sauna!

Participants arrived on Thursday afternoon. Flights across Europe do not all land at the same time, let alone those coming from the other side of the Atlantic. Therefore, the first hours of the afternoon were spent calmly waiting for the others, drinking some coffee and lightly conversing. The North Americans took a nap to recover from the long trip and to adjust to the

jetlag. We were all gathered at the same hotel, which made it easier for everyone to keep track of each other. When everybody had finally arrived and the North Americans had rested a while, we met at a big table and went around introducing each other for the newcomers. That first afternoon was relaxed, with the host of the event shortly going through the history of the town. Then came a presentation of what had been done since the previous meeting, changes in the project description and where the group was in terms of the grant application process or in the project planning. They discussed possible new members, briefly presented the main practical/operational problems that were to be discussed in the workshop and consulted the meeting agenda.

All of Friday was spent working on the definition of the project, discussing how the project tasks should be divided, distributing responsibilities, setting milestones and deadlines, etc. To make the work and the design of the project go further, the group split up into two smaller groups. The frequent coffee breaks and lunches did not stop the continuous work. In the evening, we went to the pub, had a glass of wine or a beer and chatted lively. Dinner at the same hotel followed, and the talk continued until well after the meal. The talking continued until the workshop was over on Saturday afternoon. Besides work and discussion, on Saturday after lunch, some time was reserved for a historical sightseeing tour and a tranquil walk. Some participants abandoned the place after the workshop, and others left on Sunday morning.

After the Uppsala workshop in January 1999, similar workshops were to come: in Marstrand in April that same year, followed by Bath in September and Seville in April 2000. I left the group after the Seville meeting. They continued meeting in The Netherlands and in Sweden.

ACTS

A few months before the first act, in September 1998, a workshop was held in Åkersberga, Sweden. Present in that occasion were Artemidorus, Calpurnia, Flavius, Messala, Pindarus, Portia, Tullius.

In January 1999 the group held a second workshop. The scene is the conference room of a hotel in Uppsala, Sweden. It is during this workshop that the need to get research funds other than SALTSA is acknowledged. The play begins at this moment. Present from the previous workshop are Artemi-

dorus, Calpurnia, Flavius, Messala, Pindarus, Tullius. Some new characters have joined in: Lucius, Trebonius and myself.

The second act is played in Marstrand, Sweden, March 1999. The characters in this act are Artemidorus, Calpurnia, Flavius, Lucius, Messala, Pindarus, Portia, Trebonius, Tullius and myself.

The third act is played in Bath, United Kingdom, September 1999. Present characters from previous acts are Artemidorus, Calpurnia, Flavius, Lucius, Messala, Pindarus, Portia, Trebonius, Tullius and myself. New to the play are Cinna and Casca. Varro, also a newcomer, arrived late in the evening of the second to last day.

A few weeks after the third act, the group of researchers was awarded a grant from the European Union. More meetings were to be held. These are though outside the time frame of the play since the group had already completed their first purpose. Yet, I participated in the next workshop, that held in Seville, Spain, in April 2000. Present at that workshop were Artemidorus, Flavius, Lucius, Messala, Pindarus, Portia, Trebonius, Tullius Varro and myself. Newcomers to the workshop were Volumnius, Junius and Aurelia.

CHARACTERS

A brief list of the characters in the play follows. I have changed the real names of the researchers into those of the characters in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. I could have opted for typical names from their countries of origin, such as Sven, John and José, but I dismissed this possibility: it could easily evoke cultural stereotypes in the reader, distracting him/her from the actual organising process.

ARTEMIDORUS

Country of origin: Sweden.

Gender: male.

Age: mid-fifties.

Affiliation: Professor, School of Economics and Commercial Law, Gothenburg University.

Education: PhD in Management.

SETTING THE STAGE

Languages spoken: Swedish, fluent English.

Other: Pindarus' professor.

First meeting with the group: January 1999, Uppsala.

CALPURNIA

Country of origin: United States.

Gender: female.

Age: early forties.

Affiliation: Professor of Management, University of CalPoly.

Education: PhD in Human Resources.

Languages spoken: English.

Other: large amount of teaching obligations, which make it difficult to take a week off to attend the workshops.

First meeting with the group: January 1999, Uppsala.

CASCA

Country of origin: United Kingdom.

Gender: female.

Age: late thirties.

Affiliation: Bristol Business School, University of the West of England.

Education: PhD.

Languages spoken: English.

Other: works with Portia.

First meeting with the group: September 1999, Bath.

CINNA

Country of origin: Spain.

Gender: female.

Age: early thirties.

Affiliation: Lecturer at the University of Seville.

Education: Finishing PhD in Labour Law, due year 2000.

Languages spoken: Spanish.

Other: has worked closely with Lucius for her PhD thesis.

First meeting with the group: September 1999, Bath.

FLAVIUS

Country of origin: Sweden.

Gender: male.

Age: early thirties.

Affiliation: Full-time researcher, Dept. of Business Administration,
School of Economics and Commercial Law, University of Gothenburg.

Education: PhD in Management.

Languages spoken: Swedish, fluent English, semi-fluent German.

Other: simultaneously involved in two other projects.

First meeting with the group: January 1999, Uppsala.

LUCIUS

Country of origin: Spain.

Gender: male.

Age: late fifties.

Affiliation: Professor at the University of Seville.

Education: PhD in Labour Law.

Languages spoken: Spanish, fluent German, semi-fluent English.

Other: author of several books on Spanish labour law and labour market.

First meeting with the group: January 1999, Uppsala.

MESSALA

Country of origin: United States.

Gender: female.

Age: early thirties.

Affiliation: College of Business, University of CalPoly.

Education: PhD within Human Resources.

Languages spoken: English.

Other: large amount of teaching obligations, which make it difficult to take a week off to attend the workshops.

First meeting with the group: January 1999, Uppsala.

PINDARUS

Country of origin: Sweden.

Gender: male.

Age: early thirties.

SETTING THE STAGE

Affiliation: PhD Candidate at the Gothenburg University.

Education: PhD student in Management.

Languages spoken: Swedish, fluent English.

Other: before starting his PhD he worked for a year in an agency for temporary work.

First meeting with the group: January 1999, Uppsala.

PORTIA

Country of origin: United Kingdom.

Gender: female.

Age: mid-fifties.

Affiliation: Professor of Employment Studies, Bristol Business School, University of the West of England.

Education: PhD in Sociology.

Languages spoken: English, semi-fluent Italian.

Other: received her professorship while the project was already in progress, married to Tullius.

First meeting with the group: March 1999, Marstrand.

TREBONIUS

Country of origin: The Netherlands.

Gender: male.

Age: mid-thirties.

Affiliation: full-time researcher and lecturer, Dept. of Business and Organisation,

Erasmus University of Rotterdam.

Education: PhD in Management.

Languages spoken: Dutch, fluent English, semi-fluent German.

Other: after finishing his PhD, he worked for a couple of years in a consultancy. A year before the project began he returned back to academia to work under Varro. In consultancy “there was no time to think.”

First meeting with the group: January 1999, Uppsala.

TULLIUS

Country of origin: United Kingdom.

Gender: male.

Age: late fifties.

Affiliation: Professor at the University of Bath.

Languages spoken: English.

Other: married to Portia.

First meeting with the group: January 1999, Uppsala.

VARRO

Country of origin: The Netherlands.

Gender: male.

Age: mid-forties.

Affiliation: Professor of Human Resource Management,
Erasmus University of Rotterdam.

Education: PhD in Human Resources Management.

Languages spoken: Dutch, fluent English, semi-fluent German.

Other: extremely busy with other consultancy and teaching activities.

First meeting with the group: September 1999, Bath.

SUMMING UP THE INITIAL STAGE SETTING

The play we are about to follow starts with a group of people all within the world of social science, all with various biographies in many aspects: education, culture, gender, age, length of experience, etc. Each brings his/her own personal history to the play.

Most of our actors had never met before. It was the SALTSA programme that put them together, and not a mutual knowledge of sharing a common research interest. Thus, they have not previously worked together and do not know how the others work or what perspective the others have when focusing the research question. Nor do they have a clearly defined research phenomenon, a specified set of routines or a structured hierarchy that can guide their interaction, especially in the initial stages where confusion pervades. In what follows, we will see their struggle to define a common research phenomenon, set up an international research project and organise the group.

Welcome to the play!

AN IMAGE JUMPS ONTO THE STAGE

- OR, ON A VAGUE BEGINNING



Let us revert to our question: “What is the object of a thought?” (e.g. when we say, “I think that King’s College is on fire”).

The question as we put it is already the expression of several confusions. This is shown by the mere fact that it almost sounds like a question of physics; like asking: “What are the ultimate constituents of matter?” (It is a typically metaphysical question; the characteristic of a metaphysical question being that we express an unclarity about the grammar of words in the form of a scientific question.)

Wittgenstein 1958, *The Blue and Brown Books*, p. 35

Don’t always think that you read off what you say from the facts; that you portray these in words according to rules. For even so you would have to apply the rule in the particular case without guidance.

Wittgenstein 1953, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 292

THE BIRTH OF AN IMAGE

(January 29, 1999, Uppsala, Sweden)

(Curtains open. On the stage, tables have been arranged in the form of a big “U.” In the open side of the “U” there is a blackboard and an overhead projector. Flavius stands by the projector. The rest of the group sits around the arranged table. They are all deeply absorbed in an animated discussion. It is windy and snow-white outside.)

FLAVIUS: Until now, we have only talked about the increasing use of contingent employment. But we should try to define what the phenomenon includes and doesn’t include.

MESSALA: In the States, contingent employment is a contract of leasing. You lease some employees for a period of time....

FLAVIOUS: But first we have to see what are the phenomena that we’re gonna study. And only then we can compare between countries.

PINDARUS: Maybe we should include seasonal employment

FLAVIOUS: Yes. That could be something to include. Also, another phenomenon to study is the marketisation of employment, that is, that the employer buys the employee's services.

TULLIUS: Why should we consider that?

FLAVIOUS: In my mind, we are talking about structural change, the way the labour market handles the employment contract.

TULLIUS: What about students? We could also include them.

PINDARUS: Yes. That would be a type of contract with no regularity.

TREBONIOUS: Is that your definition of contingent employment? As employment with no regularity, employment you cannot predict? But, if it were so, then you would rule out all seasonal work! Seasonal work means that they go back to the same boss, and thus there is regularity there.

FLAVIOUS: In my mind, it is not contingent employment if it is for instance a boom in the business. On the contrary, there has to be some regularity, 'cause otherwise we don't have any phenomena to study.

PORTIA: What about outsourcing? Are we including it in the phenomenon?

TULLIUS: There's no reason why outsourcing would mean lack of regularity. So you're right not to include it. On the other hand, there is more outsourcing because it is cheaper that way, and it is cheaper because they use contingent employment.

FLAVIOUS: Outsourcing may be a previous form, or maybe a start in the process...

(The discussion continues in the same animated terms.)

What is contingent employment? The first scene our actors play in our piece is intended to answer that, apparently simple, question. Still without any vision of what they are to study, the discussion about contingent employment is meant to define an objective for the group; to somehow establish where the group is going and what they are there for.

However, as Wittgenstein very well notes, questions like "What is contingent employment?" "What is X?" "What is the object of thought?" are a chimera. They adopt the form of scientific questions; their answers point to unique, precise, general definitions, definitions that will embrace all possible cases for contingent employment, X or the object of thought. A deeply rooted confusion lies there. Such questions are mere expressions of puzzlement:

That which is brought forward by an unclear use of the questioned terms. To clear up the puzzlement, the answers are not to be found in any single rule or criterion of definition. Instead, the answers are to be found by looking at the grammar of those terms. “Contingent employment,” “x” and “object of thought” remain vague until their actual uses are observed.

An added difficulty is inherent to the group of researchers on stage. The terms used in the researchers’ native tongues to refer to “contingent employment” are not always synonymous. Literally, the Swedish *tillfälligt arbete* translates to “temporary work,” and so do the Spanish expression *trabajo temporal* and the Dutch term *tijdelijke arbeid*. *Flexibele arbeid*, another common Dutch term, translates to “flexible labour.”

Yet “contingent,” “temporary” and “flexible” carry different nuances. A quick look in The Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary¹⁵⁰ gives us the following acceptations for the term “contingent:”

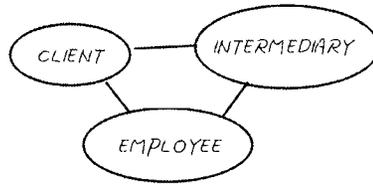
1. likely but not certain to happen. See “possible.”
2. not logically necessary; especially. See “empirical.”
3. happening by chance or unforeseen causes. Subject to chance or unseen effects. See “unpredictable.” Intended for use in circumstances not completely foreseen
4. dependent on or conditioned by something else.
5. not necessitated; determined by free choice. Synonym. See “accidental.”

Unpredictable, accidental, possible, conditional – all these significations may lead to temporality, but do not necessarily do so. In any case, the temporary aspect is not stressed. The word “temporary,” however, stresses very clearly such an aspect, its definition in the dictionary leaving no room for doubts: “lasting for a limited time.” And neither temporality, nor unpredictability or conditionally are nuances associated with the term “flexible” which in turn puts the accent on the “capability to adapt to new, different, or changing requirements.”

A single, general definition of “contingent employment” will prove, as we will see, troublesome. Not only may their home country situations and their national institutions differ - equivalent terms in their native languages stress various aspects of what they take to be the same phenomenon.

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Later on in that first workshop, Flavius suggests the following image as a way of thinking about their phenomenon of interest:



Pointing to the image projected by the overhead, Flavius announces “this is a proposal for a model of how the relationships between those involved in contingent employment go.” The discussion then switches character, becoming more concerned with what should be the focus of study: the organisational level? The employee relationships? Why not the relationship between the trade union and the employer? The final focus of their study is, however, not of interest for this thesis.

Let us look instead at how that image came to life. It has not been a birth void of difficulties. In fact, this is the story of a creating process filled with obstacles and how the group of researchers overcame them.

The vague and evasive nature of the term “contingent employment” was evident to the group from the very beginning. How were they going to consider the phenomenon – statically or dynamically; as a labour market, social or organisational solution to certain circumstances; a conjunctural or structural situation? How did trade unions come in? Besides its puzzling nature, “contingent employment” was an arduous concept to define. Initially, they tried to come up with some sort of criterion telling them when to include, and when not to include a labour relationship under the term “contingent employment.” Could such a criterion be the duration of the employment relationship, its regularity, or, maybe, the existence of an intermediary? Rather, shouldn’t it be more accurate to pay attention to the reason for the relationship, such as covering sickness, maternity leave or a business pick? There was not any clear-cut defining criterion. “Contingent employment” proved to be a slippery phenomenon that did not let itself be neither caught nor closed into a sharp and narrow definition.

Vacillations being too many, the group started dividing the phenomenon into parts (first named as “employee,” “client” and “intermediary”) and the relationships among these. In this way, “contingent employment” suddenly

took the analytical shape of independent, although related, entities. Analysis, the division of the whole into parts, became the group's way of managing the confusion and vagueness that seemed inherent to their research area. Instead of having a single contourless phenomenon, they had several bordered entities – although bordered only in appearance, as our researchers would soon discover.

(Back in the conference room...)

LUCIUS: We use two terms: temporary employer and user employer, because the functions of the real, the true employer are shared between the temporary employer and the user employer.

TULLIUS: I do not understand that.

MESSALA: Temporary employer is the agency?

LUCIUS: Yes, the agency. Temporary employer and real employer. The intermediary. But the term intermediary has negative connotations in Spain because before 1994 it was forbidden.

FLAVIUS: An interesting distinction the term 'intermediary' permits including is that between intermediaries, public agencies... – what do you call them? Arbetsförmedling ... – and I would also suggest to include recruitment consultants. It could be other kind of institutes and organisations that matches employer-employee together. It does not have to be a temporary agency.

TULLIUS: I am just worried that we might get lost with definitions. I thought that what we were saying about labour agency or intermediary was that they would both employ and supply a number of people required by the user. Ok. Now, that is different from the public sector or the recruitment agency, which simply says "We have a number of people in our books and we interview them and you can employ them." That's a normal... there is nothing new about that. What is new, what is structurally different, is then that the agency says, "We will supply you and your company with the people you need and supply it everyday." And that's what is different, the labour supply.

FLAVIUS: The important is the term 'intermediary' because it is the agent that mediates between employee and user. Then, there are different functions of intermediary. It might be a recruiter consultant which makes the selection, helps the selection process or job search process or something like that. It might be a public work agency which helps the individual to find a job. For example Manpower, which is what we'll call work firm, or temporary work firm, or temporary help industry firm or help service industry... whatever. It needs to be defined. That means if we have the term 'intermediary', it could have different functions and each individual [employee] could have different

relationships to their intermediary so there is an industry of intermediaries, which have certain strategies.

TREBONIUS: But I still don't see how the pure recruiters are agencies since they just provide labour, connect people. Nothing to do with contingent labour!

TULLIUS: But, but... I think we have to then include these recruitment agencies even if they just do the recruitment. Even if they simply link up people who want jobs with employers who want workers. Is that relevant to the study? My answer would be: it is only relevant to the study if it's then associated with the greater use of contingent labour by the employer, because the employer says, "Ok, I'll give you a job of six months... and I'll do that because I have a constant supply of people coming in. If I didn't have a constant supply then I might want to keep you for a long time." And what I am also saying is that, of course, people like Manpower, Decco, all the big players, play all of these functions.

PINDARUS: From the beginning we've been discussing how to describe the intermediary. We gave all these different forms, and there are very many different terms to describe intermediaries. That's why we could try to describe them in terms of function. What kind of function does the intermediary have in the labour market in relationship to contingent work?

(...)

Having agreed on the entities, into which they had divided the wider research phenomenon, our group faced similar difficulties as before. The "whos" inside the circles were unclear. Who were to be included within the "intermediary"? Selection agencies? Head hunters? Public services? Consultancies? After all, as the discussion continued, consultancies worked similarly to intermediaries: they rented out their own employees to work at another company. Who were to be considered under the "employee" label? Students in their summer jobs? Stationary workers? Consultants? If the defining criterion for "contingent employment" was the existence of an intermediary that rented out its employees to another company for a limited period of time, then consultants had to be considered temporary workers. This, however, went against normal use. Consultants were never seen as contingent employees! A similar difficulty lied in who used such type of employees. Along with the vagueness of each "who" came the dubiousness of the relationships among those "whos:" what types of contracts were to be included? Commercial? Labour? Subcontracting of services? Other areas that also remained vague lied outside the analytical-shaped image, such as the role played by trade

unions. What seemed to be a sharp image proved to have blurred and diffused contours. Vagueness had moved from the whole to each of its parts. That vagueness manifested itself into a discomfort towards the labels used, a discomfort grounded in the indeterminacy of the terms, which led the group to discuss them over and over. “Employee” transformed into “worker,” then “individual,” and again into “employee”; “client” changed to “user” having been “employer” in between; “intermediary” remained although not without agitated arguments and much discontent. “Contingent employment” had now a more or less precise form, three-circles joined by three lines, but its meaning remained vague and open, and so did the meaning of the diagram.

Another salient trait of their particular way of looking at “contingent employment” is its image appearance. The three-circles-three-lines image visualises a term which, given its slippery nature, had proven to be very hard to put into words. As the popular saying goes... The image allows them to handle that annoying and persisting vagueness they could not get rid of. It allows them to get a firm grip on something that obstinately floated in the air. A textual explanation did not provide them with a unified answer to the question of what “contingent employment” was. They could not even agree on a wordily explanation. Furnished with an image, the group could then deal with vagueness and answer the query.

(Meanwhile, on the stage...)

TREBONIUS: In practice, it might not be possible to find a coherent definition, but I think we have to understand the types of a new phenomenon. We have a new pattern. Maybe, for definition, we could work with the dichotomy core/periphery: what has moved out to the periphery and what never will.

FLAVIUS: It's in our interest to broaden up the definition of contingent employment 'cause it enhances the relevance of our work.

PINDARUS: Even more important. With a broad definition, the research can take several perspectives.

FLAVIUS: Important because if a narrow definition then... It is a methodology for all countries. We'll have to study the same for all countries, which might be absurd. Maybe a country wants to study other specific phenomena... So it's good with as a broad definition as possible.

(...)

All in all, maybe it is not the precise definition the researchers are looking for. As long as its form is sharp enough to allow the project to move on, the group is ready to accept, at least for the time being, a representation which remains vague. “Need the ostensive definition itself be understood?” Wittgenstein asks in *The Blue Book*,¹⁵¹ to which he answers in a marginal note in *Philosophical Investigations*. “Remember that we sometimes demand definitions for the sake not of their content, but of their form. Our requirement is an architectural one; the definition a kind of ornamental coping that supports nothing.”¹⁵² The group of researchers simply needs to have some common idea, however vague and imprecise it may be, as the cornerstone of the research proposal. That is how I understand Wittgenstein’s comment. The members will use the image as a building block for the future research project.¹⁵³ As an opposing argument, without some sort of definition, without a common way of looking at contingent employment, there is no place to start the research. Moreover, a research project with no clear description of its research object would, in the eyes of the EU, not be credible. The three-circle image is thus a practical solution to the managerial dilemma articulated by Stone and Brush:¹⁵⁴ The conflict between the need to use informality and vagueness to gain commitment from diverse interests (in our case, those of all group members), and the need to demonstrate formalisation to acquire legitimacy from critical resource suppliers (in our case, the EU funding organ).

In the first act the researchers discuss and try to agree on what “contingent employment” is, and what it is not. They engage in an intellectual argument, which is meant to settle a working definition that they can begin using in their project. They need to agree on a single definition, one they will all build upon in their subsequent national research projects. However, the definition has to be broad enough to permit several perspectives and to allow for the peculiarities of each participating country. In the following, I will further elaborate on three aspects of their construction process of contingent

¹⁵¹ Wittgenstein 1958, p.1.

¹⁵² Wittgenstein 1953, § 217.

¹⁵³ This is the object of Chapter 5: an extended analysis on how they use the image to organise and develop their future cooperation.

¹⁵⁴ Stone and Brush 1996.

employment: its inherent vagueness, its analytic form and its image appearance.

