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Constructing differences in a cross-cultural context: National distance, social differentiation or functional distinction

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Abstract

This article develops theory about the perspectives through which expatriate managers and their employees socially construct differences in a cross-cultural context. On the basis of qualitative research on three kinds of organizations – multinational corporations, small and medium-sized enterprises and start-up companies – we identify three perspectives on differences in a cross-cultural context: the national distance perspective, the social differentiation perspective and the functional distinction perspective. Each perspective relates to a specific basis for categorization (nationality, status and function), focus of attention (values, attitudes and expertise) and definition of diversity (separation, disparity and variety). We find that international experience and country experience on one side, and the purpose of business (business development, business creation or business turnaround) on the other side, explain why some expatriate managers and their employees adopt one perspective or another, sometimes as default. The passing of time, as reflected in growing country experience, growing work experience and growing company tenure, can be the motor of transition from one perspective to another. Our findings contribute to cross-cultural and diversity studies, to social constructionism, and have consequences for international human resource management research and practices.

Keywords

cross-cultural, differences, diversity, expatriation, India, social constructionism

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In the wake of globalization and the growing interconnectedness of countries, organizations and policies, people increasingly experience differences in international settings. As Harrison and Klein (2007: 1223) precisely stated in an illuminating review, 'the challenge of differences – of diversity – is a crucial one for managers and scholars.' Differences in cross-cultural contexts are a special kind of challenge that, at first sight, appears to have been extensively addressed (Cox and Blake, 1991; Jack et al., 2008). However, two related assumptions have prevented international business and cross-cultural scholars from fully addressing this issue. First, many empirical studies have, by default, equated international settings with cross-cultural differences[1] (Gelfand et al., 2007). Second, many empirical studies have inherently assumed that cross-cultural differences, as experienced by people, are more salient and relevant than other kinds of differences such as gender, age, organizational culture or professional identity (Hofstede, 1991; House et al., 2004; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1998).

This article develops theory about the *perspectives* through which people – expatriate managers and their employees – socially construct differences in a cross-cultural context: do they refer to national cultural differences as cross-cultural scholars expect them to (Hofstede, 1991; Tsui et al., 2007) or not (Chen et al., 2009)? And if people vary in their perspectives on differences, why do they do so? To investigate these questions, we undertook a qualitative (and partly quantitative) study of three kinds of organizations: multinational corporations (MNCs), small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and start-up companies. We conducted 61 interviews in 15 organizations located in four cities in India. We supplemented these interviews with non-participant observation.

We identify three perspectives on differences in international settings: the national distance perspective, the social differentiation perspective and the functional distinction perspective. Each of these perspectives rests on a specific basis for categorization: nationality, status and function, respectively. Each perspective also encompasses a single focus of attention (values, attitudes and behaviors, and knowledge and expertise, respectively) as well as a specific definition of diversity - separation, disparity, and variety (Harrison and Klein, 2007). Some people deal with diversity as many cross-cultural scholars expect them to – through a perspective that we label national distance. In this perspective, cross-cultural differences make a difference: they are objectively salient and subjectively relevant, and people organize their working worlds along nationality-based lines. Others develop alternative perspectives, which we label social differentiation and functional distinction. In these cases, cross-cultural differences do not make much difference, but other types of differences do.

We then explore why people adopt different perspectives. The purpose of business: business creation, business development or business turnaround, and two personal factors: international experience and country experience, contribute to explain why some people adopt one perspective or another, sometimes as default. Finally, we suggest that the passing of time, as reflected in growing country experience, growing work experience and growing company tenure, can be the motor of transition from one perspective to another. Our findings contribute to cross-cultural studies and diversity studies, and have consequences for international human resource management research and practices.

A social constructionist approach to differences in international settings

Differences abound in organizational life and they are evident on many levels: demographics, values, skills, personality traits, and so forth. However:

> . . . differences are a challenge. Organizations have struggled to embrace and manage them successfully. Researchers have struggled to conceptualize and study them effectively. Our theories have predicted differing effects of such differences − that they will spark integrative insights, creativity, and innovation . . . or that they will provoke conflict, division, and dissolution. (Harrison and Klein, 2007: 1199)

Despite the accumulation of a notable amount of research, the nature and effects of differences – of diversity – remain uncertain.