RULES THAT DO NOT GUIDE

– ON VAGUE DEFINITIONS

The story of how the three-circle image came about is the story of the group's attempt to define the object of their study; the definition they all had to agree upon to be able to work together. As Flavius remarked, "We must agree on a definition to be able to co-ordinate the various national studies."

In their effort to define "contingent employment," the first step they took was to look at various cases where the expression was used. That is, they looked at the grammar of "contingent employment," as Wittgenstein would have put it. So the group members started naming cases where companies such as Manpower, Acco or Proffice rented out their own personnel to companies such as Volvo, Siemens or Electrolux. In all cases the reasons for hiring temporary workers were to cover maternity leaves, sick leaves or maybe a business pick. So far, so good; but as they continued giving examples and describing the situation in their respective countries, they began to realise that certain cases which were explicitly forbidden by law in one country, could be common in another. The clearest example was found in the health sector: nurses. In Sweden the lack of nurses and their lower salaries if publicly employed, made most nurses go through employment agencies which could guarantee them higher salaries. In Spain, however, contingent employment was illegal in the public sector. Such differences were not discouraging though. All cases, Volvo or a hospital, Sweden or Spain, had in common that a company (which they would later label "intermediary") rented out personnel to another company (which they would come to label "user") for a limited period of time. Now they had their first criterion for a definition, an exact rule they could apply – or so they thought.

After having agreed upon a precise rule, they went on to look at another case: consultancies. These fulfilled the defining criterion. Andersen Consulting, McKinsey or any other of the smaller agencies rented out their own employees to Volvo, Siemens or Electrolux. This was also for limited periods of time, since often the contract was based on a concrete, already settled, project. But, "consultancies are not intermediaries," someone protested in

amazement. Puzzlement comes from constantly comparing our actual use of words to one following exact rules.¹⁵⁵ Amazement and confusion come from apparent contradictions in the use (or grammar) of “contingent employment,” or rather, of “intermediary.”¹⁵⁶ On one hand, when talking about “contingent employment,” we often think about not so highly qualified jobs, such as when we hear “In my department we went to Manpower to look for a secretary,” or “We went through a temporary agency to employ the porter.” “Contingent employment” here means some sort of dispensable job, one for which it is relatively easy to find a substitute. It indeed has connotations of a lower status. On the other hand, if the defining rule is strictly applied, consultancies must be included within “contingent employment.” Yet consultants are far from having a low status and they are certainly not seen as being under-qualified. The paradox between the use of “contingent employment” in everyday talk and the use of “contingent employment” according to a rule, is what puzzles our researchers and makes them uncomfortable. Such puzzlement and discomfort is then expressed with the thwarted question, “But... what is ‘contingent employment?’!”

It is not my goal with this thesis to clarify the grammar of “contingent employment,” nor of “intermediary.” The definition of “contingent employment,” or rather, the process of defining what they meant to study made clear how they were to use the term in their research. The question, “What is ‘x?’,” “What is ‘contingent employment?’,” is a misleading one, as seems to point to an all encompassing criterion that would give us the definite meaning of “x” (or “contingent employment” in our case). But, as Wittgenstein showed us, it is the concrete use that specifies the meaning of a term in a concrete situation.

¹⁵⁵ Wittgenstein 1958, p. 25-26

¹⁵⁶ “The man who is philosophically puzzled sees a law in the way a word is used and, trying to apply this law consistently, comes up against cases where it leads to paradoxical results” (Wittgenstein 1958, p.27).

DIVIDE AND CONQUER – ON ANALYSIS

The largely intuitive creation of concepts is the first step in the scientific learning process. We must possess the right precognition in order to identify relevant patterns; only then can we proceed with naming and classifying the proper categories. Such powers of expression can only be bought at the cost of precision.

Gustav von Herten 1993, *The Spirit of the Game*, p. 340

Our researchers had to somehow deal with the obstinate vagueness of the term “contingent employment.” They could not start deciding on a research method and designing a research project without having a somewhat clear idea of what they were to study. They needed some sort of agreement on what they were going to study, and having no definition meant having nothing to agree (or disagree) upon.

The defining criterion, at which they arrived after having looked into several examples of contingent employment, had proven not to be such a good definition. Consultants had to be considered contingent employees, even though that was neither normal everyday use, nor the way group members felt about it. Still, although the criterion was useless as a strict rule to apply, the whole discussion around it made them realise that they could divide contingent employment into at least three important units, or categories of actors: three actors with the provisory label of “intermediary,” “client” (later to be labelled “user”) and “employee.”

The word “analysis” comes from the Greek *ana-lyein*; to unloosen, to break up, to divide the whole into its components. Such division is mainly based on contrast. Claes Gustafsson points out that to be able to see, hear or feel something, this something must differ from its surrounding.¹⁵⁷ An excellent example of the invisibility caused by the lack of contrasts is the cover of the 2000 IKEA catalogue. On it is a room with white walls, furnished with a white sofa, a white carpet and white shelves holding white glasses. Even the lady lying on the sofa is dressed in white. The lack of contrast (all the whites seem to have the very same shade, so there are not distinguishing contrasts)

¹⁵⁷ Gustafsson 1994.

makes it extremely difficult to see the glasses on the shelves, or to discern where the carpet ends and the sofa begins.

Similarly, we experience and describe the world based on contrasts. A phenomenon is outlined using opposites such as light/dark, big/small, strong/weak, vague/clear and so on. Using such contrasts, we see, divide and classify what is around us.¹⁵⁸ Our researchers dissected contingent employment into three units, each based on two opposites. The first division was based on the contrast between give/take; who gave and who took employment – employer/employee. The second division resulted in the contrast between rent in/rent out; who rented in and who rented out personnel – user/intermediary.¹⁵⁹ Promisingly, these smaller units made the phenomenon of contingent employment more manageable than it had previously been. To clarify it, they could now draw an image: three circles, each representing one of those three units. Contrasts, opposites, had made it possible to recognise, label and intellectually deal with something that had once proven too slippery.

“Totemistic”¹⁶⁰ is how Gustafsson characterises a way of thinking based on contrasts.¹⁶¹ Other terms more commonly heard for totemism are “dichotomy,” “classification,” “taxonomy” or “binary.” Remarkable in this form of thought is its power to analyse intricate problems. These are dissected and their units classified on the basis of contrasts and similarities. The classifications made are then experienced as true, or the truth. They produce an “aha!” experience (revealing experience). What is important, argues Gustafsson, is not whether or not the taxonomy corresponds to some sort of external reality. Rather, what is important is the experience of truth that classifications produce. That is the point I want to raise here. The construction of a concept – “contingent employment” – composed of three categories, awakens in our researchers strong feelings of truth and the insight of having reached a

¹⁵⁸ Gustafsson 1994, p. 91-92. See also Janssens and Steyaert 1999.

¹⁵⁹ In the final research proposal they choose the term “user” over that of “employer,” giving preference to the rental contract between the two companies involved in the employment relationship. This terminology exerted some influence on how they would later treat the phenomenon of contingent employment. Their focus came to lie mainly on the intermediary and on the user; that is, on the partners of the rental relationship. The employee was relegated to the margins, as a bi-product of the rental relationship between user and intermediary. As Barbara Czarniawska notes, terms, labels are not neutral sorting devices (Czarniawska-Joerges 1993).

¹⁶⁰ Gustafsson borrows the term “totemistic” from Lévi-Strauss (1963) who maintained that pairs of opposites were the basis for the primitive way of thinking, which he then named “totemism.”

¹⁶¹ Gustafsson 1994, p.91-96.

general view of a complex phenomenon. “The three-circles model is how reality looks. That is how it is!” as Trebonius excitedly expressed it in Bath.

Such experiences of truth are produced as much in the producer as in the listener. Stemming from the Ancient Greeks, our Western culture is more easily persuaded by arguments having the shape of analysis. The Greek notion of logic present in our days is based on classificational and hierarchical thinking.¹⁶² A representation that takes the form of analysis, separating a phenomenon into subordinated categories, automatically becomes credible. It gives a persuasive answer to the question “What is X?” Divide X into categories, label them and you will rhetorically conquer your audience.

Divide and conquer. It could also be the motto for “idiergy.”¹⁶³ As I understand it, idiergy further develops the ideas around dividing and classifying. Idiergy refers to the additive effects gained through the division, splitting and drawing of borders. A practical example within economics would be the economies of scale reached through specialisation in well-delimited areas. While synergy is represented with the mathematical formula $2+2=5$, idiergy could be represented with $2/2=5$. Gustafsson maintains that the actual drawing of borders gives rise to forces – forces that change and increase the dynamics of the system that has been divided. In that way, the hierarchical lines of an organisation, structure authority and split responsibility, allowing for a better performance than if they were mixed. The discontinuities among intermediary, client and employee split the vagueness of “contingent employment.” And, as we will see in the next chapter, that split sets the group into motion. It allows the group to design a research project, settle a research agenda and distribute responsibilities within the project. Once “contingent employment” is divided, the paralysing vagueness is conquered.

AN IMAGE TELLS MORE THAN A THOUSAND WORDS

(Still in Uppsala...)

FLAVIUS: We have to specify clearly what is included in the three actors that we choose to look at. And to define what we mean, see what’s included, and what’s not included. Besides, since the words we are using have assumptions – from the employee, the employer, the intermediary, the trade union or the

¹⁶² Maruyama 1994.

¹⁶³ Gustafsson 2001.

government perspective – discussing the terminology is very important too as such discussion is related to what we'll regard as contingent employment and how we'll look at it. So it's important to find out good terms.

PINDARUS: And... actually now that we've got into terminology, "intermediary," "employee," and "employer" are not permanent, and should be regarded as preliminary so far. For example, I don't know about how useful is it to use the term "client." It has certain connotations that we might not want. And we still have problems with the terms "employee" and "employer" since we have the intermediaries who could be seen as employers. And the term "firm" is not very good either since intermediaries are firms and a firm can also be a self-employed if it is the case of an individual who has his own firm... So there are a lot of terms to work on. And sometimes it's a matter of taste, sometimes it has consequences what kind of term is used.

FLAVIUS: If we look at the function of the client company, for example, "user" might be a better term than employer. If we use the term "firm" it might not be appropriate to include public-owned organisations for instance. And it might not be in our interest to exclude such organisations.

TULLIUS: "Client" is probable not that good because, why am I employing people? Because I am producing a product for ourselves, which is distinct from anybody else. So, client of whom?

ARTEMIDORUS: It might be also that depending on the study we might not need to find a general word. Instead, it might be "the hospital" or... We could define it in terms of what types of cases or industries we are looking at.

FLAVIUS: But this is a matter of having a general model for the different relationships

TULLIUS: In the island we say "users." Let's say "user" for the moment.

LUCIUS: In Spain we use "user firm." For us it's better than "client" or "employer."

CALPURNIA: Is "user" an enterprise or organisation, or...?

TULLIUS: "User" could be anything, could be enterprise, research centre... "User" means the users of labour. It is those who use labour for doing something.

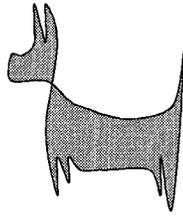
"Contingent employment" was now being divided, categorised and labelled, in an attempt to manage its vagueness. Yet, vagueness remained within those smaller categories. As what happened with "contingent employment," a concrete and explicit definition was impossible to settle on for "intermediary" or "user" (not because of our researchers lack of capacity, which they possessed, but because of the nature of language). Words could not seize the broad phenomenon before, nor could they now capture its smaller compo-

nents. Discussions about labels and about the explanation of those labels menaced to become a never-ending story.

Have you ever noticed the tendency we all have to draw on paper whatever we are unable to explain orally? Sometimes, even to the point of being comical, we raise our arms and make big gestures with our hands trying to draw something in the air. The researchers instead drew on the whiteboard. With a black board-marker they drew three circles of more or less equal size. That image represented their way of thinking about “contingent employment” and each of its components.

Pictures, images, can be seen as metaphors of what they represent. Both metaphors and pictures talk about how things are, connect symbols, are shortcut explanations, manage vagueness, cannot be empirically tested and can be used as tools for control. To develop this idea I will below use Barbara Czarniawska’s¹⁶⁴ account of metaphors.¹⁶⁵

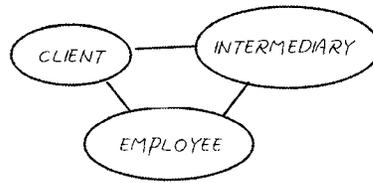
Metaphors say *how* things are, not what they are. Pictures say *how* things look, not what they are. In a non-essentialist ontology (which is the one adopted in this thesis), to say what a thing is, is to describe how it looks. To say “The stars in your face” is to say “Your eyes look like the stars” (although this last form is less expressive and not as romantic as the metaphoric form). To write, “This is a dog” while pointing to



is to write, “This looks like a dog,” or “This represents a dog.” To say, “This is contingent employment” while pointing at the picture projected on the white-board,

¹⁶⁴ Czarniawska-Joerges 1993.

¹⁶⁵ Much has been published about metaphors, especially during the ‘80s when writing about “metaphors” was fashionable (see Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Manning 1979). Besides, there have been a variety of perspectives adopted. See for example Gareth Morgan’s classical book *Images of Organization* (1986), about metaphors of organisation; Ravindra K. Jain’s *The universe as audience: metaphor and community among the Jains of North India* (1999), about religious metaphors; S.H. Aiken’s *Making worlds: gender, metaphor, materiality* (1998), a collection of essays about how gender is talked about and made with the help of metaphors; Buckley and Kenney’s *Negotiating identity: rhetoric, metaphor, and social drama in Northern Ireland* (1995), about the rhetoric of nationalism and how metaphors are used to construct and defend a national identity; or Brown’s *Social theory as metaphor* (1976), about metaphor as a logic of discovery for human studies.



is to say, “This represents contingent employment.”

Metaphors constitute a connection, using one word (stars) instead of another (the eyes of the loved one). The picture constitutes a connection using one symbol (the picture ) , instead of another (the written word “dog,” or the sound “dog”). Metaphors connect two otherwise separated spheres of reality. The vast cosmos with the tiny human body, dead lines and colours with a living animal, precise ellipses and lines with a vague term.

Metaphors are shortcuts to explanations. They try to evoke a single image encompassing the entire range of meanings embedded in the object. “Stars” talks about the beauty, the brightness, the colour, the happiness and all the nice feelings the eyes of the beloved awake in the loving person. Definitely, “stars” say much more than “eyes.” An image tells more than a thousand words. The picture, , encompasses Collies, German shepherds, Dobermans or Kennels. The three-circles picture is a shortcut evoking the entire range of cases and national particularities of contingent employment.

Metaphors cannot be empirically verified nor falsified. It is easy to prove that your eyes are not the stars, but it is impossible to show that your eyes are not like the stars. Pictures cannot be empirically tested. It is very easy to demonstrate that the scribble I made is not a dog that barks. However, it is impossible to convince anyone that it does not look like a dog (at least I hope so, even if my artistic talent is not that extraordinary). The three-circles image is not contingent employment, but none will be able to neither verify nor falsify that it represents contingent employment.

Metaphors reduce the uncertainty present in any encounter with the new. They refer to something more familiar, something we have learnt to interpret in a certain way. The uncertainty of the first meeting between two persons (will he/she like me?) disappears with “the stars in your face.” Images and models reduce the vagueness of the ideas they represent; or, at least, help to cope with them. The advantage of the three-circles image is that it can be understood at a glance and easily remembered. There is no need to go into complex theories or into long scientific explanations that try to dig deep into

the details of contingent employment. The picture is a simple representation of a complex phenomenon. In that sense, it managed the, until then, paralysing vagueness.

I am not being groundbreaking here. Saying that a model, an image, a metaphor is used as a scientific explanation is nothing new. Inspired by the romantic's insight that creative thought is metaphoric, the "cognitive aesthetic" view extends the idea of metaphors as a logic of discovery both in science and art. Such a view suggests that the deductive and inductive models of scientific explanation have to be reformulated, so that formal representations are understood as metaphoric explanations.¹⁶⁶

The main point I want to make in this section is not that the three-circles image is a metaphor explaining contingent employment. That may be more or less interesting, but it is not the point. The point I want to make is a different one. The image *visualises* what could not be put into words. With a quick gaze everybody gets an idea of how they are going to handle contingent employment. The image produces an "aha!" experience. There is no need to continue a discussion that seems to have no end. The picture, like a metaphor, is a shortcut to a complex and evasive phenomenon. As it becomes much simpler to explain and understand what is meant, pictures and metaphors thus merge the symbolic and the *practical*. Meudell has skilfully explored this double character of images in her research on organisational culture.¹⁶⁷ Acknowledging the difficulty in describing the culture of the company one works for, Meudell gave her interviewees pens, colours and paper so that they could represent it. The result of it was sometimes surprising and often amusing. The interviewees themselves declared that they understood their organisations much better after having completed the exercise.

A final similarity between metaphors and images is that both are sometimes used as tools of control. Writing about labels, metaphors and platitudes, Barbara Czarniawska maintains that they "... enable leadership to manage meaning by explaining, colouring and familiarising, as opposed to the traditional control methods of commanding, rewarding and punishing. ... they build the shared meaning by consensus and not by coercion. In that

¹⁶⁶ Brown 1976.

¹⁶⁷ Meudell 2000.

sense they can be described as more stable instruments, since once agreed upon they do not provoke opposition or rebellion.”¹⁶⁸ Besides the pragmatism of images, the other point of interest I find is that the three-circles image materialises some sort of *consensus* among group members. Everybody agrees on that way of looking at contingent employment. There is no need to continue discussing a definition, even if they have not reached a precise one yet. They can now feel that they share an understanding of what they are going to do, that they will be able to coordinate the national studies and that it will be possible to work together. The image formalises an agreement.

READY TO GO

The group now has an image that represents their research phenomenon. By visualising what could not be expressed in words, the image manages the previously paralysing vagueness. Yet, vagueness persists. What do they do with it? How do they proceed? Let’s go back to the stage.

(January 29, 1999, 16:00, Uppsala.)

(After a copious lunch and floods of coffee, the group of researchers looks a bit more tired.)

FLAVIUS: One suggestion is that we divide in two groups, one for the user and another for the intermediary. Each group tries to find the areas and some conclusions about what are we actually going to study, based on the background that we have discussed this morning.

ARTEMIDORUS: We don’t need to go into the definitions, but it’s more to think what research questions, and what type of methodology to use.

FLAVIUS: Yeah. From my point of view I think we are ready to go into the next phase and develop a research design: how we are actually approaching the field.

(Curtains fall.)

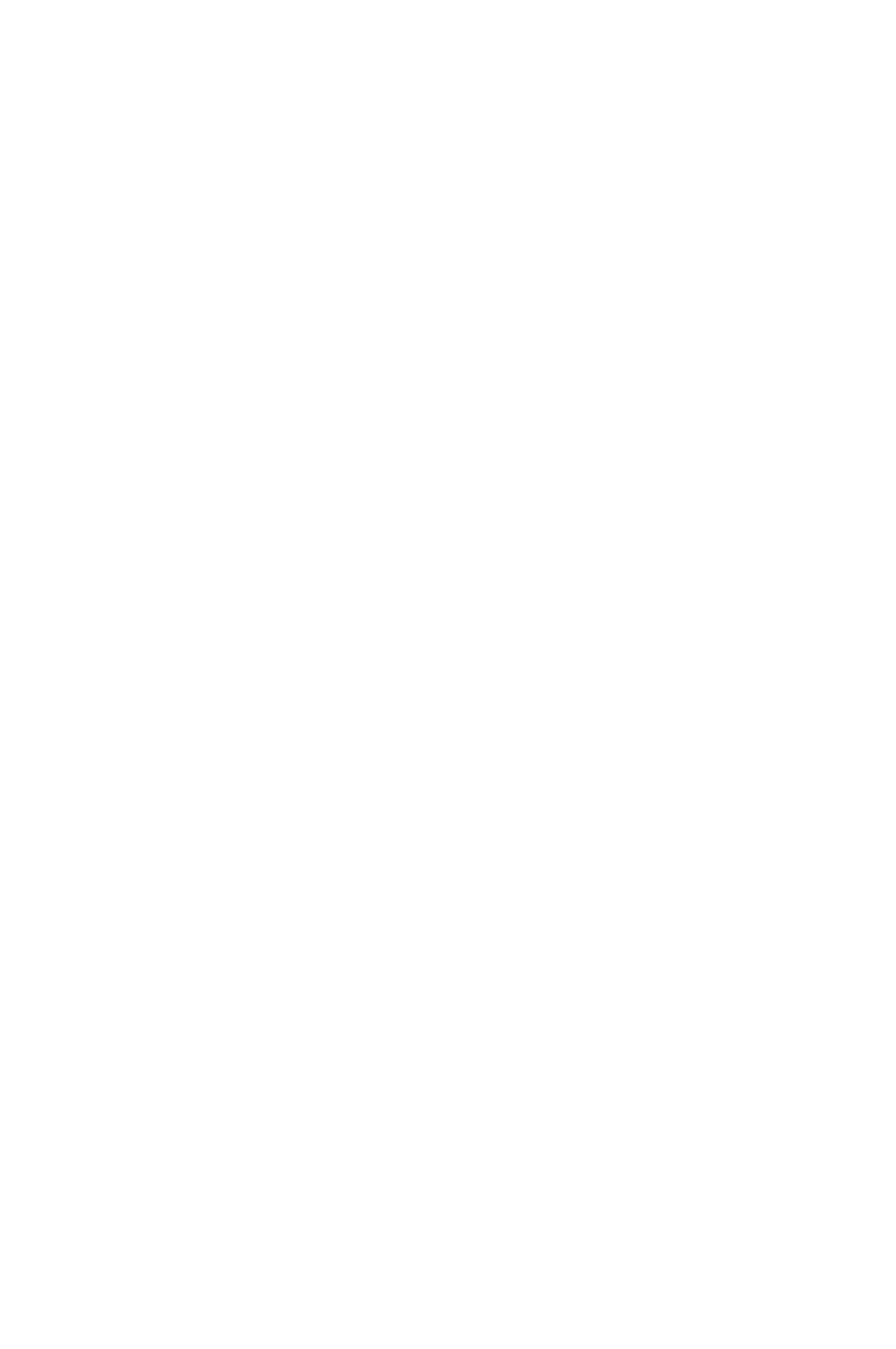
The terminology is still vague. The aim of the group however does not seem to be to arrive at precise definitions. In fact, a certain degree of vagueness is even desired. Choosing, as they did, the term “user” over “employer” is to opt for the most open of both terms, because, they argued, “‘user’ could be

¹⁶⁸ Czarniawska-Joerges 1993, p.28.

anything.” It is more general, makes room for a more ample spectrum of cases and it is flexible to the particularities of each participating country. Within vagueness, each can be represented, and consensus is therefore easily achieved. Vagueness is turned into a virtue.