Two main approaches have been utilized to examine the issue of differences. According to the essentialist perspective, differences are innate or biologically and/or psychologically determined, or they are the outcome of socialization within a particular group (Litvin, 1997). Others have argued that differences within groups and similarities across groups are overlooked in essentialism (Harrison and Klein, 2007; Zanoni and Janssens, 2004). According to social constructivism, differences are produced in social contexts and constructed within wider discourses that carry knowledge and power relations (Sayer, 1997).

Alternative approaches to differences in international settings

Not surprisingly, globalization and the growing influence of multinational companies have led academics and practitioners alike to attempt to account for the international dimension of their primary topics of inquiry in explicit terms (see, for instance, Martinez and Toyne, 2000, in international management; Brealey et al., 1999, in international finance; or Paliwoda, 1999, in international marketing). In their efforts to deal with a new kind of difference (i.e. differences in nationalities), these research streams have fueled the growth of cross-cultural studies, where the same two approaches described above have been adopted. In other words, what is true of studies of differences and diversity in general has also been assumed to be true in studies of differences in international settings.

The essentialist perspective is best reflected in Hofstede's pioneering work. The essentialization of (national) culture occurs when (national) cultures are described as second nature (or, as Hofstede [1991: 5] says, 'software of the mind') and people are restricted to a collective (Osland and Bird, 2000). The essentialist perspective is closely related to the cognitive and positivist perspectives (McSweeney, 2002; Tayeb, 2001). Implicit in the essentialist cross-cultural perspective is that there are significant differences in cultural characteristics that extant theories and paradigms must take into account if they wish to claim rigor and relevance (Eden and Rynes, 2003; Erez and Earley, 1993). The purpose of these studies is to uncover and explain cross-cultural differences (Earley, 2006), and their effects on outcomes at individual- and organizational-level (Chen et al., 2009). Unfortunately, meta-reviews reveal that empirical studies have fallen short of

their promises. For instance, 'the effect size of cultural differences is not particularly large, often about 5%' (Chen et al., 2009: 229) in most individual studies. This failure of empirical results to meet expectations has several causes. One is that within-culture variations are sometimes greater than variations between cultures (Leung and Van de Vijver, 2008). Another is that people's cultural values do not exert an across-the-board impact on their behaviors and attitudes (Leung et al., 2005).

Social constructionist scholars (Søderberg and Holden, 2002; Tsui et al., 2007) have challenged the often implicit assumption found in cross-cultural research that national cultural differences are salient and important in people's work attitudes and behaviors (Hofstede, 1991). These scholars feel that national differences could be better conceptualized on the basis of a deeper understanding of the countries' histories, geographies, economics and political systems (Sackmann and Phillips, 2004). They have criticized essentialists for their tendency to 'homogenize culture' by tying values or characteristics to a (national) territory (Chevrier, 2009; McSweeney, 2002). For instance, many cross-cultural studies of India equate Hinduism with an 'Indian' behavior or way of thinking (Kumar, 2007; Sinha, 2004). However, as a religion, Hinduism has no dogma. Moreover, it is not a set of beliefs shared across India, as 80 percent of the population is Hindu. Finally, the practice of Hinduism varies greatly across the country (Jaffrelot, 2006).

A social constructionist approach to differences in international settings

Consistent with an approach that questions essentialization and homogenization, we adopt a social constructionist view of differences in international settings. In so doing, we reject two limiting assumptions of extant research on cross-cultural differences in international settings. First, we do not assume that the mere existence of work interactions between people – managers and employees alike – from different nationalities necessarily generates perceptions of cultural differences. Second, we do not assume that national cultural differences – if they are perceived by people – are more salient and relevant than other kinds of differences (such as gender, age, organizational culture or professional identity).

Starting from people's own accounts of their international experiences at work, we develop theory about the perspectives through which they deal with differences (i.e. diversity) in international settings. We focus on the following questions: How do people – employees and managers – socially construct differences in international settings? If people vary in their perspectives on differences, why do they do so? As Yeganeh and Su (2006: 372) suggested, it is difficult for researchers to distinguish cultural from non-cultural variables. We therefore allow the people studied here to narrate their international experiences and to decide by themselves whether there are differences, and what is or is not cultural, with the goal of uncovering how they construct their views on differences in international settings.

Research design and method

Context and research design

The research questions raised in this article and the related empirical findings are largely the emergent, unintended consequences of a larger research project that we initiated in

2007. The original project was launched in India and focused on yet another research question: How do expatriates (in this case, French expatriates) handle cross-cultural (read: cross-national) differences? This research question is typical of extant theories on expatriation (Salk, 1997) and we adopted a qualitative posture in that study.

We undertook two series of interviews. The first series included 10 interviews with representatives of embassies, trade commissions, consultants and law firms, and provided us with an understanding of the context of expatriation in India (legal aspects, features of Hinduism, etc.). The second series of 21 interviews with expatriates and local employees allowed us to answer our research question. While we included a diverse pool of industries and firms, we specifically sampled interviewees according to the type of organizations in which they worked: MNCs, SMEs or start-up companies that had been established locally by French expatriates. In this second series, we conducted semi-structured interviews with semi-directive questions that converged around the issue of cross-cultural differences. At that time, we discovered that cultural differences were not as salient and relevant for our interviewees as we, the cross-cultural scholars, had assumed they were. Notably, several of the interviewees explicitly stated that we were looking in the wrong direction, while others told us that national differences were not salient in their daily work life: 'What I feel is that human beings are always the same everywhere, regardless of whether they are Indian or foreigners' (Krishna, company L). Others told us that national differences were salient but less so than other types of differences: 'I think the difference is not about being Indian or being French. It comes from the kind of company we are talking about' (Leyla, company B).

As a consequence, in a second stage we modified our research question to the question presented in this article: How do people – employees and managers – socially construct differences in international settings? We decided to run a third series of interviews and to alter our research design slightly. We sampled different kinds of organizations and, in each organization, we interviewed a dyad of people composed of one (French) manager and his/her closest (Indian) employee. The standard protocol was to interview the manager of the company – always a French national – and one of his/her close subordinates in order to ensure that they had enough daily interactions for this for this to be defined as an 'intercultural' experience.

The resulting 15-organization sample was composed of seven Indian subsidiaries of MNCs, five SMEs, and three start-up companies (started and owned by French managers). This sample provided a diverse view of international (French-Indian) experience according to firms' sizes and origins. The first author conducted the interviews in French or English, depending on the mother tongue and language skills of the interviewees.[2] The interviews lasted an average of one hour, and they were all tape-recorded and transcribed. In these one-to-one interviews, we followed a storytelling approach (Czarniawska, 2004): interviewees were allowed to express their experiences without much guidance from the interviewer. In this respect, we refrained as much as possible from asking questions, and we avoided the use of semi-structured questions. In so doing, we let interviewees express themselves in their own words and with as little intervention as possible. In cases where interviewees were less talkative – which happened with both French managers and Indians – we conducted the interviews using six open-ended questions centered on four main themes. First, we asked interviewees to share their observations (1) and beliefs

(2) regarding differences at work. Second, we asked whether differences at work had posed any particular challenges (3) or opportunities (4). Third, we asked interviewees to indicate their reference groups (5), with the intent of uncovering whether group membership influenced daily work in their organizations. Finally, we asked interviewees to describe whether and how intergroup relations influenced their work (6). We constantly probed for examples and incidents that would support and illustrate the interviewees' views. We let them freely narrate their experiences with regard to these themes and we did not impose a specific ordering of the questions. Finally, we granted anonymity and assigned each interviewee and company a pseudonym.

Empirical data

In total, we conducted 61 interviews in 30 organizations located in four Indian cities. We supplemented the interviews with data gathered through non-participant observation in two companies (C and L). Table 1 reports the composition of the sample of interviewees, broken down by type of organization, sector, city, hierarchical position, interview length and period (first, second or third interview series).

In this article, we focus on interview data because they were of greatest value in our efforts to generate theory (for a similar argument, see Ely and Thomas, 2001: 239). We conducted four complementary sets of analyses. For the first, we used the entire set of 61 interviews. For the other three, we restricted our analysis to the third series, which included 30 interviews (2×15) that had received more systematic treatment. These interviews were all fully recorded, transcribed and analyzed using qualitative and quantitative approaches.