Besides, they have to move on. Designing an international research project involves much more than agreeing on a research phenomenon. Research methods have to be discussed, the project has to be divided into stages, activities have to be coordinated and responsibilities distributed. There is no time to continue discussing definitions. The object of research might still be vague, but not too vague, since the vagueness does not paralyse anymore. Nor is it too little; vagueness still guarantees flexibility and adaptability. It is just right;¹⁶⁹ they have enough vagueness to get started. As they put it in the last scene, “We are ready to go into the next phase.”

¹⁶⁹ There is a word in Swedish that refers to this idea, “lagom.” Its origins are found in Viking times, when a bowl of drink was shared among those seated around the table. Doubts arose about how much to sip: not too much to keep the others from getting angry if there was not enough for them, and not too little as one also wanted to enjoy the drink. Just right! (Barinaga 1999).



SILENCE: THE IMAGE IS ACTING

- OR, ON HOW THEY SETTLED ON A SET OF ROUTINES



What we call “*description*” are instruments for particular uses. Thinking of a description as a word-picture of the facts has something misleading about it: one tends to think only of such pictures as hang on our walls, which seem simply to portray how a thing looks, what it is like. (These pictures are as it were idle).

Wittgenstein 1953, *Philosophical Investigations*, §291

WE HAVE TO GET STARTED!

(January 29, 1999, 16:40, Uppsala, Sweden.)

(Artemidorus summarises the discussion of the morning...)

ARTEMIDORUS: So, we now should discuss research questions and make the choice of sectors.

TULLIUS: And try to understand the ‘whys’, which could be at different levels. So we divide and one group would look at intermediaries and the other looks at users or...

LUCIUS: I think that this division you just made is too theoretical. For instance, in Spain there have been 19 sentences from the High Courts. And 13 of those 19 sentences are problems between the user and the intermediary. That’s why, making such a division might forget the relationship between both enterprises.

TULLIUS: Yes, but it’s just a way of getting started. We have to get started!...

“**W**e have to get started!” said Tullius anxiously when Lucius questioned the way smaller groups were made up. Did he mean that all they had accomplished until then was worth nothing?; that their agreement on how to look at their phenomenon of study,

the three-circles image, was useless? I don't think so. Rather, he expressed the feeling that time was running out and that there were still plenty of practical problems to tackle. The group had to decide what method to use, design the stages and activities of the project, distribute responsibilities to coordinate those activities, settle a feasible project agenda, write down a decent research proposal, etc. If moving on to more practical matters was so urgent, why their insistent search for some sort of definition?¹⁷⁰

Our group of researchers might not yet have any proper definition of "contingent employment," nor any of its components. Nevertheless they have arrived at a description, even if pictorial, of what "contingent employment" is; or, better stated, a description of how to look at "contingent employment." As Wittgenstein very well indicates, descriptions are instruments for practical uses. Compare for instance, a description of a table which tells you the exact shape, dimensions, material and colour, to a description of a table you may find in a novel, "It was a small rickety table decorated in Moorish style, the sort that is used for smoker's requisites." If the purpose of the description is to bring a vivid image of the table, in a flash, the second more indirect description achieves such purpose incomparably better than the more detailed and direct one.¹⁷¹ However, if the description is inserted into a furniture catalogue, for the purpose of giving the customer a precise idea of the table so that he can decide whether or not it would fit in the small corner of his living room, then the less evocative description would be of greater help. Purpose and context are thus important when using a description. As we will see, the three-circles description would do much more than simply help our researchers to get started.

IT'S ALREADY 10:30

(October 1, 1999, 9:50, Bath, UK.)

(Curtains open. The setting has slightly changed. Instead of the big group on stage we now see a smaller group. They discuss the work package of the intermediaries. Trebonius, Portia, Pindarus, Lucius and Calpurnia represent each

¹⁷⁰ Tullius himself would again pose the unanswerable question. We have already seen that the attempt to define "contingent employment" led them to "intermediary" or "user," which are also undefined terms. Wittgenstein would wonder, why should they look for a definition if it only can lead them to other undefined terms? (Wittgenstein 1958, p.25).

¹⁷¹ Wittgenstein 1958, p.181.

of the participating countries. Trebonius is the coordinator of both this work package and the group discussion now being performed. It is rainy and grey outside.)

TREBONIUS: We haven't decided yet on the various possible categories for the "intermediary" concept. Actually, there are still very many difficulties with the term "intermediary." I am not very happy with it.

LUCIUS: We could put 'other'!

(Everybody laughs.)

TREBONIUS (while writing down "other" on the blackboard): But, what would it include? For instance, should we include consultancies?

PINDARUS: No, because it is their own people they hire out to their clients. It is similar to a product.

PORTIA: But Manpower also employs out their own people in other companies! So, in that sense, we should include consultancies.

(...)

TREBONIUS: Because it is already 10:00, should we say that this issue is already clarified?

PINDARUS: Coffee time is now, at 10:00

TREBONIUS & PORTIA: It was at 10:30

CALPURNIA, looking at Pindarus: You'll better go and check!

(Pindarus goes to the bottom floor of the hotel where the other group discusses another work package, and then comes back.)

PINDARUS: Yes, it was at 10:30.

PORTIA: Well, then now we've got to be very efficient to manage to do everything we want!

(...)

TREBONIUS: What are we doing now? As it's already 10:15 we have to go to the practical level of what we're gonna study...

Time restriction is especially characteristic of this type of international workshop. In the case of the group studied, it was almost constant during their typical two-and-a-half day meetings. They would arrive on a Thursday

around lunchtime, have a cup of coffee, and sit at the meeting table until dinnertime, with a couple of coffee breaks included. Friday meetings began at 8 o'clock, although discussion had usually already started during breakfast. Discussion would go on until lunch, interrupted only to divide into smaller groups and for the coffee break, which they spent talking about other, often more practical, matters. After lunch, they would take a long walk guided by the host who would present some of the historical curiosities of the city. The rest of the afternoon, until dinnertime, would be spent in the meeting room. If stressed, which was often the case, they would return to the meeting room after dinner. Saturdays were similar, except for the discussion after lunch that finished at around three in the afternoon, which was also the end of the workshop. Some stayed overnight and flew out the following day. Others went straight to the train station, to catch the first train home. After each workshop, the possibility of continuing discussions about what had been left undecided, was limited to e-mail and phone contacts. Constant allusions to time and coffee breaks, remarks of the sort heard in the previous scene, "We have to go to the practical level," or "We've got to be very efficient," were rather frequent.

Moreover, in the case of our researchers, time pressure and the urge to get practical were aggravated. The application for EU research funds had a tight deadline. At the first two workshops, those held in Uppsala and in Marstrand, the group did not yet have any secured funding. Their future collaboration depended on getting enough money to support the expenses of international meetings as well as the costs of each specific country's research. It was at that point they decided to apply for European research grants, for which a thorough and elaborate proposal had to be written in a rather short period of time. June 2nd was the last day apply and it was on February 1st they decided to apply for the EU grants. Four months is not much time when their only means of communication were e-mail and the telephone.

We also have to work with the indivisibility of people, however absurd this remark may seem. Unfortunately (or fortunately, who knows?), humans cannot be in two places at once. In the group there were one or two persons per country represented. Therefore it was only possible to split into two groups in order to keep all countries represented. It was only possible, then, to discuss and decide on no more than two matters at once.

Short workshops, tight deadlines, indivisible people – all these practicalities set the conditions for the development of the play. It is a scenario that demands the actors to be practical, to get to the point.¹⁷² As to what that point was, they all seemed to agree on: “write a research proposal to apply for EU funds and get a project started.” Comments such as “with this workshop we have to set the details of the application,” or “get a research agenda and set deadlines,” or even “by the end of these two and a half days we must have split the work in the group” are frequent. Dividing work, distributing responsibilities, setting a research agenda, managing time, defining the research phenomenon, including new partner countries, etc. – all practical issues to decide upon during the course of the workshop. The goal of the workshop thus involves finding a solution to a set of practicalities, all of them equally important. Setting a definition for “contingent employment” becomes as central to the context of a workshop as the coffee breaks where they can further discuss a variety of other matters. Therefore, it is not that they eluded the definition of “contingent employment” with the excuse of “having to be effective.” Rather, since all practicalities weighed just as much, they had to keep on moving to have time to go through all of them.

THE RESEARCH PROPOSAL

– OR, TWO USES OF THE IMAGE

Let’s now look at how the three-circles image was used in this specific context.

On June 2nd, three months after the meeting in Marstrand and five months after Uppsala, the final research proposal was submitted to apply for EU funds. Under the introductory section “Understanding Contingent Employment: Contingent Employment and the Labour Market,” the text presents background to the research and some literature related to it. It describes recent changes in the labour market, and suggests possible causes of the increased use of contingent employment. Note however that nowhere does the proposal ever make explicit what they understand about “contingent employment,” and nor who the “intermediary” includes. Next, the text exposes the model on which they will base the project:

¹⁷² As we saw at the end of Chapter 4, with the excuse of time constraint they also gave up the continuous attempts to reach a definition, even if vagueness still persisted.

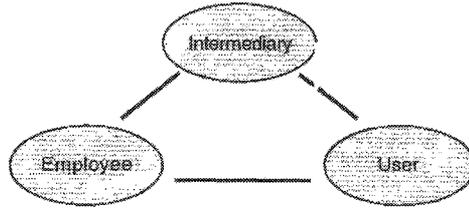


Figure 1. The main actors of contingent employment

The main actors of contingent employment¹⁷³

That section ends with some comments on the consequences of looking at contingent employment in the form of the three-circles image. Mainly, that the relationships between the three actors are considered to be market relationships.

There is nothing remarkable up until this point. In fact, it is quite natural to start a research proposal presenting some background on the phenomenon to study, and then proposing a model conceptualising such a phenomenon. What I find interesting comes next, under the section "Project Plan." There the project is structured into work packages,¹⁷⁴ the deadlines of the work packages are settled, and responsibility for the coordination of packages is distributed among the participating countries.

Work package list

No	Work package title	Lead partner No	Person months	Start month	End month	Deliverables
I	Legal, Social and Economic Context of Contingent Employment	1	3	000101	000630	IE1-2
II	The Role of Intermediaries in the Employment Relationship	3	10	000101	020630	IE1-3
III	Contingent Employment in the Health Care Service Sector	1	6	000101	011231	III-3
IV	Contingent Employment in the Food Manufacturing Industry	4	5	000701	020630	IV-1-3
V	Contingent Employment in the Financial Industry	2	6	000701	020630	V-1-3
VI	Contingent Employment in the ICT-Industry	3	6	000701	020630	VI-1-3
VII	Implications for European Labour Markets	1	11	010701	021231	VII-1-6
	TOTAL		48		36	23

Work package list¹⁷⁵

¹⁷³ Research proposal submission, fig.1, p.17.

¹⁷⁴ "Work package" is the terminology imposed by EU requirements when writing a research proposal. It corresponds to a set of activities to carry out within the project. In this way, a project is structured into several work packages, and a work package into several activities.

¹⁷⁵ Research proposal submission, p. 26.

The titles of work packages I, II and VII state very clearly the matter these packages are going to consider. That is nevertheless confirmed later in the separate descriptions of each work package. Work package I concerns the institutional context of each country. Work package II describes the intermediary sector and carries out four or five case studies, two of multinational generalist intermediaries and three of more sector specific intermediaries. Work package VII compares and synthesises the findings of the previous work packages. Doubts arise however for work packages III, IV, V and VI, as all that is said in their title is that they are going to study contingent employment in a given sector or industry. However, what aspect of contingent employment are they going to deal with? Are they going to study the three components of their representation in each industry – or only one of them, as in work package II?

Looking more closely at the description of these work packages the research proposal maintains that they will “compare the *use*¹⁷⁶ of contingent employment in the X industry between different countries and its effects on employee relations.” Getting down to the activities of the work packages, each includes:

Activity 1: Sectoral Overview

Activity 2: *User*¹⁷⁷ Case Study

These work packages refer exclusively to the “user.” The distinction among packages III through VI is the “X,” the industry where the case study is carried out, but in each of them the focus lies on the same actor/component of their contingent employment model/image.

Getting to the point. The three-circles image has been used to structure the research project into work packages, and to decide a time limit for those work packages. Work package II is devoted to the “intermediary” component, whereas work packages III, IV, V and VI are consecrated to the “user.” The very same analytical division that once helped our actors to represent a concept they could not define, is helping them again. It could almost be said that the three-circles have transformed into their *project agenda*, designing stages and setting deadlines in the project.

¹⁷⁶ Emphasis is mine.

¹⁷⁷ Emphasis is mine.

In addition, the table above also distributes the responsibility among group partners for the coordination of the packages.¹⁷⁸ Coordination involves, in their case, being the member that the rest of the group can turn to in case of complications or doubts in any part of the project, collecting from all countries the deliverables¹⁷⁹ of that package, and seeing to it that the package deadlines are met. Since the image structured the project into work packages (or phases in the project), and since responsibility for those work packages was now distributed among countries, indirectly, the image was used to distribute responsibility for the stages of the project. Once more, the image was used. This time as an *organisational chart*, telling them who was responsible for what.

THE IMAGE REPLICATES — OR, A THIRD USE OF THE IMAGE

(October 1, 1999, 18:30, Bath, UK.)

(Ten months after the first meeting in Uppsala, the research proposal had formally been approved for EU funding, administrative responsibilities for the many work packages had been distributed, PhD research had started, additional research assistants had already been recruited, and some countries had even begun interviewing. Some new faces were seen around the table: Cinna, Varro and Casca. It is still rainy and grey outside.)

FLAVIUS: One of the important things of this meeting in Bath is building up the groups; putting the people together. That everybody meets and knows each other. I think that is the most important thing of this workshop, to know whom we are going to work with and to talk to. So, it is already decided that the responsible for work package I is me, for work package II is Trebonius, for work package III is Pindarus... is that a deal?

TULLIUS & OTHERS: Yes

FLAVIUS: Then tomorrow, we are splitting in smaller groups to discuss the different work packages. In the morning, Tullius, Messala, Cinna, Casca, Varro, and me will go to the group discussing work package I...

(Meanwhile, Artemidorus notes on the board who will go to what group.)

¹⁷⁸ Nowhere, however, it is stated what the responsibility for co-ordinating a work package involves. Each will have to find out the what and the how for his or her own work package.

¹⁷⁹ "Deliverable" is another EU term. It refers to any kind of paper, report or document synthesising the work and the findings of a given part of the research project.

FLAVIUS: ... and Trebonius, Portia, Pindarus, Lucius and Calpurnia will discuss work package II.

(They continue talking about the next day's arrangements...)

Newcomers are, from their very first day, placed in a group to discuss one of the work packages. In the previous scene, Cinna, Varro and Casca, all newcomers, are sent to the group working on work package I; that is, on the legal, social and economic context of contingent employment. Straight away they hear of intermediary, user and employee. The same morning, the other group works on the intermediary (work package II), whereas in the afternoon both groups work on the user, one group on the health care sector and the other on the food industry. Newcomers immediately learn that contingent employment is conceptualised as a phenomenon with three actors. All they hear about and discuss are the terms “user,” “intermediary” and “employee;” three specific actors, no less, no more. Trade unions are for instance left out of the discussions. At once, they are introduced into looking at contingent employment through the three-circles image.

As we have seen, the image is a representation of what they were to study; a sort of enactment of the field. However, it is also used as a project agenda and an organisational chart. This double character makes it ideal to transmit to newcomers the knowledge developed in the course of the various workshops. Cinna, Varro and Casca in Bath, and Volumnius, Junius and Servilia in Seville are new to the discussion. Despite their new-coming, they do not encounter the paralysing vagueness our researchers faced at the beginning.¹⁸⁰ They already have a representation, something telling them how to look at contingent employment, even if this something is wordless. They also know what the structure of the project is and the steps the group is going to take. Even more. They know who they can turn to if they have questions about a given work package. They know what to expect and what is expected of them.

It could be said that the image is used to both transform and transmit knowledge. Nonaka talks about knowledge creation as a dynamic and ongoing transformation in the form of knowledge,¹⁸¹ from implicit to explicit and back to implicit. Initially, our actors seemed to know what contingent em-

¹⁸⁰ See Chapter 4.

¹⁸¹ Nonaka 1994; Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995.

ployment was. Even if such knowledge was difficult to verbalise, they still could tell what was a case of contingent employment from what was not. After much effort, that tacit knowledge was formalised into an image. What first had the character of a representation, later transformed into a project agenda and an organising device. Knowledge had thus been transformed once again, from explicit into tacit. Finally, by merely fitting into the discussion groups, following the stages of the project and accepting the responsibilities distributed, newcomers slowly absorbed the tacit knowledge embedded in the image, the project design and the organisation of the group. The image worked as a socialising device. It told newcomers how to think about what they were to study, how to study it and who was responsible for what in the coordination of the study.

A SPECIAL CHARACTERISTIC OF THE IMAGE — OR, AUTONOMY OF ACTIVITIES

(September 30, 1999, 18:30, Bath, UK.)

(In the room, the, by now, well-known group of researchers sits around a big table covered with a billiard-green cloth. Flavius stands by the overhead projector, presenting the objectives and research questions they stated in the now accepted EU research proposal. Suddenly Tullius interrupts him.)

TULLIUS: A question that shouldn't be asked: What do we really mean by "contingent employment"?

FLAVIUS: In work package I, it is the statistics of the use of contingent employment.

TREBONIUS: In Holland it is...

Knowledge, ideas and concepts are transmitted more or less easily and more or less quickly, depending on the characteristics of that knowledge. In Chapter four we saw that the idea of "contingent employment" had three main characteristics: its content was vague, its form analytic, and its appearance was visually attractive. I discussed how its *vagueness* added flexibility to the project and made it possible to adapt the study to the peculiarities of each participating country. Although the studies would be adapted to each one's peculiarities, I argued that the *image* visualised some sort of agreement. It gave a sense of purpose to the group (they were there to study a phenomenon that looked like three circles) and the possibility of consistency among

national studies. We also saw that they used the force of division to conquer the initially paralysing vagueness. In this chapter that characteristic, *analysis*, has been of help for something else: autonomy of activities.

Work packages, tasks, stages, deadlines, responsibilities – all owe thanks to the guidance of the three-circles image. Although joint with lines, the group has taken the components of the image separately and made them into independent activities, which can be carried out without having to worry neither about previous activities, nor about the rest of the countries. The members can thus work separately and, in this way, handle the physical distance of their offices. Coordinated by a unique image, the autonomy of the tasks is guaranteed by the shape of the image. The analytical form of the image has organised the project into independent activities, so that our researchers can work more or less independently from each other.

A year after their first workshop, in the scene above, vagueness still persists. They have no precise explanation of what “contingent employment” is. That does not seem to matter though. What matters is to go on, to divide the project into separate stages, to split tasks and responsibilities. In summary, what is important is to solve the set of practicalities an international cooperation involves. After a few workshops and many discussions, they can come up with individual descriptions of what is done in each country and in each work package. Everything thanks to the analytical form of their image which lets them organise their work in distinct and independent activities. Vagueness remains, but it remains levelled.

TO GET THE NETWORK

(April 24, 1999, 11:10, Marstrand, Sweden.)

(It is Saturday, just before lunch. Our actors have been working intensively on the EU application for two and a half days. They seem tired of so much talk, but happy about how far they have got. The table is full of papers and various documents. Flavius types on a portable computer. The sky is blue and the air is cold outside.)

PORTIA: I just have an aside, and that's Italy. It strikes me actually the more I think of it the more concerned I am it wasn't possible for somebody to come. It's all right that Longinus couldn't come. But if he doesn't have a college he can send, it's worrying...

FLAVIUS: I have to say that we went to the EU, they gave a lot of advise on these programs. They talked about the EU program for us. And one of the most important pieces of advise was that the most important thing was to get the network. And that if you had any doubt about the commitment of one of the partners, don't be afraid. You should say no. And ok... there're always conditions that make it hard to come. And he, Longinus, was sick.

PORTIA: Yeah... all of us get sick sometimes. But nonetheless, it should be sensible for a college to come.

FLAVIUS: I have never met him.

PORTIA: Longinus is really delightful, but... Italian. Ha, ha, ha [some laughs]. Very disorganised. Ha, ha [more laughs]. We don't... frankly, we don't need him. It seemed to me that it was very important that we had a southern European partner. But because we now have Lucius, maybe we don't need Italy... frankly. Besides, he has failed to show commitment.

FLAVIUS : Another thing the EU said is when you pick partners you should be able to demonstrate or motivate that these are very good in the area. That these are really needed because they've done things in this... good and motivated. And also it's important if you have had experience coordinating work like this before.

PORTIA: That's the other reservation I have about Longinus. It's actually that they are a small research institute, which does a lot of... Do you [to Lucius] know Junius?

LUCIUS: Junius?

PORTIA: Junius is in Barcelona

LUCIUS: Ah! Junius! Yeah, yeah, yeah.

PORTIA: You know Junius research centre... It's a small research centre.

LUCIUS: I don't really know the centre, although I know of its existence.

PORTIA: But the point is, his research institute, it's very soft money. They do a lot of projects, very many projects. But it is not the best way to do research.

FLAVIUS: Yeah...

PORTIA: Yeah. So Longinus actually it's the same. I've seen them.

(...)