Analytical strategy: A multi-faceted approach to the analysis of interviews

The authors independently read all of the transcripts to identify themes and patterns that could explain similarities and differences in people's experiences. Three perspectives seemed to govern how people dealt with differences. This became our working hypothesis, which framed and guided the remainder of our data analysis. Our analytical strategy can be characterized as abductive (Van Maanen et al., 2007), as it combined empirical fieldwork with an emerging theoretical framework. Accordingly, we developed our theoretical ideas alongside increasingly detailed analyses of the interviews.

We applied a multi-faceted approach to the analysis of interviews (Vaara and Monin, 2010) and proceeded in four stages.[3] Our methods included qualitative and quantitative content analyses of the categories and attributes associated with differences, followed by a sociological qualitative analysis of how people socially constructed differences. Finally, we explored some factors that could explain why people adopted one perspective or another.

Qualitative analysis of categories and attributes associated with differences. A key part of our work was a qualitative analysis of the categories and attributes that interviewees associated with differences in their international settings. This part of the analysis was particularly important for our understanding of how the actors interpreted their environment and

Table 1. Series of interviews.

First series

Name *	Type of organization	Sector	Position	City
Jean	Trade commission	Civil Service	Manager	Delhi
Raj	Trade commission	Civil Service	Employee	Delhi
Pratik	French embassy	Civil Service	Employee	Delhi
Thierry	Start-up	Consulting	Expert	Delhi
Delphine	SME	Law firm	Expert	Delhi
Sanjeev	Start-up	Consulting	Expert	Bengaluru
Jagdish	Start-up	Consulting	Expert	Bengaluru
Mohan	Start-up	Consulting	Expert	Bengaluru
Mahonara	Start-up	IT	Expert	Bengaluru
Jean Luc	Trade commission	Civil Service	Expert	Bengaluru

Second series

Name *	Type of organization	Sector	Position	City
Ram	MNC	IT	Employee	Delhi
Bhuvan	MNC	IT	Employee	Delhi
Pierre	MNC	IT	Manager	Delhi
Jean	MNC	Oil	Manager	Delhi
Aurélie	SME	Food	Manager	Delhi
Jérémie	SME	Consulting	Manager	Delhi
Marc	MNC	Water	Manager	Delhi
Rosh	MNC	Electricity	Manager	Delhi
Stéphane	SME	Health care	Manager	Delhi
Nadir	MNC	Consumer goods	Manager	Mumbai
Sumit	MNC	Consumer goods	Employee	Mumbai
Maurice	MNC	IT	Manager	Mumbai
Sumita	MNC	IT	Employee	Mumbai
Soni	MNC	IT	Employee	Mumbai
Jean Pascal	MNC	Hotel	Manager	Mumbai
Michael	SME	Construction	Manager	Pune
Pranav	SME	Machine tools	Employee	Pune
Amesh	SME	Machine tools	Employee	Pune
Ashish	SME	Machine tools	Employee	Pune
Nandini	SME	Machine tools	Employee	Pune
Mukesh	SME	Machine tools	Employee	Pune

Third series

Name *	Type of organization (and fictional name)	Sector	Position	City	Interview length (minutes)
Camille	Start up (A)	Garments	Manager	Delhi	88’
Rajiv			Employee		59’

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

Third series					
Name *	Type of organization (and fictional name)	Sector	Position	City	Interview length (minutes)
Marie	MNC (B)	Luxury	Manager	Delhi	51
Leyla			Employee		36
Jacques	MNC (C)	IT	Manager	Delhi	26
Uma			Employee		70
Arthur	Start up (D)	Leisure	Manager	Delhi	62
Kamal			Employee		59
Paul	SME (E)	Hotel	Manager	Delhi	73
Vijay			Employee		58
Patrick	SME (F)	Consulting	Manager	Delhi	60
Anand			Employee		55
Anatole	MNC (G)	IT	Manager	Delhi	84
Pradip			Employee		46
Damien	MNC (H)	Cosmetics	Manager	Mumbai	56
Dayanand			Employee		56
Jean-Claude	MNC (I)	Oil	Manager	Mumbai	49
Raj			Employee		61
M-Amélie	SME (J)	Aid	Manager	Pune	92
Gayatri			Employee		46
Dominique	MNC (K)	Molding	Manager	Pune	92
Arun			Employee		63
Thibault	SME (L)	Machine tools	Manager	Pune	66
Krishna			Employee		35
Joseph	MNC (M)	Sport	Manager	Bengaluru	44
Nikhil			Employee		58
Etienne	Start-up (N)	Food	Manager	Bengaluru	51
Rahul			Employee		56
Hector	SME (O)	IT	Manager	Bengaluru	70
Mahesh			Employee		58

* All names have been changed to ensure participant anonymity.

categorized people. In this analysis, we examined all 61 interviews. Two recurrent themes emerged from the empirical material: the *basis for categorization* and the *focus of attention*. The basis for categorization refers to the way interviewees categorized people in their working context. Empirically, it was related to people's answers to the following questions: What are the relevant groups of reference? Does national culture come into play in people's production of group(s) of reference, that is categories, and if yes, how? We identified three bases for categorization: nationality (or territorial identity), status (position in the company) and function (role in the company). The focus of attention emerged as a second important theme, and refers to the characteristics of the situation that people perceived as especially relevant in terms of what they paid attention to

in their international contexts. The content analysis highlighted three attributes that attracted people's attention: values (moral or intellectual position on a specific topic), attitudes and behaviors,[4] and knowledge and expertise.

Quantitative analysis of categories and attributes associated with differences. Equipped with these two themes, we returned to the interpretation of the interviews and were soon convinced that a more systematic quantitative analysis of the 30 interviews might yield additional insights. We initiated several explorative analyses. Specifically, we used the bases for categorization (nationality, status and function) and foci of attention (values, attitudes and behaviors, and knowledge and expertise) to code and analyze the interviews. Appendix 1 provides the descriptive statistics of the quantitative analyses with succinct annotations.

Sociological qualitative analysis of the social construction of differences. With this broad picture in mind, we returned to the reading and coding of each interview, still proceeding with caution due to the exploratory nature of the initial analyses. We conducted a qualitative sociological analysis of each person's interview regarding his/her social construction of difference in an international setting. We were looking for regular patterns in the interviews and it is at this stage that national distance, social differentiation and functional distinction progressively emerged as three perspectives.[5]

Exploratory analysis of the antecedents to people's perspectives on differences. The motivation for this stage of analysis, which was added later in the process, was to explain why some people fell back on nationality (the national distance perspective), while others took other routes (the social differentiation and functional distinction perspectives). At this stage, we identified three factors that seemed to influence the perspective that people adopt: two personal factors (international experience and country experience), and one contextual factor, the purpose of business (i.e. business creation, business development or business turnaround).

In our multi-faceted approach, specific analyses complemented each other and further increased our confidence that the three perspectives indeed differed in nature. This ongoing analytic process eventually resulted in a detailed description of three perspectives, each with a basis for categorization, a focus of attention and an underlying definition of diversity.

Three perspectives on differences in international settings

National distance

National distance is the perspective through which people interpret their international experience by defining groups based on the nationalities or territorial identities of their members. In the quote below, Jacques expresses national distance using a specific linguistic tool: the collective singular ('Indians'): 'They are good at trading, the Indians. In trade, they are notably crafty. They try to cheat you . . . It can even lead to fraud' (Jacques, C).

Such stereotypical generalizations contribute to the creation of clear-cut dichotomies between two national groups. With collective singulars, the essentialization of groups

peaks and nationality is attributed absolute explanatory power (Thompson et al., 2006). People often refer to such dichotomies when they complain about a specific behavior or criticize a situation, and they tend to make positions between groups irreconcilable. Among the interviewees in the third series, six French managers predominantly adopted a national distance perspective when they talked about their daily work.

Indian employees mentioned national categories less frequently than their French managers, but they referred to a different basis for categorization, namely regional identities and territories. They often refused to be defined as 'Indians.' Instead, they claimed the regional identity of their state of origin and frequently divided India into specific parts when attempting to achieve some form of categorization: 'Normally, Keralian people make their own group to survive in a company . . . to be stronger. The same is true for the Chennai people' (Mahesh, O).