Finally, Italy and Longinus' team were excluded from the project. "The most important thing was to get the network." The reasons given for the exclusion of Italy allude to the importance of relationships (or the more fashionable term "network") and who one is, knows and does. Longinus was disorganised and informal; neither he nor any of his colleges had showed up at any

workshops; some had never met him before; Southern Europe was already represented in the group; Longinus and his group has not worked on the research area that much nor did they have experience in international projects; the research institute was small and the research done there was dubious.

All through the play we have witnessed how our researchers shaped their reality through conversation:¹⁸² Their research field and their object of study are both three-fold, and the project structure and the sharing of responsibilities follow that form as well. They achieved all that by talking, meeting and discussing; that is, by means of speech. Yet, talk is relational, for there cannot be talk without a listener and a speaker. The constructed reality then involves, as already seen, a multitude of relationships: relationships within the group itself with external institutions, such as various EU organs, and relationships among group members and the institutions they represent. In an international project as the one studied, relationships are central and thus who you are, what you do and who you know are of primary interest when presenting yourself to the others. International research cooperations have to deal with the vagueness of the partners and their commitment.

¹⁸² Shotter 1993.



ACTORS PLAY SEVERAL CHARACTERS

– OR, POSITIONING THE SELF

VAGUENESS AND THE SELF

(January 28, 1999, 14.15. On the Stockholm-Uppsala train.¹⁸³)

(Artemidorus, Flavius, Pindarus and I are sitting on the train. Flavius and Pindarus are side by side, Artemidorus and I are in front of them. We talk excitedly about the many things to do during the coming days, and are curious about the two new persons who will be joining the group. I am also new. The others explain to me what has been done up till then. The train car sways nicely. The conductor has just passed.)

ARTEMIDORUS: We all met already last September, in Åkesberga. There we met with trade union representatives to talk about what is interesting to research concerning contingent employment. We discussed the possibility of making a research project on that.

PINDARUS: But in that workshop neither the Spanish nor the Dutch were present. Both are new to the group, and we don't know how they are, or how they work. This is the first time we meet them. We are staying in a manor. It's a nice place, but I'm not sure if they'll like it. It's in the countryside. I hope they'll like it.

FLAVIUS: This time we have some sort of document about the project, which we didn't have last time. But it is still extremely fuzzy, and the limits of the project are not very well defined yet.

ESTER: So, is that what you are trying to accomplish during this workshop? Delimit the research area?

FLAVIUS: Well... and decide on a common perspective for all countries. We want to do a comparative study, and to be able to compare, everybody has to have the same methodology and take the same perspective. And that's not gonna be easy. I think that's going to be the most difficult part, because we don't know how they work, nor what their research interests are.

PINDARUS: And we have to decide that, and then already discuss perspective and methodology in detail 'cause afterwards, after the workshop, all contact is via e-mail. And that's not the same thing... You cannot know how they work

¹⁸³ The following conversation is reconstructed from my own field notes.

or how they've understood the project via e-mail. Besides, we're all from such different countries and cultures, that it's better to settle down from the beginning how we are to work so that we can coordinate national studies.

FLAVIUS: The thing is that we only have two and a half days to discuss all that and agree on it. It is gonna be tough... And we don't really know these new people. But they all seem to be very prepared and know a lot about temporary employment, and have worked with it for a long time. And we, we are not as well prepared as they are.

We are back at the beginning of our play. The atmosphere in the train car is one of excitement, but also of concern. There is excitement for the arrival of the new members, over the possibility of a major international cooperation; simply excitement over an interesting project. There is also concern about the variety of perspectives in the group. People have diverse backgrounds; let alone their different countries of origin. Contingent employment is still too vague of a term. So vague that they could all work on contingent employment, and yet not be able to compare studies because they could all be of such different character. "Contingent employment" is under-defined; its limits are too blurry. "Is it because we [Swedes] don't know enough about contingent employment?" Flavius seems to speculate. Doubts about one's knowledge arise. "We are not as well prepared as they are."

Vagueness, it seems, gives rise to questioning oneself (Maybe... it is not that the world abounds and the terms to describe it are vague. It might be me who doesn't know enough...). That questioning is addressed with interaction; and interaction, in our group, developed mainly through talk.

DISCURSIVELY CONSTITUTED SELF

"Me llaman la Agrado, porque durante toda mi vida sólo he pretendido hacerle la vida agradable a los demás.

Además de agradable soy muy auténtica. Miren, ¡qué cuerpo! Todo hecho a medida. Rasgao de ojos, ochenta mil; nariz, doscientas, tiradas a la basura porque un año después me la pusieron así de otro palizón. Ya sé que me da mucha personalidad, pero si lo llego a saber no me la toco. Continúo, tetas, dos, porque no soy ningún monstruo, setenta cada una, pero éstas ya las tengo amortizadas. Silicona en...

¿Dónde?

Labios, frente, pómulos, cadera y culo. El litro cuesta unas cincuenta mil así que echen la cuenta porque yo la he perdido. Bueno, lo que les estaba diciendo, que cuesta mucho ser auténtica señora. Para estas cosas no hay que ser

rácana porque una es más auténtica cuanto más se parece a lo que ha soñado de sí misma.”¹⁸⁴

Agrado, *Todo sobre mi madre*, Almodóvar film, 1999

When Agrado, a partial transsexual in Almodóvar's film *Everything About My Mother*, confesses her changed physiology to a numerous audience from the stage of a theatre, adding that "... a woman is more authentic the more she looks like what she has dreamed for herself," she manifests a postmodern view of the self. With her example, she demonstrates that the self can be shaped and reshaped in ways that were not even thought of in the modern or in the romantic world of individual essences. "In the postmodern world there is no individual essence to which one remains true or committed. One's identity is continuously emerging, reformed, and redirected as one moves through the sea of ever changing relationships. In the case of 'Who am I?' it is a teeming world of provisional possibilities."¹⁸⁵ For Agrado, one of these possibilities is her own dream of becoming a woman. With the help of a scalpel and a good deal of social learning, as Garfinkel's study of Agnes showed,¹⁸⁶ she manages to construct an identity which was not given to her from birth. Such is the malleability of the post-modern self.

Rather than the scalpel, the tool used to shape our identities in everyday life, and those of our researchers in the course of their project, is talk. Shotter reminds us that the way we use the pronouns "I" or "you" mirrors our own experience of self and the other.¹⁸⁷ The voice and the person of verbs, he says, define the character of the specific situation where talk is produced and depicts how the subject of the verb is engaged in that situation. For instance, in the active voice the subject is an active agent who does things, whereas the passive voice de-emphasises the agent, making it often disap-

¹⁸⁴ "They call me 'Ms. Pleaser' because all my life the only thing I have aimed for is to make life more pleasing for others.

Besides pleasing I am very authentic. Look at this body! All tailor-made. Eyes-cut, eight thousand; nose, two hundred, thrown to the dustbin because a year later they put it like this from another beating. Yes, I know it gives me personality, but had I known I wouldn't have touched it.

I continue. Teats, two because I'm no monster, seventy each, but these are already paid off. Silicon in lips, front, hips and ass. Fifty thousand the litre, so make the count 'cause I have already lost it. Well, I was saying, it is expensive to be authentic, lady. For these sorts of things, one shouldn't slack because a woman is more authentic the more she looks like what she has dreamed for herself" (*Everything about my mother*, Almodóvar 1999, own translation).

¹⁸⁵ Gergen 1991, p.139.

¹⁸⁶ See Heritage 1984.

¹⁸⁷ Shotter 1989.

pear. The voice serves, thus, to locate the subject in relation to the process indicated by the verb, and in this way constitutes an active agent or a passive role-taker.

A similar recognition of the constitutive force of discursive practices is implicit in Davies' and Harré's concept of "positioning": "... the process whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced story lines."¹⁸⁸ The person takes on a conglomerate of positions, is placed and places herself in the various immediate conversations in which she participates.

In the discursive view, the self becomes multiple, provisional and relational. Multiple, because of the possibility of participating in several conversations and thus adopting several positions. Provisional, because the same person can take a variety of positions as a conversation develops, leaving one to take another in the next story line. Relational, because there cannot be talk without a speaker and a listener. In a nutshell, the self is jointly and ongoingly produced in conversation.

CULTURAL POSITIONING

Let's now return to the stage and see what discursive answers group members gave to the question of the self.

"What do they want from me?" "What do I gain from this?" "This is all just about politics!" "There is something else going on here." "We just talk and talk without getting anywhere." "They need to plan everything." "I am not very prepared in the subject and the others are." These are only some of the comments I heard at the workshop in Uppsala. Each one of our actors tried to make sense of what the others wanted, of what was wanted from them, of who knew what and how much, of how the others worked, of what was going on there.

As already seen, at that initial stage of the project they did not have any defined project nor was the group explicitly, or formally, organised. In their strife to make sense of what went on they could not turn to any hierarchy, setting each one's position *vis-à-vis* the rest, nor had they any rule or procedure telling them what to do, when and how. Besides, contingent employ-

¹⁸⁸ Davies and Harré 1991, p 48.

ment, the phenomenon they were there to study and the reason for the project, was proving to be vague and evasive. There were many ways to attack “contingent employment,” each member understanding it differently and wanting to deal with it accordingly. Hence, the group was without a clearly defined goal which could assist them in their sensemaking effort.

Without hierarchy, procedures and clear goals the group members did not have at their disposal any of the common tools used in collective action to make sense of the environment and of each others’ actions.¹⁸⁹ Vagueness pervaded every aspect. No wonder, then, that doubts arose around one’s task, – “What do they want from me?” – about one’s capacity, – “I am not very prepared in the subject and the others are” – about the action of others, – “They need to plan everything” – or around the nature of the interaction, – “This is all just about politics!” “There is something else going on here.” However, as Garfinkel showed us,¹⁹⁰ the human being is a sensemaking machine. In such a vague and unstructured environment, what discursive resources did our actors use to cope with vagueness?

CULTURAL STEREOTYPES

(January 28, 1999, around 21:00. Uppsala.¹⁹¹)

(We have had a copious and beautiful meal. Some still sit at the dinner table, others have moved to the next room to continue chatting while having coffee. Flavius is playing the piano. Lucius takes me aside.)

LUCIUS: They [northern Europeans] just talk and talk because they need to plan everything. It is like the way we build our villages. We [southern Europeans] don’t have any urban plan. One neighbour makes a house, and the next one makes hers wherever she likes most. Then a third one builds hers again where she enjoys it. So at the end our streets turn out to be narrow, serpentine and disordered. Northern Europeans however plan their cities, so they come out with well-ordered wide streets. But to plan that they talk and talk and talk, even too much, whereas we are more spontaneous. And things come out anyway!

Cultural stereotypes are labels hiding metaphors and properties concerning the referred group of people; categories in terms of which we classify people

¹⁸⁹ Weick 1979, Ch. 4.

¹⁹⁰ Garfinkel 1967.

¹⁹¹ The following is reconstructed from my own field notes. The actual conversation was held in Spanish.

by geographical region or cultural upbringing. Attached to such categories are personal characteristics and intentions for people's actions. When a person has been positioned along the cultural story line in terms of the stereotypical label, her doings and sayings can be interpreted through the metaphors and properties ascribed to the stereotype. Stereotypes become, then, a sensemaking device.

To make sense of the chaos he feels, Lucius' village-building metaphor places everybody in terms of the dichotomy northern-southern European: order vs. anarchy, planning vs. spontaneity, talk-oriented vs. action-oriented. There are two researchers from the United States, but the majority comes from Northern Europe or, at least, not Southern Europe: two from the United Kingdom, one from The Netherlands and three from Sweden. With the majority positioned under the label of talking-for-planning, Lucius can make sense of the confusing excess of talk. "They [north Europeans] talk and talk because they need to plan everything."

Lucius places "the other" in terms of cultural stereotypes. When it comes to himself however he positions himself against the stereotype usually assigned to him. "They think we are disordered and that we know nothing. But tomorrow we'll show them who we are!" When the label imposed on one's culture is interpreted as having negative attributes for the concrete context, in this case those of disorder and ignorance, the position oneself takes rejects the stereotype. However, when the label has positive attributes one happily accepts it, as when Flavius admits, "I might be a too goal-oriented Swede." There is a touch of regret in his words, but he has no problem assuming the stereotype.

This acceptance, or refusal, of the label assigned to oneself points towards the moral enforcement of stereotypes or discursive positions. What is expected from a person and how that person acts, is judged according to the label she bears. Kundera recognises this in his latest book, *Ignorance*. Irena, who emigrated from Czechoslovakia to Paris after the Revolution of 1968, complains that people see her as a "young woman who suffers, exiled from her country," whereas they see her lover, Gustaf, as "a nice Scandinavian, very cosmopolitan, who has already forgotten the place where he was born."¹⁹² Both of them, she thinks, have been classified and labelled, and they will be

¹⁹² Kundera, 2000, p. 30; own translation.

judged according to their loyalty to that label. Here comes the irony: It is one's loyalty to the label assigned by others that determines one's authenticity or loyalty to oneself. Others morally force you to be, feel and act in a manner dictated by the stereotype they hold, since authenticity lies in the conformance with the label.

Irena refuses to accept the pity implicit in the label of a "suffering emigrant;" Agrado and Agnes reject that of "man by nature"; and Lucius denies the "chaotic and lazy southern European." It is not that easy to "be authentic" (if authentic means conformance to the label imposed from outside) when that involves ascribing to undesired personal characteristics. So Irena remains in Paris despite the opening of the Czech border; Agrado removes a bit here and adds a bit there; Agnes gets a sex change operation; and Lucius positions himself as "being a very German Spaniard" with all the nuances of laboriousness and order associated to the German stereotype.

Paradoxically though, note that in order to position himself against the assigned label, Lucius is once more using that very same discursive line. He rejects the Spanish position; yet he accepts the cultural discursive line to reposition himself within the German borderline. "Culture" seems to be both a loved and a hated story line. It is rejected when the stereotype is not appropriate, while it is still invoked when attempting to fit into a more flattering stereotype

There are, however, other occasions where the characteristics assigned to the label are easy to accept, as they can be even flattering. Gustaf welcomes the "nice cosmopolitan Scandinavian"; Flavius appreciates the "goal-oriented Swede"; and although Lucius rejects the disapproving attributes implicit in the "Southern European" label, he embraces the 'spontaneous' one, as when he says "we'll put our exotic flavour here" (as if one went around being constantly exotic in her own country!).

EXPERIENTIAL POSITIONING

About a week before the workshop held in Marstrand, a small island in the archipelago of the western coast of Sweden, a document was e-mailed to all participants in the research group. This document was the very first draft of their future project. In it, the three-circles image appears. It is the way they agreed to understand their phenomenon of study: "Contingent employment"

is made of three autonomous but related entities. Their field of research has been divided, enacting the world they are to investigate. "Contingent employment" now has a more precise form, even if the definition of each of its parts, the three circles, still remains vague and unclear.¹⁹³ The group begins to envision where they are heading, what they are there for: To study a phenomenon with a three-circled form. However, they still lack agreement on how they are going to get there. The group now has a goal, but they lack some sort of organisational chart distributing tasks and responsibilities among group members.

With the research field divided, our group of researchers can now split, in accordance with that division, into smaller discussion groups. The image has already begun to act, ordering some of the interactions among the group members. Latour would say that the image is an actant with as many rights as human actors.¹⁹⁴ Each of the discussion groups is set to make sense of the still vague components of "contingent employment," especially those of "user" and "intermediary." Each researcher will try to contribute using his/her specific knowledge. However, if discussants continue to position themselves in terms of the cultural story line, the group, will lose knowledge and experience which might be pertinent to the actual task. Properties such as being spontaneous, planned, disordered or goal-oriented do not help to answer what is an "intermediary." The cultural selves are irrelevant for the task at hand. Now that cultural stereotypes are no longer an effective device in coping with vagueness, what story line will they use to deal with the vagueness of what they are going to study?

SELECTIVE PERSONAL BACKGROUND

"I have to come with my legalist view so that "intermediary" can be understood in terms of the type of contract." (Lucius)

"The intermediary can be seen in terms of who holds organisational control over the employee." (Calpurnia)

"Let Pindarus talk since he worked in an intermediary before getting into academic life." (Artemidorus)

¹⁹³ Go to Chapter 4 to see how the image came to life and how it levelled the initially paralysing vagueness.

¹⁹⁴ Latour 1991.

“I worked as a consultant after my PhD and before coming back to university and I see parallels in the way intermediaries and consultancies function.” (Trebonius)

“Portia and Tullius have a long research experience so that they know much more about international research projects.” (Pindarus)

“For Pindarus this is his PhD project and for Flavius this is his first project after his thesis. So both are very motivated for this project to come right.” (Artemidorus)

All these quotes take into account *certain* historical aspects of the self. I stress “certain” because only some pieces of the lives of others are picked out and emphasised, namely those biographical aspects relevant in the immediate context. None of them, for instance, refers to Artemidorus as someone who enjoys dancing tango whenever he has the chance, nor do they allude to Pindarus having recently become a father or to Flavius living in a flat in central Gothenburg. Only those aspects of participant biographies relevant for the sensemaking of what they are to study and how they are to study it, are selected. The self is positioned in terms of the personal experience related to “contingent employment” or “intermediary.” Gubrium and Holstein maintain that biographical work “... reflects *locally promoted* ways of interpreting experience and identity so that what is constructed is distinctively crafted, yet assembled from the meaningful categories and vocabularies of settings.”¹⁹⁵ The locally promoted biography is the discursive positioning of the self in the specific conversation and under the concrete circumstances.

Furthermore, life stories, or biographies, morally enforce the person to which they belong. The person behind the biography is expected to know about the aspect stressed by the biographical fragment. Implicit in “Let Pindarus talk since he worked in an intermediary before getting into academic life” is the expectation that Pindarus has some knowledge and experience that can contribute to define the “intermediary.” Similar to the way in which a person is morally enforced to behave in a certain way when culturally positioned, the person positioned in terms of previous experience is enforced to know about that which makes the experience relevant. This is what Shotter calls “social accountability,” “the fact that we *must* talk only in certain already established ways, in order to, meet the demands placed upon us by our need

¹⁹⁵ Gubrium and Holstein 1995, cited in Atkinson and Silverman 1997, p. 305; emphasis is mine.

to sustain our status as responsible members of our society.”¹⁹⁶ Hence, Pindarus has been made responsible for knowing how intermediaries work.

There are three criteria to meet when selecting the biographical fragments that are used to position the other and to make sense of the still vague phenomenon of study: educational background, length of research experience and related work experience.

EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND. Being an expert in Law, Lucius positions himself as someone who is knowledgeable in the area. “I have to come with my legalist view so that ‘intermediary’ can be understood in terms of the type of contract.” The criterion he offers to make sense of the intermediary belongs to his field of expertise, labour law, so he goes on to distinguish labour from commercial contracts.

Calpurnia however, who has a PhD in Human Resources in organisations, offers a criterion more related to her area. “The intermediary can be seen in terms of who holds organisational control over the employee.” Another example is when they later have to decide on the expected results of the research project. The one educated as a sociologist would put forward the “social consequences of contingent employment” as an important conclusion to reach.

Researchers are positioned in terms of the type of knowledge they have received, and place themselves by using arguments belonging to their field of expertise. Participants become what Knorr-Cetina calls epistemic subjects.¹⁹⁷ Scientists are accountable for being knowledgeable in a given field and feel responsible to argue from the perspective of that specific field.

LENGTH OF RESEARCH EXPERIENCE. “Portia and Tullius have a long research experience, so that they know much more about international research projects.” By alluding to the long research experience of Portia and Tullius, Pindarus is adding more weight to whatever they may contribute compared to what someone else with less research background may have to say. This has a double edge. While giving more credibility to Portia’s and Tullius’ contributions, he is also making them morally responsible for knowing more.

¹⁹⁶ Shotter 1989, p.140-141. Italics in the original.

¹⁹⁷ Knorr-Cetina 1999.

Personal background is not only alluded to make someone responsible for being knowledgeable. Personal background is also used to attribute intentions and motivations behind the actions of the others. “For Pindarus this is his PhD project and for Flavius this is his first project after his thesis. So both are very motivated for this project to come out right.”

WORK EXPERIENCE. Having related experience with the phenomenon of study is also used to position someone as morally responsible for being knowledgeable. “Let Pindarus talk since he worked in an intermediary before getting into academic life.”

Moreover, related experience serves to justify one’s arguments for making sense of the phenomenon in one way or another, as when Trebonius puts forward his labour experience in consultancy to draw parallels with what they are to understand. “I worked as a consultant after my PhD and before coming back to university and I can draw parallels in the way intermediaries and consultancies function.”

RESPONSIBILITY POSITIONING

In October 1999, nine months after the first workshop, the group meets in Bath. The document around which they now deliberate has recently been accepted by the European Union for a research grant. It is a research proposal with a clear objective and an ordered time schedule, with fixed deadlines and distinct stages. Goals, and tasks to achieve those goals, are made more or less explicit on paper. To study contingent employment, the project proceeds along various stages, or work packages.¹⁹⁸ In the document, an image organises the project and specifies how the project is to develop. It also distributes responsibilities for each work package among group members. In this sense, the document, and with it the three-circles image, becomes another participant in the group – a participant guiding interactions between our researchers, telling what is expected of each of them and what each can expect of the others, informing what activity each has to take on next and even imparting

¹⁹⁸ Concerning the term “work package,” see note 5 in Chapter 5.

what papers and reports the group has to write and when. Indeed, the document is an actor in all its rights.¹⁹⁹

With the project nicely rolling and the image an active participant in the group, how do our actors position themselves? Is the three-circles image engaged in the positioning of the self?

ASSIGNED RESPONSIBILITY

Interaction among group members seemed to have changed. Small groups were formed according to the work package division, without even questioning whether it should be split up differently. Nor was it ever questioned who should lead the discussions in the smaller groups. For instance, some days before the workshop in Bath, Trebonius, now responsible for the work package involving the intermediary, sent an e-mail with a detailed agenda for the discussion in “his” group; the issues that were to be dealt with and in what order, were explicit. Likewise, the persons leading the discussions in the rest of the groups were always the one the persons the document had assigned responsibility to. Therefore Lucius led the talk concerning the user in the food industry; Flavius, that of the user in the health care sector; Portia conducted the discussion on the user in the finance sector; and Messala did the same regarding the information and communication industry.