In the national distance perspective, individuals primarily focus their attention on values. Behaviors at work are assessed against values that go beyond the purely professional sphere, such as time, aesthetics or the conditions faced by women:

> Then there is this notion of time. The notion of delivery on time is something extremely . . . subjective that has no importance for *them* . . . Two days before opening the office here, I was told: 'Do not worry, everything will be ready.' 'It is impossible,' I said. 'You need at least two weeks to be finished.' Of course, two days later, it is not ready. 'Oh, but you know we had a problem.' Then they start telling you a cock and bull story. *They* say 'yes' just to please you. (Jacques, C)

The groups were perceived as functioning with contradictory logics. Interviewees compared these logics to each other, often using an expression indicating that the other group was inferior or viewed in a negative light. Daily professional experiences were interpreted through the prism of national culture:

> When I talk about loyalty, it is because of our 20% attrition rate. People who have been here for three months leave overnight without telling anybody. They do not feel that they are accountable to the company . . . The consequence of that 'rupees call' is that they do not respect anything. To me, it is cultural. (Hector, O)

In this quote, Hector stereo-typified the behavior of his employees, and offered a simple and definitive cultural explanation for their so-called materialistic behavior: they did not attribute values according to the same order. In Hector's view, those employees ranked the 'call' of rupees above loyalty. Such a process of essentialization emphasizes the ineluctable nature of behaviors, which, as a result, are deemed impossible to change or adapt.

Implicitly, the national distance perspective refers to a way of defining diversity – in our specific case, cultural diversity – that Harrison and Klein have termed 'separation' (2007: 1208). Separation is best captured by a bimodal distribution, with members irremediably gathered at opposite standpoints.

> So, their telling of a lie at a specific moment because it suits them, that is normal life. For us with our Judeo-Christian background, this creates a moral conflict. For them it is the right answer at the right time, adapted to the situation (Patrick, F)

When viewed through the lens of separation, the national distance perspective strengthens the potency of the two categories (us and them) and limits border-crossing in the form of the borrowing or assimilation of the other group's cultural traits. Nationality-related values serve as interpretive toolkits for daily behavior at work. In the national distancing perspective, people often confront two different, yet coexisting, visions of work or/and society. The following statement about aesthetic values illustrates this perspective:

> Our aesthetic values are different from theirs. The balance of colors, the balance of shapes, verticality and horizontality . . . they simply do not have those values. And their environment, their temples . . . Some of their gods are really ugly . . . they could scare children, but this does not shock them. So I think the very notion of aesthetics is a value that we do not share. (Dominique, K)

Provisional summary. In the national distance perspective, national culture is the 'uncaused cause' – the argument that people who are unable to explain a specific event use (Thompson et al., 2006). As an explanation of last resort, nationality is the reason given when other explanations are unsatisfactory or insufficient. Essentialization and homogenization are prominent and supported by linguistic tools, such as the inclusive 'we' or the globalizing 'they'. National differences are viewed as salient, relevant and explanatory. Not surprisingly, the national distance perspective is predominantly adopted by French managers. As extant literature on expatriation has shown (Shaffer et al., 2006), being far away from one's homeland arouses comparison processes and leads expatriates to question situations more frequently than when they lived and worked in their own country. As such, national distance as a perspective on differences is fully consistent with the literature on expatriates' uprooting and rooting (Haslberger and Brewster, 2009).

Social differentiation

In the social differentiation perspective, individuals primarily perceive differences and define groups based on the status of others in the company or, more generally, in society. 'I do not need lots of bosses around me. I like to work in my own way. I can't work for someone. So there I was the boss' (Rajiv, A). In this quote, Rajiv categorizes people according to their position (management versus non-management). In several cases, the relevant status related to the distribution of power within the companies, so that people were separated into groups of managers and employees. Other cases revealed less expected categories. For instance, while discussing technical and managerial capabilities, some Indians placed themselves in opposition to other Indians, whom they referred to as 'uneducated' or 'remote':

> Whether someone is really technically good depends on his family background, and whether he is someone who could be a good manager also totally depends on the family background. If his family comes from a really remote area . . . that guy will definitely not be providing that kind of an impression. (Mahesh, O)

In the social differentiation perspective, people explain differences in attitudes and behaviors by referring to differences in education or economic status. In this regard, we

acknowledge that the Indian interviewees were all white-collar workers who belonged to the privileged Indian population, which might explain their social differentiation perspective – they did not wish to be assimilated into an undefined, all-encompassing group of 'Indians.'