So much was this so that the responsible person for each specific work package felt compelled to have worked on it and prepared the discussion; and when for whatever reason this had not been possible, he/she felt the need to apologise. This was clear even months later, at the workshop held in Seville during the first week of April, 2000. Lucius’ opening sentence for the discussion on his work package was “First of all I want to apologise for not having done my work but I have been very busy working on my book which relates to the work package on the intermediary. I’m very sorry.” Nobody else had done their part. However, he was the only one asking for apologies.

Each group member takes on the position assigned by the now funded research proposal and places the other according to it. The positions dictate to the members what their responsibilities are, how they are to interact with the others, what is expected of them and what they can expect of the rest.

¹⁹⁹ Go to Chapter 5 to see how the image structured the project and organised the group. It became an active participant.

Such a positioning, for instance, defines Trebonius as the person responsible for work package II. He is no longer a business researcher with some years of work experience in consultancies. He is even less an ordered goal-oriented North European planner. Rather, he is the one to whom the rest can turn in case of doubts concerning the intermediary, the one who has to prepare the agenda and lead the discussion for his work package, and the one to whom others have to hand the papers and reports written around that issue. He is also the one allowed to ask for papers when due dates arrive, and the one authorised to edit those papers in order to put them together. Certain rights and certain obligations are bounded when the positioning of the self is done in terms of the responsibility story line.

ORGANISING AND POSITIONING

Something curious has happened here. Initially, it was our actors who drew the three-circles image as a way to get around a phenomenon that was too vague. Later, those three circles structured the project and organised the group. By the end, it was that very same image that, indirectly, told our researchers who they were in the group and how to interact with each other. A handmade drawing turned towards those humans and began to speak. Organising and positioning the self seem to make up two sides of the same coin.

On one side, once a particular position in a conversation has been assumed, a person sees the world from the viewpoint of that position, and through the images, metaphors and story lines relevant to the discursive practice where he/she is located.²⁰⁰ The way one experiences the world around oneself and structures/organises one's environment, comes together with the adopted position. Or, as Weick puts it, "Sensemaking is grounded on identity construction."²⁰¹ Inseparable to the process of positioning comes a certain enactment of the world.

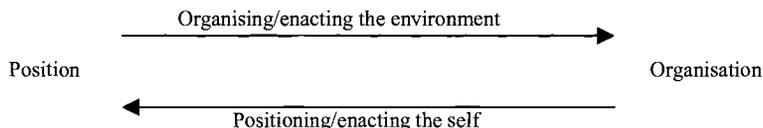
On the other side of the coin, the process goes in the opposite direction. Many have looked at organisations as systems of meaning²⁰² and at organising as a process of sensemaking by which we understand and structure our

²⁰⁰ Davies and Harré 1991, p.46.

²⁰¹ Weick 1995.

²⁰² See for instance Alvesson 1993; Smircich and Morgan 1982; Smircich and Stubbart 1985.

immediate environment and ourselves in a certain way.²⁰³ The discourses institutionalised in a specific organisation constrain the range of story lines available and often place persons in one position or another. The process of organising thus involves the enactment of a specific self.



The enactment of the environment is braided indistinctly with the enactment of the self. This duality is how I understand Latour when he talks about humans and artifacts exchanging properties as they interact.²⁰⁴ The vague environment took, on stage, a human analytical form (only humans insist on seeing an analytical order of most things), while our researchers took a textual responsibility. Both emerged inseparably.

We have seen, however, that our actors went through various selves. If organising and positioning go hand in hand, then each self mirrors the immediate situation. Hence, if the concrete situation is open and vague, the self will then be vaguely and broadly defined; for instance, in terms of distanced cultural stereotypes. However, if the local situation is more or less delimited and precise, then the self will also be more locally embedded. Hence, when the vagueness of situations is managed with three circles, the self is also positioned in terms of that image.

For the sake of clarity I have almost surgically separated the use of all three discursive lines. Throughout the chapter it seems like in Uppsala, they only applied the story line of “culture,” in Marstrand only that of “personal background,” and in Bath only the line of “assigned responsibility.” But all three discursive resources were not used as clear-cut. In Marstrand the “personal background” story line entered the scene, but they continued to use “culture” where vagueness was too much. It was a similar case in Bath, where all three discursive lines could be heard depending on the situation. Discourses are mixed in everyday life often without us realising it.

²⁰³ Weick 1995.

²⁰⁴ Latour 1993.

Each discursive resource may be used to manage the vagueness of an immediate moment. The ongoing transformation of the self is a way to turn a vagueness that paralyses interaction into one that allows for flexibility. It keeps interaction going.

A LINE WITH MANY USES - OR, HOW TO DO THINGS WITH “CULTURE”



(February 2, 1999. The internet.)

(Following the workshop in Uppsala, I sent an e-mail to each group member. I wondered about their impressions, thoughts and feelings about those days. Hence, my question was open for I did not want to force an answer upon them. I wanted to know how they had experienced the workshop.)

Hi Messala!

How was your flight back home?

You missed the good weather here: today it is 5 degrees warm!

It was very nice to meet you in Uppsala, and great to have some time to talk in the sauna. However it feels like we could have talked a bit more on how you felt about the conference.

For helping me in my research, would you mind to send me what you think it happened in the group, your opinions about the conference, if you think you got somewhere...

It doesn't need to be too long but feel free to write what you think. An e-mail would do!

Thanks so much for your help.

Ester

(February 10, 1999. On the internet. Messala answers my e-mail.)

The greatest challenge for the group, in my mind, is the difference in backgrounds! Sometimes I feel like I can be an “offensive American” because I tend to forget background differences when I make my comments. I feel that the Swedes have a much better developed sense of others, if that is the right way to put it. They tend to really think before they speak, which is not one of my strong points! Since I feel I’ve had the greatest amount of work interaction with the Swedes, I don’t yet have much information about how Trebonius and Lucius think, interact, work, etc. I’m looking forward to developing more of a working relationship with them. ...

“The greatest challenge for the group, in my mind, is the difference in backgrounds!” The comment points to the potential difficulties brought on by a variety of cultural backgrounds. The underlying assumption commonly held, as much in everyday life as in the research literature, is that confusion and misunderstandings may arise due to different values, practices and ways of thinking. The culture we are born in determines to a large extent the way we feel, think and behave. Those ways, it is maintained, differ from culture to culture, often resulting in mismatch and incompatibility.

The same assumption is held by the researchers studied. It says little, however, about how group members proceeded, about how they coped with vagueness – a vagueness rooted in language, and therefore dealt with recurring to linguistic resources. Hence, in my analysis of the field material, I have not focused on what their particular ideas of culture are, nor on the nature of their cultural stereotypes. Instead, I have focused on what our actors *do* when using cultural stereotypes.

DOING THINGS WITH “CULTURE”

I thought I could organise freedom, how Scandinavian of me.

Björk, *The Hunter*. Used as motto for “Organising Freedom,” exposition at the Museum of Modern Art in Stockholm during the spring of 2000.

The verse of the Icelandic singer could be understood in three ways. The traditional way is to turn one's eyes to where the sentence appears to be pointing. The cause of her wanting to organise freedom is that she is Scandinavian. The sentence seems to point to some sort of cultural mechanism influencing her behaviour in a certain manner. The mechanism may vary in nature: it may be a social structure,²⁰⁵ a value system,²⁰⁶ a cognitive map,²⁰⁷ a system of meaning,²⁰⁸ or a system of rules.²⁰⁹ Whatever it may be, it is as if there were some sort of hidden motor from which we could not escape, from the outside or from within (depending on the nature of the mechanism), that compelled Scandinavians to want to behave as Björk sings. Studies adopting such a perspective try to go to the mechanism, to look at and measure its characteristics. They come up with results such as that the Scandinavian cultural program is individualist, feminine, with low power distance, and low uncertainty avoidance.²¹⁰ Stretching the metaphor, these researchers might say that Scandinavians may want to structure their freedom because of their feminine will to reach consensus and be interdependent. Paradoxically, a way to get a future filled with consensus is to organise everybody's freedom.

"In much of human conduct there are no mechanisms, only practices."²¹¹ This is the second way to understand Björk's lyrics. The difference between looking at practices or at hidden mechanisms, Rom Harré argues, lies in how rule-following is conceived. In the traditional view, rules are treated as components of the cultural machine. Rules use us. In the view of practices, instead, we use rules. We learn to apply rules, rule-following being "an inculcated practice, not a rigidly constructed mechanism."²¹² Ann Swidler joins Harré's criticism, yet using a somehow different argument. Culture influences action, she admits, although not by providing the final values toward which action is addressed. Rather, culture influences action because it shapes a pattern of behaviours, a set of habits and skills with which people act. Culture

²⁰⁵ Parsons 1960; Malinowski 1944; Radcliffe-Brown 1952.

²⁰⁶ Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952.

²⁰⁷ Goodenough 1971.

²⁰⁸ Geertz 1973; Schneider 1992.

²⁰⁹ Wallace 1970; Lévi-Strauss 1973.

²¹⁰ Hofstede 1980.

²¹¹ Harré 1989, p.27.

²¹² Harré 1989, p.27.

does not provide us with the ends of action, but with the means to achieve whatever end we may pursue. Culture furnishes us with styles and practices of behaviour out of which we construct “strategies of action,” as she puts it.²¹³

This second type of studies looks at the customs and forms of the life of a culture. We find a good and amusing example in Ögren.²¹⁴ At a certain time during the first half of the 19th century, Sweden thought of implementing the Scottish banking system, but left their attempt aside because, as the royal representative concerning banking questions (the finance minister of the epoch) put it, “We would have needed to transform Swedish people into Scottish.”²¹⁵ Anders Ögren, as any good economics historian, gets into the institutional setting and practices of the time. In Scotland the market was free, no king mediating the starting up of any bank; whereas in Sweden, royal permission was required for establishing most banks. The minister’s complaint insinuated thus the distorting royal bureaucracy proper of Swedish cultural practices. “I thought I could organise freedom” acquires here a different, more political, tint. Björk might cynically comment on the long-standing Scandinavian custom of implementing a strong system of authorities and hierarchy of permissions: first the king, later a mighty socialist state, now the hunter.

Most research on both international management and organisational culture take one or the other of the two previous views, with the difference among studies consisting of where exactly attention is addressed. Some focus on values,²¹⁶ others on attitudes,²¹⁷ others on taken-for-granted or un-stated assumptions²¹⁸, and still others focus on practices and skills.²¹⁹ Attempts have been made to synthesise the extensive literature within the international management field, Schein being an excellent example. In his widely used framework, he distinguishes among three levels, or layers, of culture: arti-

²¹³ Swidler 1986.

²¹⁴ Ögren 2000.

²¹⁵ In C. D. Skogman’s (the royal representative) own words: “På denna redbara grund hvilat förmämligast de så mycket prisade bankerne i *Skottland*, som framställas till efterföljd i andra länder, vid utförandet hvaraf en väsendtlig svårighet möter, *den* att förvandla deras invånare till *Skottar*.”

²¹⁶ See for instance Davis and Rasool 1988; Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars 1993; Hofstede 1980; Lane and DiStefano 1992.

²¹⁷ For some examples Maznevski et al. 1997; Schneider 1992; Smith and Bond 1993; Trompenaars 1993.

²¹⁸ See Gudykunst and Kim 1997; Triandis 1995.

²¹⁹ Examples are found in Harris and Moran 1991; Swidler 1986.

facts, values and taken-for-granted beliefs.²²⁰ Allaire and Firsirotu elegantly map the area of organisational culture; first providing a typology of schools of thought in cultural anthropology, and then relating these schools to the views found in the management literature.²²¹

Eero Vaara points out that such perspectives adopt a realist epistemology, very much in line with the anthropological tradition. The focus is set on the particularities of a certain people, whether these particularities are artifacts, values, social institutions or a set of practices.²²² I am not interested, however, in the characteristics of specific cultures. Rather, I am looking at a process, the process of *organising*, of *working* together, the *doings* of the actors – multicultural *interacting*. Thus, I am interested in the performative aspect. The views of culture as a mechanism or a set of practices, however, look for causal explanations. Analysis starts, for instance, at the point of conflict and looks backwards to find the reason for it: incompatible cultural programs, discordant values or irreconcilable customs. Such analysis looks somewhat behind the words, in search of causes. They seek the implicit motive for the action, whereas I look at the action itself. I cannot answer a performative question with a causal explanation.

To understand interaction in an international project group from a performative perspective, a third form of analysis is very helpful. Instead of taking Björk's verse and looking at where it points, whether at hidden mechanisms or at faraway customs, I take the sentence itself and look at what it *does*. I acknowledge the performative nature of language.²²³ The Swedish Finance Minister of the early 19th century might have been trying to apologise for not daring to implement the very free Scottish banking system; and Björk might be revolting against everything and everybody, expressing her anarchist views. This sort of analysis is not new, and many have advocated it,²²⁴ although very few have implemented it in studies concerning culture. Eero Vaara is one who adopts a similar perspective.²²⁵

²²⁰ Schein 1992.

²²¹ Allaire and Firsirotu 1984.

²²² Vaara 2000.

²²³ See Chapter 1.

²²⁴ For an example, see Potter and Wetherell 1987.

²²⁵ Vaara 2000.

Vaara characterises this third view with a constructivist epistemology, versus the realist one of the first two views. Constructivist, he argues, because it focuses on the actors' interpretations and constructions of culture, which are thought to be more consequential for social action. Looking at those instances where actors invoke cultural stereotypes is focusing on what actors do with their idea of culture. It is stressing their interpretations and constructions of culture, and what they do with them.

Insisting on the different analytical strategies of the first two views compared to the third. Following our actors' worries, I could have tried to distinguish and describe the concrete cultural particularities of each group member; for instance, individualistic versus collectivistic values, or consensual versus confrontational behaviours. Instead, I looked at those instances where the term "culture" crept into the conversation and focused on how it was used. Another example: Take the same conflict the previous two views explained *retrospectively* with reference to incompatible cultural programs, inconsistent values or discordant practices. In the third perspective the analysis starts off in the same conflictive situation, but instead of looking *for* the implicit content of what the contesting parts say, it looks *at* what the uttered sentences do, *prospectively*. "Culture," the idea/stereotype Björk has of "Scandinavian culture," might be invoked simply to provoke, which it in fact does. This sort of analysis takes into account the performative nature of language, looking at, to paraphrase Austin, how we do things with words.²²⁶ It gives a performative answer to a performative question.

"CULTURE" EXCUSES

(February 15, 1999. The internet.)

(Calpurnia answers my e-mail regarding the recent workshop in Uppsala.)

[...] As to what happened in the group, it is perhaps important to realize that this was our second meeting with most of the participants, and so we found ourselves feeling a good deal more comfortable and relaxed about expressing our views than we did the first time (last September). The group this time was smaller, and we were all focused on the same research issue, so it was I think a more efficient and

²²⁶ Austin 1975.

productive meeting than the initial one. The highpoint for me came on Friday, in the brainstorming sessions held by the two breakout groups. I was in the group focusing on User/Employer perspectives on contingent employment, and I thought we produced really outstanding and comprehensive list of potential research questions and hypotheses, and (at last!) finally started getting concrete about research methodology. This was the biggest puzzle for us Americans at the first conference, how everybody seemed to be avoiding operational issues. Perhaps it is the 'action orientation' bias of Americans, but we were really wondering where things were going at the end of the first meeting when we hadn't even begun to discuss a joint research strategy in any concrete terms. In the U.S., research methodology is typically considered the make-or-break part of a research project. Since published scholars are typically very familiar with U.S. findings from prior research in the same stream of inquiry, they generally already know what the remaining research questions are, and so the focus of attention is on how well they will be able to address these remaining questions. But in the international context, we began to realize that different countries can have radically different views of what the important research questions are (due at least in part to the different institutional contexts). So it was appropriate and ultimately very beneficial to spend the time we did on articulating the questions we wanted to address as a group. [...]

“Culture” is used to *excuse*. “Culture,” or rather “cultural diversity,” is often evoked as the source of misunderstandings, confusion and, sometimes, even conflicts. When, initially, the researchers insistently bumped into the vagueness of “contingent employment” (which as we saw is due to the inherent vagueness of language), the easy way out of the possible conflict or the assumed effortless cause of their confusion was “culture.” They argued that the fact that the group represented a diversity of cultures drove members to understand things differently and to want to work in various manners. “Cultural diversity” was the reason why they could not reach any precise definition of “contingent employment.” It was also the reason why some group members insisted on discussing their research phenomenon whereas others impatiently wanted to move on to discussing methodological questions. I do not pretend to say that is not the case. If we look at the practices of a culture, they might

be able to make clear for us how the group members differ in their understandings and workings, and why. That, however, is not the point.

The point is a much plainer one. What I am simply trying to say is that “culture” is often brought into speech as an innocent excuse: It is simple and easy to accept, because it does not pinpoint any scapegoat. However, if one looks closer at the concrete situation where the confusion arises, other causes could readily be sorted out. For instance, that they had different educational backgrounds and thus looked at contingent employment through different lenses, or that they came into the project having their own personal interests which were fulfilled by taking slightly different focuses on the question, or that they simply did not yet know enough about the research area. Nevertheless, “culture,” or rather “cultural diversity,” continues to be the easiest excuse, since it provides a way around conflicts without blaming anyone. The group can continue to work smoothly, with neither judges nor blamed.

“CULTURE” GIVES THE GROUP A *RAISON D’ÊTRE*

(April 23, 1999, around 10:00 am, Marstrand, Sweden.)

(On stage are Calpurnia, Lucius, Flavius and Portia. In the room across the corridor are Trebonius, Pindarus, Artemidorus and Messala. There is a portable computer in each room. Each group discusses a work package. The group on stage discusses the one on health care. They talk about what type of hospitals to study and how many interviews to conduct. They write their decisions directly on what is to be the application for EU research funds. Now, they have to formulate the expected results. Flavius is typing on the computer.)

FLAVIUS (talks slowly, while he types): The work package will provide the research group with the data set and empirical findings that make comparisons possible for the understanding of the differences for the use of contingent employment in the health care industry

PORTIA: Well... it will map the use of contingent employment within the health care sector. That’s what we are trying to do, aren’t we? We map for each country what are the contingent workers in terms of occupation, type of organisation, sub-sectors in the industry... and see if they have increased the use, or decreased the use in the sector, what is the net effect on the sector itself?

(Flavius types.)

FLAVIUS: So, one thing is to map the use of contingent employment in the sector

PORTIA: Within the sector

FLAVIUS: Within the sector... in different countries. Compare the use of contingent employment in different countries in that sector...

PORTIA: Yes, that's right

FLAVIUS: ... and provide explanations of the changing use of contingent employment in that sector.

PORTIA: Relating to the legislation in the culture and socio-economic variables or something in this country... in each locality, in each region

FLAVIUS (slowly reads what he has written): compare the use of contingent employment in the sector, between different countries...

PORTIA: Related to legislation

FLAVIUS: Do we have to specify in what? Well... I was thinking... If we say that we would like only one possible result of this work package, it would be to provide explanations of the changing use of contingent employment in the health care industry. We don't have to specify more. Because we don't know if the changing use of contingent employment is because of legal things, or social conditions or things like that... Do we have to specify that?

PORTIA: Well... That's the rationale for doing an international comparison.

CALPURNIA: At the sectoral level we might look at what the environmental influences are likely to be.

PORTIA: Yeah, yeah.

(After a short while...)

LUCIUS: Coming back to the expected results, do we answer what they [EU] want?

PORTIA: We can say something about the forces by doing the comparison. That's the very meaning of doing comparison.

FLAVIUS: Yes, because the point with the comparative analysis is to do something different than national studies; and studies that only focus on workers, or only focus on firms, or only focus on intermediaries. So, our point is that we compare between countries.

CALPURNIA: Yeah.

FLAVIUS: So, when writing it we should be more general.

“Culture” is invoked to *legitimise* the value and usefulness of the project. A few months after their first meeting, as we saw in Chapter 5, the group arrived at structuring the international project into several, parallel, identical but independent, national studies. The question that arises then is, if the studies are fully and independently carried out in each participating country, why

should the researchers be together at all? To the group itself, but particularly to the EU, they legitimise the group's existence with what I have called "the comparability argument." The project is worth the grant because they are going to compare results from individual countries, and, they argue, it is precisely in that comparison, the comparison across institutional settings and cultural norms where the most interesting conclusions may be reached.

THE COMPARABILITY ARGUMENT

(Still in Marstrand, that same small group and that same morning...)

(They are deciding on a criterion to use to select the hospitals they will use to conduct the study. Some have been arguing for the size of the hospital: small vs. big. Others advocated ownership as the right criterion: private vs. public hospitals.)

FLAVIUS: The point is, we always do these things [research] in relation to former studies. There are other studies on the impact of size, so why do that again? Because... well... other studies have not made comparisons between countries, and by doing comparisons between countries we can look at the effect of different systems, different levels of market pressure, different legal aspects, different...

"Other studies have not made comparisons between countries," or, "The novelty and interest of the research project is the comparison among countries." – such explanations were very often invoked. Surprisingly, though, allusions to the interest of comparing across countries came out as much when the matter in question was similar in the various countries as when it was dissimilar. For instance, to Lucius's comment that it was not possible to study contingent employment in the healthcare sector in Spain since it is explicitly forbidden by law, Flavius answered "But that's a very interesting comparative result for our study! Compare the situation in the healthcare sector in the different countries and realise that they are different and why." Here Flavius is using a comparison to justify carrying out the study in a sector where contingent employment does not exist in one of the participating countries.

On the other hand, the interest in comparing is argued when things are very much the same in several or all countries. This is the case with the food industry – a seasonal, low qualification and traditional industry. Despite pos-

sessing these characteristics in all countries, it is still somehow “interesting to see that it is similar across countries,” as someone put it.

Comparison argues as much for differences as for similarities, becoming an all-purpose argument; a criterion used to select what sectors to study that does not discriminate. Comparison across cultural practices is thus not used in selecting countries to include in the project. It is used for doing something else.

Comparison is always praised in connection to the variety of countries represented in the project. When in the research grant application, the argument is addressed to the EU Commission, it is used to underline the interest of the expected results. Even if the phenomenon of contingent employment is interesting in itself, without a need to appeal to cross-country comparison, they advocate for the interest of the study on a different basis. The project is interesting, they write, because of the possibility to “account for the effects of specific institutional aspects, [... to] widen the scope of research, [...and to] compare developments and consequences of contingent employment” across countries and institutional practices. It is the international comparison that is presented to be worth the EU grant, rather than the phenomenon of contingent employment. The comparability argument is thus used to legitimise the interest of the project as a whole, their mere coming together, the mixed nature of the group.

Besides, this same argument advocating for the worth of the project, reminds the members of their dependence on the group. They might be carrying out independent, although similar, studies in their own countries, but that is not where the interest of the project lies. The interest lies in the various national projects coming together. Comparison, thus, re-establishes the group interdependency – interdependency that was lost with the autonomy of each separate study. It enforces individual commitment to the wider project.

“CULTURE” POSITIONS THE SELF

The third use of “culture” has already been the object of a more extended analysis in Chapter 6, so I will simply recapitulate.

“Culture” is used to *position* the self and the others. I have taken the notion of “position” from Davies and Harré, referring to the location assigned

to the self in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants.²²⁷ In this view, the self is produced discursively, and “culture” is one of the discursive lines.

On those occasions when vagueness is overwhelming, intentions are assigned to others’ actions according to the cultural stereotype. We saw already how Lucius attributed a “need to plan everything” behind the excessive and confusing talk of all those Northern Europeans. Maybe Björk would have sung that the need to plan everything was due to a will to organise freedom.

Even more than positioning the other, one also positions oneself along the cultural discursive line, whether in conformity to it (for instance Flavius’ confession of being a “goal-oriented Swede”), or in opposition to it (Lucius’ concession of “being a very German Spaniard”). A paradox hides here: The rejection of one’s position is not necessarily done by using an alternative discursive line; rather, it might be done by using another position along the same line, however “unnatural” that position may seem. Despite his black hair, brown eyes and dark skin, Lucius still embraces “culture” (the German stereotype) to position himself against the label assigned to him (the Spanish stereotype).

Closely related to this use of “culture,” there is another, more naughty, use. “We’ll put our exotic flavour here,” Lucius reveals. With the excuse of exoticism, taking advantage of the position attributed to him, he permits himself to do what he otherwise might not have even thought of at home. “Culture” becomes an excuse to become somewhat piquant and sprightly.

“CULTURE” JUSTIFIES DECISIONS

(April, 23, 1999, Marstrand, Sweden.)

(In the meeting room, around the big table, we see one of the smaller discussion groups: Flavius, Calpurnia, Portia and Lucius. It is the last day of the workshop, so they are pressured to make some practical decisions concerning the project. Right now, they need to designate who will be responsible for each work package.)

FLAVIUS: We have to think about... who is going to be responsible for each work package. Who feels for being responsible for food industry?

²²⁷ Davies and Harré 1991.

LUCIUS: Uhum... I already have some connections with some people in that industry.

FLAVIUS: So... Lucius could be the coordinator of the work package in food industry... That's very good. Should we try to distribute the other ones?

PORTIA: Yes, yes.

FLAVIUS, murmuring: Ok, I'll write down

portia: If you don't mind, I would prefer not to do health care because I don't know very much about it. Although Tullius [her husband] does actually. But I could do ICT²²⁸ or finance.

FLAVIUS: Ok... well...

CALPURNIA: For us it would be of course quite natural to take the ICT.

UNION REPRESENTATIVE: But, in that case, if you're doing ICT, and, (looking to Portia), you're doing Finance, could you [to Flavius] do health?

FLAVIUS: Yes I was thinking because... Pindarus [who works together with him] is going to write his thesis dissertation on intermediaries within health care. So health care would be interesting for us. And maybe... it would be a natural thing for Trebonius, Holland, to take the intermediary work package.

CALPURNIA: Mmmm.

FLAVIUS: If he is not interested in the food industry. And then you [looking at Lucius] and Trebonius will have to discuss that... But if it's ok with Trebonius, I think they won't mind to take the intermediary.

PORTIA: Yes. I mean obviously we'll all work together anyhow. We will work collaboratively. It's just choosing who's responsible for making sure that we got all the information and coordinate the work.

(Flavius types on the computer...)

CALPURNIA: It's off the time.

FLAVIUS: I'm sorry. Then, you Portia take the finance?

PORTIA: That's fine. Both Tullius and I have worked quite a lot in Finance.

(About an hour later, the whole group sits around that same table. Flavius addresses those members of the group who were not present in the previous scene.)

FLAVIUS: [...] and concerning the distribution of responsibilities. We said that the British partners would take the financial industry. We think that's very good to get someone from the UK cause they're quite advanced in that area. Sweden will take health care industry because hospitals have a symbolic value

²²⁸ ICT: Information and Communication Technology.

for the Welfare State. And Lucius, in Spain, would have food, ready-made meal. Food industry is a big thing in Spain. And California would take communication technology. It's very logical. And this is all dependent on Trebonius, of course. But, I think intermediaries are well developed in Holland.

We can compare the actual decision making to its posterior justification. The distribution of responsibilities was done randomly depending on tastes, accessibility, already ongoing studies and even on fashions in one's country. However, not even a couple of hours later, they argued about it in what appears to be a rational and sensible manner: The sector of a given work package was the most logical for the signalled country.

In fact, it never mattered which country was responsible for a given work package, as all countries had to carry on every single part of the study. It was a decision without obvious consequences for the development of the project. Yet Flavius somehow felt compelled to rationalise the randomly made decision. With this, I do not pretend to judge the way our researchers made decisions. I am just signalling a use of "culture," of "country and its cultural institutions," in a situation where such use was not required. At least it was not required in a logical sense, though it maybe was required in a grammatical sense.²²⁹ The two smaller groups had joint to tell each other what had been decided, and to justify the decisions made. In the language game of justification, "culture" comes in as a good reason for random decisions, those decisions with no evident direct consequences for the design of the project.

"CULTURE" ALLOWS THE GROUP...

... to avoid blaming and scapegoating.

... to keep interaction going despite the lack of a precise vision of where to go and how to get there.

... to defend the interest of the study, to argue its worth.

²²⁹ With "grammatical sense" I refer to Wittgenstein's use of "grammar." It is not the linguistic structure of a sentence. With "grammar" Wittgenstein means the actual use of words, how we talk here and now.

... to stay together and increase individual commitment towards the project despite the independence of national studies.

... to know what to expect of each other and what is expected from oneself, especially in the initial stages of the project.

... to appear professional and rational when justifying decisions.

Whether considered particular institutional contexts (eg. when justifying and legitimating), peculiar ways of thinking (eg. when excusing), or an specific set of skills and behaviours (eg. when positioning the self), group members *used the idea of culture to do things*. Even if our actors implicitly assume culture to be a sort of mechanism or a set of practices that influence interaction, they still use the story line/term “culture” to solve several practicalities.

By getting around possible difficulties, “culture,” the idea group members have of culture, or cultural stereotypes of group members,²³⁰ keeps the project going.

²³⁰ To underline a crucial difference. For analytical purposes and to be coherent with the performative perspective in this study, I have simply taken culture as a term, a term used in conversation. The relationship between words and deeds, talk and action, is in focus. However, this does not mean that those in the field consider culture in the same way. In fact, they take culture in the sense I, for reasons of perspective and coherence, have rejected.



TYING THE KNOTS



Consider for example the proceedings that we call ‘games’. I mean board games, card games, ball games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all? – Don’t say: “There *must* be something common, or they would not be called ‘games’ – but *look and see* whether there is anything common to all. – For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: Don’t think, but look!

Wittgenstein 1953, *Philosophical Investigations*, §66

And we may not advance any kind of theory. There must not be anything hypothetical in our considerations. We must do away with all explanation, and description alone must take its place. And this description gets its light, that is to say its purpose, from the philosophical problems. These are, of course, not empirical problems; they are solved rather, by looking into the workings of our language, and that in such a way as to make us recognise those workings: in despite of an urge to misunderstand them. The problems are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known. Philosophy is the battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language.

Wittgenstein 1953, *Philosophical Investigations*, §109

“**L**ook and see” – I ended the first chapter retaining Wittgenstein’s advice. I have continued to apply that advice throughout the text, and I shall round off my story arguing its value. What may seem to be a methodological remark is, indeed, much more. It is a way of comprehending the world around us, of getting an understanding of what happens in our closest environment. With his “Don’t think, but look!” Wittgenstein refrains from searching for causal explanations. He is not looking for possible “whys” behind the phenomena that puzzle us. That would be, at its best, mere hypothesising; at its worst, esoteric speculations. As Wittgenstein abstains from finding causes behind the phenomena he tries to

comprehend, I have tried to resist the human tendency to find another type of causes, intentions, behind human action and interaction.²³¹

The approach adopted in this thesis does not seek to discover anything hidden. It simply tries "... to *understand* something that is already in plain view. For this is what we seem in some sense not to understand."²³² Plain view, the surface, is the greatness of Wittgenstein's legacy, as I see it. Life, reality, is rich enough in itself. There is no need to make it even more complex by adding a hidden dimension behind everything we say or see.²³³ We have enough trouble already trying to understand the surface, the abundance of reality as Feyerabend puts it. Wittgenstein taught us the value of what seems to us most banal: the surface, the force of triviality.

Consequently, the outcome of this thesis is neither a grand theory, nor an analytical model, nor a causal explanation.²³⁴ Nor are any novel truth-claims erected. Throughout this thesis, I have sought to reach an understanding, not to discover; to gain insight, not information; to bring a novel reading,²³⁵ not facts.²³⁶ I have observed cultural diversity and intercultural interaction through lenses foreign to that research area, lenses borrowed from the philosophy of language and the sociology of science. In that cross-disciplinary attempt, I both come with an alternative story of interaction in international project groups, and develop a perspective to catch the dynamism of organising processes. In this text I have looked at and described what a group of researchers coming from various countries and different disciplines did to set up an international research project. Two questions centred my story: 1) "How does the organising process of an international project group develop?" 2) "What role does cultural diversity play in that process?" However plain such a descriptive strategy may sound, I added an unusual twist:

²³¹ Gustafsson 1994, p.80.

²³² Wittgenstein 1953, §89; emphasis in the original.

²³³ *Nothing is hidden* is the title of a book about Wittgenstein's philosophy written by one of his students, Norman Malcolm.

²³⁴ In Chapter 2, under *On scientific claims*, I distinguished two uses of the term "explanation:" causal explanation and narrative explication. My contribution would belong to the second type: the novel reading of an old riddle. I offer a new way of looking at and comprehending organising processes in groups of people with different cultural backgrounds.

²³⁵ Czarniawska 1998. For a clarification of the concept of "novel reading," see Chapter 2.

²³⁶ The previous empirical chapters develop a novel reading of the organising process of an international project group, a reading which the current chapter condenses in order to better capture the wholeness of the story. Chapter 9 elaborates on what the novel reading implies for research on diversity management in particular and organisational theory in general.

vagueness. The story of the organising process of an international research project group becomes the story of the group's strategies in *Levelling Vagueness*.

LEVELLING VAGUENESS

The abundance of life, the richness of reality, manifested itself, to our group of researchers, in the severe difficulty of reaching a clear-cut definition of "contingent employment." Whenever they found a rule defining what "contingent employment" could be (i.e., a company, the "intermediary," who rents out personnel to a second company, the "user," for a limited period of time), there were always some cases the criterion left out (i.e., students in summer jobs), while including other cases that should not have been included (i.e., consultants). The language game of definition attempts to provide a rule for the use of the defined term – a rule that tells once and for all when and how it is correct to use the term in question.

However, different language games involve different uses of the same term. Belonging to several research disciplines and coming from different countries, the games the researchers usually plaid with "contingent employment" varied. Each group member had learnt to use the expression according to certain rules, which did not completely overlap among different members. What was a necessary condition in one game (contingent employment is legally forbidden in the Spanish public sector) was an occasional quality in another game (contingent employment may or may not be introduced in Swedish hospitals). What was a constitutive rule in one context (contingent employees do not have fixed contracts anywhere in the US) was a violation of the game in another context (contingent employees do have fixed contracts with the Swedish intermediaries). Group members might even want to play different games. While the lawyer wanted to use "contingent employment" making reference to the employment contract, business researchers wanted to use it in relation to organisational control. They had no common rule, or set of rules, telling them how to use the expression "contingent employment" in each specific case. Thus, they experienced "contingent employment" as vague.

Yet, without definition, without a clear view of the project's goal, how was the group to proceed? They did not know where to go, and even less how they were going to get there. Moreover, group members felt uncertain

about to what extent the others thought in the same terms as they did. Each used the term in his/her own way. "Contingent employment" was too broad, too vague, for them to know if the others interpreted the phenomenon similarly, and if they were ready to study it in analogous ways.

ANALYTIC THOUGHT STRUCTURES AND DISTRIBUTES²³⁷

Analytical thinking aims at attacking the vagueness of abstract concepts and broad visions. To the researcher group, analysis directly addressed the project's goal. Analysis, or the division of the whole into its parts, is mainly done on the basis of contrast. We develop classifications and taxonomies by drawing lines that order phenomena in terms of opposites. Basically, we experience and describe our surroundings based on contrasts.²³⁸ In the case of our play, the group of researchers did so by means of two lines: give/take, who gave and who took employment; and rent in/rent out, who rented in and who rented out personnel. Those two lines divided the research phenomenon into three areas: "user," "intermediary," "employee." "Contingent employment," the issue of the project, began to acquire a triptych shape.

Through analysis, the actors got a glimpse of some sort of structure; they began to define some order. Through the division and classification of what they were to do, they were able to conquer its, until then, paralysing vagueness. "Contingent employment" still went into several language games. It was still used in various ways. Yet, the group had found a similarity to the referent²³⁹ of all uses. The division became the starting point to do something, to act, to design the project. Later on, that same division was used to structure the project, set up a research agenda and distribute responsibility.

Analysis arranges the abundance of reality, the richness of life, the vagueness of words, into manageable boxes. Vagueness does not paralyse anymore.

²³⁷ See Chapters 4 and 5.

²³⁸ Gustafsson 1994, p. 91-92.

²³⁹ With the referent I mean what the term/statement deals with.

METAPHORS VISUALISE²⁴⁰

Vagueness might not have been paralysing, but it was not yet easily managed. Our researchers, even after the dividing lines had been acknowledged, were still unable to provide any sound definition of “contingent employment.” Vagueness persisted within the parts. “Intermediary,” “user” and “employee” were still vague terms. Their use was neither clear, nor common to all group members. Something had to be done; otherwise the attempt to start up an international research project was doomed to fail. The solution came quickly. They took a marker and drew three circles on the whiteboard.

Metaphors (as presented in Chapter 4, images are but special kinds of metaphors) were another strategy used to cope with the vagueness of the project topic. Metaphors are shortcuts in an explication.²⁴¹ The three-circles image visualised how “contingent employment” was to be understood and where the group was to go. A quick gaze at the whiteboard gave everyone a sense of direction. The aim of the project now had a contour. Although still vague, “contingent employment” no longer needed a precise definition, an all-encompassing rule. The research phenomenon was precise enough; or vague enough. Group members already knew where they were heading – towards studying a three-circled reality – and that they all headed in, more or less, the same direction.

Analysis and metaphor differ in how they deal with vagueness. Analysis combats vagueness. Its dividing lines introduce a sense of precision, even if vagueness remains in the divided parts. Metaphors, however, welcome vagueness. Its image (both the literal and the poetic) accommodates heterogeneity; it remains open to interpretation and adaptation. A metaphor makes vagueness something positive. Everyone could now read the peculiarities of his own country within the framework of the image. The flexibility of the metaphor accommodates the variety and abundance of everyone’s realities, constituting a firm base for consensus. A consensus that does not lie in a single definition, or in a unique rule, but in the acceptance of a heterogeneity of views and uses.

Assuming the risk of getting repetitive, there is an issue I want to make clear. The point here is neither the specific shape of the image, nor how ob-

²⁴⁰ See Chapters 4 and 5.

²⁴¹ Czarniawska-Joerges 1993.

vious it may seem to represent the phenomenon of “contingent employment” with three circles. The point I want to underline is that the image puts an end to what seemed to be a never ending discussion; it sets a stop to a ceaseless search for a precise definition and for a clear goal. It tells them how vague is vague enough. From that instant on, vagueness is an advantage, as it gives flexibility to the project by making room for the particularities of every country and perspective. Everybody is acknowledged. Our researchers can then move on to design the joint research project, and where is a better point to continue setting up the project than from the silent consensus they had reached? If they all agreed on the image, why not use it?

That is exactly what they did. They took the three circles and used it to establish a set of routines and practices for member actions and the group interactions. The image was no longer a mere description of their research phenomenon and the project matter. It also became a project plan, a research agenda, an organisational chart, and a socialising device for newcomers. In a sense, the image was used as a tool to manage the vagueness of the project structure (What do we do and in what order?), its deadlines (When do we do what?), the distribution of responsibilities (Who does what?), and the integration of potentially dissenting perspectives (How are new members to fit into the project?). Thanks to its analytical shape the core issue was structured into tasks, the project divided into work packages, time distributed across activities, responsibility allocated among group members.

Metaphor reconciles the variety of individual peculiarities and the heterogeneity of country practices. Vagueness becomes, in this sense, an advantage.

IDENTITY CHANGE COMMITTS²⁴²

The language game of definition is not only about a referent. It is also about a sender and an addressee. The utterance “contingent employment is formed by a user, an intermediary and an employee” positions its sender (the person who utters the statement), its addressee (the person who receives it) and its referent (what the statement deals with) in a certain way. As Lyotard notes, this sort of utterance places the sender in the position of knower, the addressee is put in the position of having to take a stance towards what is stated,

²⁴² See Chapter 6.

and the referent is handled as something that demands to be correctly identified and expressed by the statement.²⁴³

So far I have looked at how analysis and metaphor dealt with the referent. The mobilisation of identity concerns the sender and the addressee. On stage we saw that in order to place themselves or the others as knowers, and to refuse or accept a statement, the researchers used mainly three story lines: “culture,” “experience,” and “assigned responsibility.” They made sense of the initial confusion through “cultural differences;” the all-pervasive vagueness of “contingent employment,” and its parts, was dealt with through “my experience in an intermediary agency;” the nebulous expectations of oneself were shaped through “my responsibility in this project.” One story line or another was selected depending on the requirements of the specific situation; the position within that story was often a given. One can choose “culture” instead of “professional background” to deal with the vagueness of “contingent employment,” but one cannot avoid being classified as a temperamental Spaniard instead of a goal-oriented Swede.

One more thing is left to be said: The ongoing definition of identity increased individual commitment towards the project. Analysis and metaphor, we saw, enacted a reality with a triptych shape, a reality that later structured the project. Along with the emergence of such a reality, group member identities were mobilised, accommodating the emerging reality. As the self is defined in terms of the reality the project was going to work in, individuals committed themselves to the so enacted reality.

Sender and addressee are positioned as knowers of various aspects of the referent. The mobilisation of identities sheds light on the referent from various angles.

“CULTURAL DIVERSITY” CATALYSES²⁴⁴

The relationship between culture and vagueness is of a slightly different character. “Culture” is not simply a tool, or strategy, for levelling vagueness. Culture itself, or rather the expression of cultural variety, have a place because of vagueness. Let me develop this point.

²⁴³ Lyotard 1979, p. 9.

²⁴⁴ See Chapter 7.

“Culture” and vagueness are mutually related. I maintained above that the three-circles image visualised a voiceless consensus, a consensus that had to do with the way all parties were to look at contingent employment. Nevertheless, three circles is a rather open representation of that phenomenon. How exactly those three circles were to be interpreted was left in the hands of each researcher. The now compartmentalised vagueness made room to introduce the peculiarities of each participating country. Openness in the way of looking at contingent employment gave plasticity to the project, allowing the adaptation of the study to the variety of national institutions and cultural practices. In a sense, the vagueness left in the image guaranteed the expression of cultural diversity.

At the same time, the worth of the research project was recurrently argued to be the cultural variety vagueness permitted. On stage, our researchers defended the merit of the project with allusions to the possibility to “... account for the effects of specific institutional aspects, [... to] widen the scope of research, [...and to] compare developments and consequences of contingent employment” across countries and institutional practices. Furthermore, that very same argument, the possibility to compare across countries, reminded group members of their mutual need. Despite the autonomy with which national studies were carried out, those studies were interdependent, they argued, because the primary strength of the research project lied in the actual comparison across national studies. “Cultural diversity,” with its endorsed comparability, became the group’s *raison d’être*.

Yet, the same vagueness that makes room for adaptation and variety also makes room for misunderstandings and confusion. Without exact definitions, “contingent employment,” or “intermediary” for that matter, may have as many interpretations as there are researchers. The confusion that may originate is not explained, at least not on stage, by blaming someone’s incapacity or naming a scapegoat. Instead, a culpable that is much easier to accept is chosen: cultural diversity. With such an innocent excuse the group is able to keep going. It impedes getting stuck in a blaming-defending type of interaction that would not move the project forward. “Cultural diversity” is used to excuse the misunderstandings and confusion that vagueness provoked (or maybe, it is better said, to which enough vagueness never put an end).

Briefly, “cultural diversity” excuses the confusion brought in by vagueness, while vagueness makes room for “cultural diversity,” which, in turn, is

used to legitimate the worth of the project, and to remind group members of their mutual interdependency. As an excuse, a legitimating device and a reminder of interdependency, it can be said that “cultural diversity” (and “culture” with it) smoothes interaction. As a catalyst facilitates a chemical reaction, the expression “cultural diversity” facilitates the organising process. Although not always necessary, it propitiates the reaction in the lab, or the interaction in an international project.

Vagueness and the idea of “cultural diversity” go hand in hand. The first makes room for the second, and the second excuses the first.

THE PLAY GIVES ANSWERS

The perspective I proposed in Chapter one, a performative view of language that places meaning neither in the mind nor in the world, but in the linguistic practices and actions around the use of words, led me headlong into vagueness. The focus on the pragmatics of words translates into a method that attempts to follow human interaction by following the use of words, closely studying contexts, situations and actions where they are inserted. For the story in this thesis I followed the use, by an international group of researchers, of the expression “contingent employment.” The contexts, situations and actions into which the expression was inserted varied across countries and disciplines. Contingent employment, the phenomena they were to study, could only very vaguely be defined. The aim of the project and the degree of future cooperation had, initially, a vague confine. Individual commitment to the project and the extent of research skills and knowledge in the relevant field, were vaguely known. At the beginning our group faced paralysing vagueness.

How was interaction organised in that sea of vagueness? Group members proceeded by trying to make sense of the vagueness that paralysed them. In their attempt, they indistinctly used different rationalities or modes of knowledge:²⁴⁵ analysis and metaphor.²⁴⁶ They, too, swiftly used one stereotype or another: “culture,” “profession” and “experience” – stereotypes which ongoingly positioned individual identity. Analysis, metaphor and identity positions

²⁴⁵ Bruner 1986.

²⁴⁶ Images are but a form of metaphor. D. McCloskey, for instance, argues that the graphics and images that economists use are metaphors, and thus rhetorical tools (McCloskey 1986).

were steadily used to cope with vagueness. The dynamism of the interacting process comes from the continuous levelling of vagueness.

How did the levelling occur? Analysis levelled the vagueness of concepts by dividing and categorising them into smaller and easier to manage boxes. It also levelled the vagueness of the project by structuring it, setting deadlines and distributing responsibilities. Analysis did not reduce vagueness. It made vagueness manageable. Metaphor levelled the vagueness of the core issue by visualising it and by materialising a consensus – a consensus that was not grounded on a unique meaning of “contingent employment” for all group members in all work contexts, but on heterogeneity, the acceptance of everyone’s peculiarities. The analytical shape of the image permitted the structuring of the project and the organisation of the group’s interaction during the meetings. In this sense, the image became the organising rule when group members were together. The ongoing positioning of identity levelled the vagueness of who knew what and how much, of who was responsible for what and of how deeply each researcher was committed to the project. The mobilisation of identity positioned group members in terms of the relevant knowledge and the necessary commitment. Finally, the idea of cultural diversity, through that of culture, smoothed interaction. “Cultural diversity” eased many situations and actions by excusing what was potentially conflictive. The answer to the question “What role does cultural diversity play in daily group life?” is “‘Cultural diversity’ catalysed the organising process; it facilitated international collaboration.” In short, organising proceeded by “dividing, visualising, committing and catalysing.”

How did the organising process in our group of researchers look? Neither was it linear, nor circular (which is but a bent sort of linearity). Analysis, metaphor, identity definition, and “cultural diversity” were not strictly used one after another. No ordered sequence was in place. Rather, all four forms of sense-making were tightly braided together – even interdependent. Without the division of analysis the metaphor could not have been drawn, and vice-versa. Without the visualisation of the metaphor the aim of the project would not have been grasped, and analysis would have had no project to structure. The same went for identity. The lines suggested by analysis and settled down by a metaphor served to define our actors’ identities and ascribe them responsibilities, while such definitions and ascriptions confirmed and stabilised the analytical divisions visualised in the metaphor. “Cultural diver-

sity” also helped to position identities in a moment when analysis had not yet started to level vagueness. Moreover, “cultural diversity” enabled analysis, metaphor and identity by facilitating the discussions and interactions that led to them. All four forms of levelling vagueness iterated. Therefore the story answers the question, “How does the pattern of interaction look?” with “Iterative.”

BEYOND THE ANSWER

The story does not end with those answers; it reaches further. The four organising processes described directed the group to discuss things in smaller groups, it directed them not to ask certain uncomfortable question and to draw instead of theorise. Each group member knew whom to ask what, how to excuse confusion, how to argue the worth of the project, how much was enough and when to take a break. Analysis, metaphor, the mobilisation of identity and the idea of culture shaped the group’s routines and habits. They gave group members a guide for acting, reacting, behaving and speaking; and for not speaking, not asking, not reacting and not acting. They got a regularity for what words to use and how; a regularity reflecting “the way to do things around here,” the accepted, the ungrounded, the taken for granted that cannot be justified. It is a form of life, as Wittgenstein might have put it, since it is that regularity that makes each researcher a member of a community – the researcher group.

Analysis, metaphor and various stereotypes levelled vagueness by shaping the rules of the game group members were to play together. They developed language, and inherent to it, a form of life.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁷ Wittgenstein 1953:

§19: “And to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life.”

§23: “Here the term ‘language-*game*’ is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life.”

A bit more developed in §241: “So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false? – It is what human beings *say* that is true and false; and they agree in the *language* they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life.”



LEVELLING VAGUENESS

- OR, ORGANISING



Jag väljer att se vetenskapen som ett samtal. Detra samtal är ständigt pågående; ett samtal om vad som finns, vad som gäller, vad som är en meningsfull utsaga, vad som är ett meningsfullt påstående. Här deltar alla, så gott som, fast på olika villkor. Här deltar icke blott alla nu levande vetenskapliga debattörer, utan också de tidigare levande vilkas utsagor man minns: Aristoteles, Platon, Galilei, Newton, Marx, Weber – ja, hela gänget är med.²⁴⁸

Gustafsson 1994, *Produktion av alvar*, p. 13-14

If it's true that sensemaking involves seeing what one has said, then it's also true that if we can reword the sentences that people utter about themselves, we can alter the conclusions they arrive at concerning who they are and what they're up to. Our strong impression is that when people in organisations have conversation, those conversations are not particularly instructive, nor are their pauses within those conversations cultivating. We're trying to make it possible for people to have better conversations so that they can see their circumstances more richly.

Weick 1979, *The social psychology of organizing*, p. 240

“**C**onversation” comes from the Latin noun *conversatio*, related to the verb *conversari*, to associate with; frequently used with *convertere*, to turn around.²⁴⁹ Joining a conversation could be seen as positioning one's thoughts and opinions *vis-à-vis* the debaters. It would be about deciding who to associate with, and whose argument to oppose.

Science is often regarded as an ongoing conversation among participants both living and dead. As Gustafsson suggests, when writing books and arti-

²⁴⁸ “I choose to see science as a conversation. This conversation is constantly present; a conversation on what there is, what is valid, what is a meaningful statement, what is a meaningful claim. Everybody participates in it, although under different conditions. Not only do all currently living scientific debaters participate, but also those who are no longer living, whose statements we remember: Aristotle, Plato, Galilee, Newton, Marx, Weber – yes, the whole gang is there” (Gustafsson 1994, p. 13-14; own translation).

²⁴⁹ From Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary's website (www.m-w.com).

cles, when discussing at a seminar or when presenting an idea at a conference, we do not merely converse with those reading, listening or debating us. We may start our arguments from Plato's considerations, develop them with what Aristotle argued and further support them with what Galilee, or anyone of the others who are not with us, said. We associate with or oppose present and past participants in the scientific conversation, and we have (or may think we have) something to tell to them.

Although in a slightly different sense, people in organisations also converse. They might comment on work-related difficulties. Through talk, solutions to problems are found. Sporadically, practitioners turn towards scientific conversation to find another perspective, a new view that may help them in their daily work. I won't go as far as Weick, who maintains that conversations in organisations are not particularly instructive. Nevertheless, I agree with him when he claims that we can contribute to their conversation – as much, I believe, as they can contribute to ours.

Throughout this thesis we have heard the voices of some debaters in the conversations going on in the field of social sciences. Their participation has allowed me to sometimes develop my reasoning further, and other times, to support my argument. It is now time to add my bit, and to make clear what I have to say in regards to organisational practice.

A NOVEL READING OF INTERNATIONAL GROUPS

The scientific conversation this thesis most directly addresses is the one concerning interaction in international groups. The form of the dominant research question, and the assumptions underlying that question, differ to the way I have confronted the field. Thus the suggested answers differ in the same manner.

	Dominant research	This thesis
Question ²⁵⁰	<i>What is the effect of cultural diversity on group interaction?</i>	1. <i>How does the organising process of an international project group develop?</i> 2. What role does cultural diversity play in that process?
Answer	Cultural diversity affects the individual effectiveness, group productivity, creativity, turnover, group cohesiveness. ²⁵¹	Levelling vagueness. “Cultural diversity” catalyses. ²⁵²
Assumption ²⁵³	Cause-effect relationship. Cultural diversity reified: A gap between cultures that can be measured.	Surface, dismiss the micro-macro distinction. “Cultural diversity” inseparably woven into language.

Dominant research on international groups takes national culture as a collection of variables that explain the ways group members interact. Their question adopts a causal form: “What is the effect of cultural diversity on group interaction?”²⁵⁴ They then define culture as a set of *dimensions*, such as individualism-collectivism, and measure the extent to which these dimensions influence group interaction. The answer to their question is given in terms of group performance, creativity and cohesiveness.²⁵⁵ By doing so, they focus on the *products* of interaction; the actual interacting *process* is left aside. Both the question and its answer assume some sort of *stable* cause-effect relationship – the cause being the cultural gap, and the effect being an initially hampered performance. Such a strategy reveals the results of a process but nevertheless, it raises questions regarding the process. Causal questions lead to causal answers. Hence, to capture the dynamism of the organising process in multicultural groups, the research question needs to be reformulated.

Inspired by Wittgenstein’s late philosophy, I changed the questioning strategy: “How does the organising process of an international project group develop?” Such a question focuses attention on the process of *organising*, of *working together*, of *interacting*. It focuses on the surface, on what is visible to the eye and audible to the ear. I then concentrated on the pragmatics of

²⁵⁰ See Chapter 1.

²⁵¹ See Chapter 1.

²⁵² See Chapter 8.

²⁵³ See Chapter 2.

²⁵⁴ See for instance Watson, Kumar and Michaelsen 1993.

²⁵⁵ For some examples see Bochner and Hesketh 1994; Kirchmeyer and Cohen 1992; Maznevski and Chudoba 1997; Milliken and Martins 1996; Thomas 1999; Watson, Kumar and Michaelsen 1993.

words, a perspective that acknowledges the tight twine between words and deeds, talk and action, the meaning of an expression and group interaction. By following the use of a word as group members interacted, and the practices around that use, the perspective allows for the study of the *process* of interaction among people from different countries. Besides, it gives leeway to the various *meanings* the expression “cultural diversity” may have.²⁵⁶

As you ask, you will be answered: vagueness arose. Financial difficulties, missing a meeting because of illness, flights or trains that leave earlier than the end of the workshop, severe jet-lags, difficulty sleeping in a bed that is not one’s own, moving home, family additions, coffee-breaks, relaxing sight-seeing walks in the hosting town, conferences to arrange, deadlines imposed from outside. Various institutional practices, national laws, research disciplines, work contexts at home, etc., the list could go on. Mundane banalities, unexpected practicalities, and expected national divergences inundate the course of an international project and daily group life. It is the dust of the surface, or the abundance of life, as Feyerabend expresses it, which manifests in the vagueness of our words.

With this change in perspective, organising when cultures meet develops through the continuous levelling of vagueness. We are impatient with what is open, we crave certainty and stability. Yet, we desire flexibility and adaptation. How the process develops and the pattern of interaction it leads to, have been the object of the previous chapter. What I do want to underline is that the ongoing levelling of vagueness is responsible for the dynamism of *any* interacting process.²⁵⁷ “Level vagueness,” in its various forms, is what took the group from a project with an undefined goal to one with a more or less clear goal and structured stages, from a cooperation with an unknown extent to one where time and responsibility were framed. “Culture” and “cultural diversity,” or rather, *the ideas actors have of culture and cultural diversity*, become in this perspective one strategy among others to make sense of what seems vague. A performative question led me to a performative answer.

²⁵⁶ Ely and Thomas (2001), studying three culturally diverse organisations, realised that cultural diversity can be understood in at least three ways. The understanding held, they argue, influences the functioning of culturally diverse groups. This is how they explain the contradictory results reached in the literature on multicultural groups. More importantly, this observation questions the prevailing perspective in the literature: cultural diversity becomes a construct that participants may understand in several ways. It thus cannot be measured once and for all. See Chapter 1 for a more extended presentation of results and a discussion on the implications these have.

²⁵⁷ This point is further developed later, in *Extending vagueness*.

A FRESH INSIGHT INTO CROSS-CULTURAL AND DIVERSITY MANAGEMENT

“Levelling vagueness” is the line I added to the scientific conversation. In light of that phrase, culture is not an appropriate explanatory variable for human interaction, but rather one way, among others, to make sense out of vagueness. Re-reading the literature on cross-cultural and diversity management with the insight of vagueness, has practical consequences both for researchers in the field and for practitioners dealing with such issues. The novel reading offered here yields a reinterpretation of previous results, complementing their answers.

First, cultural dimensions, however detailed questionnaires and surveys be-hind their design may be, become concealing and deceiving. Concealing because, whether one is aware of it or not, they disguise the richness and variety of each geographical reality into a uniform of similitude. Saying that people’s behaviour in a given culture is individualistic and risk taking, is lacking consideration to the changeable and contradictory manifestations of human nature. Such research on culture, in its attempt to mould the shapeless, becomes inattentive to the richness of everyday life. It reduces, or hides, the abundance of any specific situation, no matter if it is culturally homogeneous or heterogeneous, and arranges it into “manageable parcels.”²⁵⁸ Deceiving because those “manageable parcels,” despite their promise of utility, fail to give adequate advice. Otherwise, how do you explain managers’ dissatisfaction with the correspondence of an intercultural training program with the problems they faced in their international environments?²⁵⁹ I am not denying cultural differences in language, history, tradition, body gestures, food habits, etc. I am simply saying that, seen from the perspective of vagueness, those differences have become too important in the dominant research approach, thus annihilating the particulars of the specific interaction.

Nor do I maintain that homogeneous and heterogeneous groups perform similarly. My approach does not allow me to take a stand regarding that question. What I can do is read anew previous studies, reinterpreting and complementing them. Culture, in this re-reading, stops being a collection of

²⁵⁸ The expression “manageable parcels” comes from Feyerabend (1999) who uses it to discard objectivity and cultural separation.

²⁵⁹ Wolkenauer 1996, cited in Sauquet and Jacobs 1998. See the literature review in Chapter I.

variables, and is transformed into a term used in interaction in various occasions and with varied consequences. Cultural diversity, as well, ceases to be a problematic gap, to instead become a useful expression – an expression performing diverse things depending on the circumstances in which it is invoked. In sum, cultural diversity becomes a linguistic resource, able to put the abundance of reality in order and make sense out of the vagueness inherent in language. The difference in group outcomes (like group productivity, creativity, cohesiveness...) that existing research acknowledges, becomes a consequence of introducing a new linguistic resource into group interaction. The disagreement in research findings concerning what type of group performs better, is the direct consequence of how the extra linguistic resource is put into use by the concrete group. As observed by Ely and Thomas, “cultural diversity” may hinder or facilitate group interaction depending on whether it is understood as a chance to learn or as a moral imperative to ensure justice – a reinterpretation of existing results that I complement by recognising other linguistic resources: metaphor and identity borders.²⁶⁰

Hence, training in cultural diversity changes character. Currently, such training proceeds by reviewing cultural stereotypes and exchanging cultural codes of conduct. The insight that reality abounds, that the world seems vague to us and that “culture” is one among many strategies to manage that abundance and vagueness supports the introduction in those training programs of various strategies in dealing with international situations.²⁶¹ Metaphors could be developed, different lines of analysis practised and drawing skills taught. The real benefit of current training programs is not so much awaking an awareness of the different reality of the other (already a merit in itself), as it is making participants accustomed to the sense of vagueness in intercultural situations. Clarity is the result of routine.

Time is needed for the creation of routines.²⁶² The emphasis thus changes from productivity numbers and efficiency measurements to a focus on ac-

²⁶⁰ Note that both metaphor and the various borders we may use to position identity are not resources exclusive to the intercultural interaction. Thus, the novel reading I offer could be extended to interaction between cultural equals. This point will be developed in the next section.

²⁶¹ Culture ceases to be a hindrance. Rather, “culture” is one among many strategies used to make sense of vagueness and canalise abundance into a sensible course. “Culture” thus becomes an advantage international groups (and situations) have over their homogeneous counterparts. They are provided with an extra sense-making device.

²⁶² Note that this observation is in line with the conclusions arrived at by existing research in the field of culturally diverse groups (Kirchmeyer and Cohen 1992; Maznevski and Chudoba 1997; Watson, Kumar and

tion. If we are to make sense of vagueness, the solution is not found in ciphers that are everything but precise. If anything, numbers and measurements are inattentive to the peculiarities of the circumstances. If I had to give one advice to managers and leaders in intercultural situations, that advice would be “Act!” “Don’t get stuck with the vagueness that pervades those situations!” “Do something!” “Start up routines!” That something could be anything; those routines could be started up in several ways: divide, cut, analyse, paint, draw organisational charts, read poetry, make plans, change identity, bring new tales, tell new stories, make deadlines. Level vagueness, and manage abundance. How exactly that is done depends on the specific circumstances, on the task at hand, on the particulars of the situation, and on the creativity of group members and its leader.

EXTENDING VAGUENESS

Without much reflection, I accepted a common assumption made in the research literature on international groups: culture equals nationality. Geographical region of origin is used as a means to assert cultural diversity. A group composed of Spanish, British, Dutch, North-American and Swedish people – “That’s a very culturally diverse group!” I thought.

And I was right, although not for the reason I first thought. Group members proved to be diverse in more aspects than country of origin, and used these various aspects of diversity just as they used that of country of origin. Profession and length of experience, for instance, were also used to make sense out of the situation; to understand what the others said and to build up expectations on what and how much the others knew. Milliken and Martins, after an extensive literature review regarding diversity in the composition of organisational groups, concluded that any type of diversity – race, ethnicity, gender, nationality, age, personality, skills and knowledge – affects group outcomes.²⁶³ Nationality is one among many sources of differences that affect group performance. The observation of Milliken and Martins’ and my empirical data, both suggest that the linguistic resources we use to make sense out of our everyday life come from more places than just the regions where we

Michaelsen 1993). Since I arrived at the conclusions in a different manner, the consequences I draw are also different. See chapter one for a review of existing research.

²⁶³ Milliken and Martins 1996.

grew up. The way we author and read the world depends just as much on our age, gender, educational background or even whether we spend our free time playing cards in a poker club or preparing demonstrations for Green-peace.

I will even venture to say that for the organising process of the group, the type of diversity does not matter. Group members resort to the idea of “difference” (whatever its origin) to make sense out of what happens around them. In our group, as many and varied sources of diversity as educational background, work experience in the sector studied, length of research experience or nationality, were used to position the others, position oneself or to justify arguments. These are simply other kinds of stereotypes, and as such they are sensemaking devices.

For just the same reason, nor does it matter how broad the cultural gaps among group members are. As long as groups are heterogeneous (which most groups are bound to be since differences may refer to a wide variety of biographical aspects), they will have “diversity” to resort to. “Diversity,” whatever the type and the breadth of the gap, is a sensemaking device.

Another argument against the relevance of the question “What diversity matters?” is put forward by Schütz. This time it is not that the construct “diversity” is applied in a variety of circumstances. As it may be, the origins of diversity provide us with varied tools to make sense of the world, and in that sense, any sort of difference matters just the same. In *The Homecomer* Schütz gives us a cue about why biographical differences (whether they are nationality, educational background, professional experience, age, gender, etc.) affect the way we make sense of the world.²⁶⁴ Like Ulysses in the *Odyssey*, the emigrant who returns home after a few years of absence does not recognise her own country. “By the mere change of surroundings, other things have become important for both, old experiences are re-evaluated; novel ones, inaccessible to the Other, have emerged in each partner’s life.”²⁶⁵ The position from which the homecomer makes sense of the world has changed and thus the reality she reads and authors is not the same reality she read and authored before she left. The unique personal experiences have rearranged her webs of significance. The homecomer and those who never left home might originally be from the same country. Yet, their different

²⁶⁴ Schütz 1964.

²⁶⁵ Schütz 1964, p.112.

biographies have provided them with different means to interpret the outer world and interact with the other.

Other than country of origin, there are many aspects that make our biographies unique: gender, age, educational background, professional experience, race, ethnicity, even our hobbies, to name some. Miriam Salzer-Mörling talks about spheres of meaning to refer to the various aspects of our lives from which we organise, interpret and react to our surroundings. All spheres participate in the ongoing process of making the world meaningful.²⁶⁶ Analysis, metaphor and stereotypes (in the case studied, as varied as cultural differences, educational background and work experience) are not exclusive to certain geographical regions nor to intercultural situations. These are various forms of sensemaking used in everyday life.

It is thus reasonable to extend the insight of vagueness to human interaction in general, even to contexts other than that of a meeting in a hotel room for research purposes: the meeting between two friends, a culturally homogeneous group, or a group diverse in other ways. Since vagueness ceases to be something negative to eradicate to become a quality of the world we perceive and the words we use to describe it, all our efforts to cope with it are acknowledged.

Vagueness becomes symbiotic to human understanding and imprints the background of human interaction.

READING ORGANISING ANEW

To introduce, in Chapter one, the performative perspective of this thesis I used the example of the meeting between two friends. The example was taken from Bruno Latour who uses it to explain organising.²⁶⁷ Later, along the chapters of the thesis, I applied the perspective to study organising in a group. Those chapters constituted the empirical foundation for a novel reading of interaction in international groups. The perspective could be further extended to interaction in organisations in general. That, however, would be the object of another thesis. Instead I will simply indicate some of the threads already laid, that could be followed to study organisational settings.

²⁶⁶ Salzer-Mörling 1998a.

²⁶⁷ Latour 1998.

REALITY IS THE EXCEPTION

A stream of research about organisational culture revolves around shared meaning, where shared meaning is portrayed as a reality shared by all organisational members – a shared reality that is decisive for what happens and how people interact. Hence, these authors regard shared meaning as the basis for collective action.²⁶⁸ These authors however seem to point to some sort of mental reality, or some hidden shared meaning. Although I agree to some extent with the view of shared meaning as a basis for collective action, I have certain problems in accepting shared meaning as a mental (or any other sort of hidden) reality.

Some considerations on knowledge can be a way to shed some light on shared meaning and to better understand how collective action is organised and maintained. Michael Polanyi was the first to acknowledge the importance of tacit knowledge.²⁶⁹ He assumed that all knowledge has tacit dimensions. For analytical simplicity, knowledge could be seen as a spectrum. At one extreme, knowledge would be completely silent, implicit and held in people's heads and bodies. Polanyi named this type of knowledge "tacit knowledge." At the other extreme, knowledge would be entirely explicit, structured, codified and accessible to people other than the people originating it. Most knowledge, however, exists between the extremes. Explicit, objective and rational elements mix with tacit, subjective and experiential elements.

Returning to the researchers, each entered the group with a certain knowledge of "contingent employment." The expression was not new to anybody. Everyone had heard of it before. Each one knew how to use it and in what contexts. However, as they discovered in the course of the workshops, that use and those contexts slightly differed among geographical realities. Group members had, individually, some sort of tacit knowledge about "contingent employment." Tacit knowledge of "contingent employment" can thus be seen as the specific use of the expression and under which specific circumstances it is used. Possessing tacit knowledge would be knowing how to talk, how to proceed in the conversation.

With time and discussion the group was able to visualise the knowledge that lied tacit, or at least some of it. They came up with three circles. That

²⁶⁸ Smircich 1983; Bettenhausen and Murnighan 1985; Donnellon, Gray and Bougon 1986.

²⁶⁹ Polanyi 1967.

image, a symbol standing for a certain phenomenon,²⁷⁰ embodied what was common to the various uses of the expression “contingent employment.” It condensed in a simple image the rules for using the expression: When discussing contingent employment, they would discuss the intermediary, the user and the employee. Trade unions, for instance, did not fit in; nor did the discussion of specific national laws. The three-circles image is the part of contingent employment that can be generalised, made objective and extended to all geographical realities. (It is indicative that they arrived at that image through analysis, which is a form of reasoning that is believed to be objective and rational.) Knowledge had been made explicit.

Yet, although the symbol embodied the rules of the use of “contingent employment,” it left out the specific circumstances of its use. It did not visualise the peculiar uses in each country, or the particulars of each situation. It did not say that contingent employment was not used in the Spanish hospitals, while it was common in the Swedish ones. It forgot as well that contingent employees have a fixed contract at the Swedish intermediaries, while in the US “contingent employment” was not used together with “fixed contracts.” The here and now was left outside the symbol. Abundance could not be included.

Little by little, the symbol was translated into routines to be followed in the workshop. It told group members to split into smaller groups, one for each circle of the image; it told them how to distribute responsibilities; how to design the agenda for each workshop; how to set deadlines. Little by little, explicit knowledge was transformed into tacit knowledge by embedding it into organisational routines.²⁷¹ Those routines is how I see shared meaning: Neither mental, nor deep, but open to the eye.

The “shared” part of “shared meaning” simply points to the routines for using a given set of words in such-and-such way *here and now*. It is playing the same game. That the researchers on stage develop a certain shared meaning of “contingent employment,” means that they have agreed upon rules for the use of that expression. They have developed language. They now know how to go on, how to behave and what to discuss when they meet at the work-

²⁷⁰ Miriam Salzer-Mörting writes that a symbol is a sign standing for something other than itself. When the sign's content comes from outside itself, the sign becomes a symbol (Salzer-Mörting 1998a, p.43). In this sense, the three-circles image is a symbol standing for the phenomenon of contingent employment.

²⁷¹ The idea that tacit knowledge is embedded in the organisational routines is not new. See for instance Nelson and Winter 1982.

shops. The shared meaning basis to the collaboration of our actors simply signals the way they behave and what they discuss when they meet. They discuss contingent employment. Within contingent employment, they discuss the intermediary, the user and the employee; not trade unions, nor national institutions. They split into groups. They have coffee breaks, and even take a historical walk on one afternoon. In this sense, the grammar of the term “understand” is similar to that of “know,” because saying “Now I understand!” is equivalent to saying “Now I know how to go on!”²⁷² They have agreed on the game to play when together. Since shared meaning becomes the common routines, saying that shared meaning is a ground for collective action becomes a tautology.

Hence, in order to collaborate, to act collectively, the question of whether or not there exists some sort of shared meaning of what is ground to the collaboration becomes irrelevant. Using the same set of words, agreeing on what terms to use and how to use them, speaking a similar vocabulary, engaging in alike practices, is collaborating and is also shared meaning. Shared meaning thus turns towards the surface: The terms and expressions actors use, the practices and routines actors inhabit.

In sum, the three circles visualise the normative understanding of contingent employment developed by, and within, the group. That is how they are to see, understand, and talk about their research phenomenon when they are together. At home however, their realities and ways of talking about contingent employment may differ. Reality, with its abundance of particulars, becomes an exception, an exception not included in the norm that the symbol stands for. The symbol embodies the rules for using “contingent employment” and the routines to follow in the workshops. Reality is the exception. The symbol is the rule.

CLARITY IS THE RESULT OF ROUTINE

The symbol materialises the rules and routines as the ground for collective action. Those rules and routines refer, in the case studied, to the organisational routines of the workshops. It told group members how to structure the workflow, how to divide the project into activities and how to distribute responsibilities.

²⁷² Wittgenstein 1953, §150-151.

The three-circles image, however, says nothing about its use in circumstances other than the workshops. The rule condensed in the symbol does not explicit a second rule on how to use the first. This is in short Wittgenstein's argument of finitism:²⁷³ To follow a rule you need a second rule telling you how to follow the previous, to follow the second you need a third... Yet in practice it did not work this way, and group members (or we in our daily lives) were not discouraged. The routines settled around the symbol, made them know how to go on. The lack of a precise definition for "contingent employment" was no longer troubling. The vagueness of the term and the variety of situations the three circles may refer to did not disturb the group anymore, for they had developed working routines. They knew how to proceed, discuss and interact. They now know how to go on.

"Clarity is the result of routine;" not of special insight,²⁷⁴ nor of precise visions, strict models or deep understanding. Routines for the application of a word are created with time and practice; regularities in the circumstances of use developed; patterns of relevant trivialities elicited; standards of reality drawn; samples of knowledge raised. Wittgenstein's recognition that "*Practice gives words their sense,*"²⁷⁵ means that clarity is the result of routine. Hence the expression "alignment of meaning" that I introduced in the first chapter. Words are used similarly, interaction regulated, realities arranged, knowledge typified, and actions paralleled. Words, practices, realities, knowledge and action are aligned; and clarity comes from that alignment.

A second point that can be made from the group of researchers is that *vagueness is the companion of change*. The three-circles image was possible in a moment of a lack of clarity on how "contingent employment" was to be used. The variety of geographical contexts brought to those meetings had led to disagreement on how to use "contingent employment." There was not a single well delineated reality. The vagueness that situation created made room for a change of understanding. There is no room for a new reality if the present reality is precise and working well. The possibility of a new solution

²⁷³ "Don't always think that you read off what you say from the facts; that you portray these in words according to rules. For even so you would have to apply the rule in the particular case without guidance" (Wittgenstein 1953, §292).

²⁷⁴ In a footnote in *Achilles' Passionate Conjecture*, one of the essays included in *Conquest of Abundance*, Paul Feyerabend mentions this point (Feyerabend 1999).

²⁷⁵ Wright 1998, p. 97; emphasis in the original.

arises with the dissolution of the previous reality. Vagueness makes reality changeable, flexible.

CONSENSUS MEANS HETEROGENEITY

There is a risk though. Vague visions and flexible realities may feel uncomfortable for many. It can create a feeling of uncertainty about the future. How are the others to interpret and study contingent employment when at home? The possibilities are many and varied. This situation can be dealt with in at least two ways.

First, reduce uncertainty. "Uncertainty refers to imprecision in estimates of future consequences conditional on present actions."²⁷⁶ Reducing the uncertainty of the future involves reducing the number of alternatives in the future. This is done by changing the conditions of departure, by making them more restrictive. It implies a change in the environment as Galbraith suggests. Take a restaurant and reduce the number of options in the menu. It is easier to forecast demand for 5 items than for 20. Seek out large banquets and fix the menu – this strategy altogether eliminates the need to forecast.²⁷⁷ In the case of our actors, changing the conditions of departure to reduce uncertainty would have meant giving a definition of "contingent employment" that was too precise. The backside of this strategy is that it is blind to the peculiarities and preferences of all those affected. The customer at the restaurant might not particularly like any of the options in the menu, and a definition of "contingent employment" that is too restrictive may leave out interesting national cases.

The second reaction to the uncertainty of the future is to tolerate it. As rough as this may sound, there are means to do it, means that manage the vagueness of the present situation. Those means, which without eliminating or reducing vagueness, give it an appearance of being under control. Such are the strategies our actors have used. Vagueness remained, yet it was levelled so that the feeling of uncertainty did not paralyse. The advantage of this second reaction is that it gives a voice to every participant. All are given equal importance. Noone is subordinated. The flexibility of the image treats all

²⁷⁶ March 1994, p.178.

²⁷⁷ Galbraith 1977. Cyert and March, although talking about uncertainty avoidance instead of uncertainty reduction, talk as well about the reduction of future possibilities (Cyert and March 1992).

alike. Lyotard reminds us²⁷⁸ that it is in the plurality of voices, the variety of contexts, the diversity of preferences that creativity resides. Instead of being, as in the first reaction, something negative that needs to be reduced, vagueness becomes something that the group or organisation may gain from. As Lyotard would have put it, heterogeneity of language games leads to make a difference, to innovation; to paralogy.

Consensus in the first reaction means restriction to one alternative. Consensus in the second reaction means the acceptance of heterogeneity.

The moral of the story, if there has to be one, is to be neither too vague nor too precise; just vague enough. If goals, research phenomena, or companies are too vaguely described, it might be easy to get lost. There is nowhere to start from, nothing to work with, nothing to stand on. Excessive vagueness paralyzes action and complete chaos prevails. On the other hand, if goals, research phenomena or companies are too precisely stated, then the whole group loses. Noone sees room for peculiarities; nor is there place for individual initiative or local adaptation. Excessive precision ignores the particulars – stiffness dominates. The quiz lies in levelling vagueness so that there is room for change and adaptation, space for the peculiar. Chaos and disorder menace on one side; rigidity and authoritarianism on the other.²⁷⁹ The fuel for action and constructive interaction lays in the delicate levelling of vagueness.

STUDYING A PROCESS

Despite the title of this thesis, I do not think its only contribution is developing the concept of vagueness. Other contributions include borrowing from other disciplines, such as philosophy of language and sociology of science, in order to propose a perspective that acknowledges the dynamism of organising processes as well as concretising that perspective into a method for the study of such processes.

After reading Wittgenstein's later philosophy and retaining Latour's empirical implementation of it, in Chapter one I developed a perspective that

²⁷⁸ Lyotard 1979.

²⁷⁹ This might be why culturally diverse groups, as observed by Watson, Kumar and Michaelsen, more commonly had members trying to be too controlling, tend to be more authoritarian than homogeneous groups crave for certainty, the intolerance for vagueness, might be the reason why culturally diverse groups

attempted to overcome the static accounts of dominant research in the field of intercultural interaction. First, Wittgenstein taught us that the meaning of a word is neither an external reality corresponding to that word, nor is it an image found in our heads. Rather, “The meaning of a phrase for us is characterised by the use we make of it. The meaning is not a mental accompaniment to the expression.”²⁸⁰ Meaning is found in the context and circumstances of the use of that word, phrase or expression, in the rules governing its use, in the way we use it. Wittgenstein’s advice, thus, if we want to understand the meaning of certain expression, is “Look and see;”²⁸¹ follow the use of the expression and look at its use. Then came Latour who applied that piece of advice to his studies of natural scientists. Latour, however, is not interested in the meaning of a single term. Instead, he is interested in the process by which scientists construct theories of the world; in how they develop an understanding of it; in how, for instance, the meaning of a crumb of earth evolves. By following what he calls a “circulating reference,” a crumb of earth, from the Amazons until it becomes a scientific paper, Latour is able to study the process by which natural scientists construct their own versions of reality. He follows both the transformations suffered by a crumb of earth and the discussions around it. Witnessing how a group of natural scientists develop a certain understanding of the world, Latour is present in their process of knowledge creation, where rules for the use of terms and expressions are developed. In other words, Latour witnesses how language is generated.

My scientists, however, were not natural scientists. There was no tangible circulating reference to follow. Still, I could follow the conceptual development of their research phenomenon, “contingent employment.” I could, as Wittgenstein suggested, look at how they used the expression, and in what circumstances. I could follow the process by which they developed rules for the use of the term “contingent employment.” I witnessed how they arrived at a tacit agreement about what was and what was not a correct use of “contingent employment.” I have seen how the researchers on stage developed language and, inherent to it, a certain understanding of the reality that the language referred to. With this merge of Wittgenstein and Latour, not only have I been able to watch how a common use (or a shared understanding) of

²⁸⁰ Wittgenstein 1958, p.65.

²⁸¹ Wittgenstein 1953, §66.

“contingent employment” was developed. I have also been able to study the organising process revolving around that term.

A few last words before I conclude: Dear reader, I hope you enjoyed the play. I hope, too, that the thoughts and ideas gathered have been of some interest to you, if not directly in your daily work or research, at least as something to contemplate. Attention to the surface prompts prudence regarding what can and cannot be said. The prudent analytical method that follows is as plain as following a word across its various uses and situations of use, forgetting concealed intentions or hidden structures. That is one contribution to ponder on at length. Plain as it may seem, it proved to be a fruitful method that showed us vagueness and our dealings with it in organising processes. Other than “surface” and “vagueness,” “abundance,” “levelling,” “identity position” and, chiefly, the equation “meaning = use” formed a coherent set of terms to enable the reading of organising processes – a conceptual development which I contribute. Method and concepts conferred a new light to interaction in international groups - a light stressing the efforts group members made to level vagueness. “Cultural diversity” became, in this light, a linguistic resource to legitimate the group, justify certain decisions and excuse confusion – in short, to deal with vagueness. With this third contribution, a novel reading of international project groups, I hope to awake some debate. If you have some thoughts, I would be most grateful to discuss them with you.

The End

APPENDIX



According to the Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary, “epilogue” is a concluding section that rounds out the design of a literary work. It comes from the Greek *epilegein*, to say in addition. The term is also used to refer to the final scene of a play – a scene that comments on, or summarises, the main action. “Appendix,” on the other hand, comes from the Latin *appendere* and refers to supplementary material usually attached at the end of a piece of writing. This last section exposes the comments of group members regarding the story developed throughout the thesis. My aim is not to round out the story by telling how the group continued. That could be material for another thesis. Rather, my aim is to supplement the story with the actors’ comments to my it and how helped polishing the story – therefore the choice of the term “appendix.” As I maintained in Chapter 2, the consistency of the actors’ feedback with the final story is evidence of its verisimilitude.²⁸²

A VAGUE PLATFORM

In Seville April 2000, I presented to the group of researchers a preliminary analysis of the past months. A couple of weeks before the actual presentation I sent them a report by e-mail, a report which later became Chapters 4 and 5 of the thesis. These are their comments and reactions to the analysis developed in those chapters.

“My hesitation comes from the choice to focus on the uncertainty of the concept ‘contingent employment.’ My feeling is that we have never needed, nor do we now need a precise definition of the concept. What we need is a

²⁸² See Chapter 2, section *On scientific claims*.

definition that makes it possible to coordinate action – a common platform rather than a precise concept.” (written comment to report)

“... to focus so much on the uncertainty of the concept ‘contingent employment,’ I believe distracts from the organising process that deals with the uncertainty of the values, acts, curiosity, and among all the level of joint commitment. There are a lot more dynamics involved in each individual’s uncertainty around values and actions and self image, than around the concepts we actually talk about.” (written comment to report)

Vagueness is not exclusive to the concepts used in research. Rather, vagueness concerns abstract concepts as much as it relates to practical issues. The management of the research project, the coordination of national studies, the commitment of group members, personal values and individual identities – all are pervaded by vagueness. What is more, this might be a more relevant vagueness than the vagueness of words. Some group members thus pointed that the vagueness I initially saw in the term “contingent employment” was merely a reflection of the abundance of life – abundance that affects as much research phenomena (and the concepts we use to talk about them) as the coordinating process. To coordinate action “a common platform,” rather than precise concepts, is needed – a platform broad enough to make room for national idiosyncrasies.

“Funny that you talk about comparability. Pindarus and Flavius have been discussing that concerning the food industry. Should we choose those cases that are most interesting to each country, as different as a Swedish brewery or a Spanish slaughterhouse may be? Or should we choose similar cases so that comparison across countries is secured? That is actually what the discussion deals with at each workshop. We want to clear up ‘what’ is going to be studied and ‘how’ to warrant comparison. It’s not about defining the concept ‘contingent employment.’ Rather, it’s all about warranting that we’ll be able to compare studies across countries. That’s why in each workshop there’s not so much a theoretical discussion as a pragmatic discussion. We want to agree on something while, at the same time, leaving it open so that each one does what he or she believes most interesting in his or her own country. Uncertainty lies there: we don’t know if we’ll be able to compare.” (plane to Seville)

“During the workshop in Åkesberga, we tried different images and concepts and we couldn’t agree on anything. We had to tear down the national perspective and educational perspectives and come to something more abstract that could room all these.” (Seville)

These comments reinforced my initial analysis, but also helped me to tune it. Starting from the vagueness of “contingent employment,” I emphasised that

this was merely an example of a more general phenomenon; namely, the vagueness of language – a vagueness enabling us to talk about many, varied and subtle issues despite a limited vocabulary.

WHAT ABOUT IDENTITY?

“When I entered the group I had a certain feeling of inferiority, that is over now. In the Latin countries a broad terminological variety exists and great confusion around the subject. Yet, along these workshops I’ve seen that such terminological confusion also exists in Anglo-Saxon countries. And I’m happy for it! (Seville)

“When I entered the group I had a certain feeling of inferiority.” During a walk around Seville, I discussed with Trebonius a germ of the ideas presented in Chapter 6. I was surprised about how quickly identity questions were raised once group members were asked separately (as in the e-mails) or once I presented how I understood the organising process of the group. A few months later, in connection to this talk, Trebonius sent me an e-mail.

“I hope everything is going well with your dissertation. I am interested in the story you are developing. Also interested in the developing identities – it feels as if we first needed to get past cultural stereotypes, then get to know each other professionally, and now are actually building up true personal relationships because both previous issues are out of the way.” (e-mail)

It was not merely the vagueness of words and the abundance of practical matters group members had to deal with. They also had to deal with expectations of each other and one’s own position *vis-à-vis* the group. As a result of these comments, Chapter 6 was written.

VAGUENESS’ FUNCTIONALITY

Other comments manifested concerns about whether vagueness had been functional or dysfunctional.

“To me what we’ve been doing all these meetings is trying to decide what we want to get out of this but we still haven’t decided it. We still don’t know where we’re going to do it and how?” (Seville)

“I have been thinking about the vagueness and the development of the group. In Seville I was very much wondering whether the vagueness you were trying

to describe as functional was not just a lack of effectiveness and disability to run the meetings properly.” (e-mail)

Still, others were concerned about continuing to run the project in the same way now that the project was entering a new phase.

“Maybe, as you said, vagueness has been good. But I think we now need to become more concrete.” (Seville)

“We need another organisational principle, because the organisational principle that Ester has shown us has been used in order to collect material. But now, for publishing the deliverables, we need another principle. So there’s a risk that we get stuck on the way we’re organised now. This work package organisation might not be the best way to organise us for publishing.” (Seville)

“... it seems that now that we are actually producing things (work package 1 produced the industry report plus the proximity of two new deadlines – February 1 for work package 2 and work packages 3 and 4) makes discussions much more concrete.” (e-mail)

The first set of comments questions the effectiveness of an organisational principle that has emerged from vagueness. The second set questions the permanence of such a principle. I cannot and I am not going to take a stand on these issues. I have not compared between groups. Hence, I cannot pronounce a well-documented answer about the functionality and temporality of vagueness. Yet, both sets of comments, by questioning the effectiveness and permanence of vagueness manifested an acceptance of the story I have told. They did not question vagueness itself. Rather, they wondered about some of its characteristics. And to do that, they first had to accept it. They had started to make sense of what they had done in terms of vagueness, which takes us to the last matter.

DISTINCTION RESEARCHER/RESEARCHED?

The group of researchers was an audience especially receptive to my story. Each researcher belonged to the same community as I – the academic community. In this sense they might have been inclined to accept my reading and see similarities with what they had already read.

“All you talk about reminds of the literature on conflict solving. They recommend to take the discussion into a general level and, from there, look at the different positions in that wider picture.” (Seville)

Not only did they seem to accept the reading of vagueness as they started to reason with it. They also intentionally applied it when organising their workshops and preparing their discussions.

“In preparation for the Gothenburg meeting I had decided for myself that I would relax and not get too involved, be more laid back about what happened, considering the fact that only broad guidelines needed to be set.” (e-mail)

“The meeting in Rotterdam last August was very effective. ... For myself I concluded that very specific instructions might actually be counterproductive in getting people into action. A general outline of the paper to be produced had set all the professionals to work and of course they were all smart enough to fill them themselves. This had three good effects: Less instructions meant that everybody could remain focused, that everybody was able to describe the idiosyncrasies of their own country situation and finally that they could use the information that was most readily accessible/available to them to describe the issue. The vagueness had left room for discretion and requisite variety in a learning organisation: we still learn along the way what we are actually studying.” (e-mail)

Since “only broad guidelines” are enough, as some of them seemed to think, I may as well relax and let the group take care of the work. This sort of comment brings up the question of the role of the researcher in what is being researched. To what extent does the researcher influence the field? How much does the participant observer participate? How do the stories from the field change once the research story has been introduced? These are not easy questions to answer. I won’t deny, however, that I have been a part of my field. As I pointed out in Chapter 2, the researcher is another actor in the field, and even the author of the story of the field. He/she selects and condenses the events that make up the story in the research re-port (in this case a thesis). Furthermore, the researcher influences the words used by those being researched and how these words are used. Even the researcher who wishes to go as a non-participant observer participates!²⁸³

²⁸³ Atkinson and Hammersley 1994.



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