Those adopting a social differentiation perspective focus on attitudes and behaviors rather than values. They often compare attitudes and behaviors, and we found a balance between positive and negative evaluations in interviews of both French and Indian nationals:

> The most positive point here is the enormous capacity to work. It's amazing. Sometimes I have to tell them: 'When I work, you don't have to work. Go home.' Still, they will wait until their boss has finished before going home, even though they have nothing to do. I have to tell them: 'Guys, it's OK. You don't have anything to do. Go home!' . . . Obviously, this is a plus for us. (Arthur, D)

The focus on attitudes and behaviors (*capacity for work* in this quote) does not exclude references to national culture. However, in contrast to the national distance perspective, national differences are tied to consequential attitudes and behaviors, rather than to value judgments. Managers and employees recognize the need to adapt their attitudes and behaviors to reflect what they understand about the nationality of the people with whom they work. As illustrated below, this need to adapt is not viewed as an insurmountable obstacle but as a prerequisite for working in a country that is completely different from one's homeland:

> The reward for the Indians is the bonuses. So, yes, salary is important in light of the problems I have to face in human resource management. Bonuses and pay increases are important. I was obliged to adapt to this fact. (Anatole, G)

The relationship with money, which was interpreted as cultural under the national distance perspective, is related to the structural economic situation in India in this perspective. In moving beyond a simplistic causal explanation based on national culture, Camille develops a broader vision and can apply her managerial skills to sustain employees' motivation:

> I work with lots of bonuses here. These people have a difficult life. They do not earn a lot of money. So you give them respect, you give them responsibilities and you give them a bonus each time the work is done properly. In my company, apart from the driver and the tea maker, everyone is rewarded after every successful shipment. They double their salary, and that is something. (Camille, A)

Implicitly, the social differentiation perspective refers to a way of defining diversity – in this specific case, status diversity – that Harrison and Klein (2007) have termed 'disparity.' Disparity is best captured by a positively skewed distribution that correlates with the distribution of status and power in companies, as well as in general society. This is especially true for Indian employees, as they often have only sporadic interactions with the larger population of French people at company headquarters. They interact frequently only with the few local French managers at the highest echelons of their particular unit.

Interestingly, Indian employees sometime use words like 'European' or 'foreigner' to categorize their manager(s) in a specific group, thereby making their French nationality irrelevant. This might not be surprising given the small number of French firms located in India (approximately 400 in 2007), and the low number of French expatriates in India (approximately 2300 in 2007; French Trade Commission in India, 2008).

> Three French expatriates work here, including Joseph, so yes there is some influence, but it is not marked . . . Someone who joins us would know it is a French company because he would have done some research. I mean, when you work at the office, it does not look like you are working for a French company. You know, it could just be any regular foreign multinational. (Nikhil, M)

Provisional summary. In the social differentiation perspective, status, and attitudes and behaviors are the salient and relevant differences through which people interpret their international experiences. People still refer to national culture, but without essentializing or negatively evaluating cultural differences. Rather, national differences call actors to adapt their attitudes and behaviors according to what they understand about the nationalities of the people with whom they work.

Functional distinction

Functional distinction is a perspective in which individuals interpret their international experiences and define groups based on people's functions within the company:

> They have good knowledge of the products. Maybe it is because the company has a small structure and we have few products, but I really admire them. These girls learn very fast. They have great potential. My two assistants will fly in the company or elsewhere – they won't stay at the 'fashion advisor' level. (Marie, B)

In the quote above, Marie refers to the tasks and roles that the 'girls' – a typical moniker in the fashion industry – take on in the company. Individuals' attachments to their company often lead them to define groups of reference: the organization with its corporate culture, and organizational subgroups based on roles and functions. Interviewees often include themselves as members of a company they recognize for its intrinsic qualities, and compare themselves with other companies, as evidenced in Thibault's quote:

> For a short time I worked for F but I didn't like it . . . Then I was approached by L. I do not know why, but I have always been fascinated by this company, its openness and its management style. I have had, and I still have, a fascination with it. Compared to the other companies where I have worked, there is little to improve here. This company is much more encouraging and caring. (Thibault, L)

International brands and/or a strong internal corporate culture help to fuel individuals' feelings of belonging to a single group: the company. The manager of a famous French luxury brand's boutique in New Delhi explained her attachment to the brand and to the company she called 'the house' ('la maison' in French):

> I talk to my employees about B, it is such a magnificent story. I show them how we work and how we live at B because Miss B [the founder] was a very rigorous person, hardworking and very demanding. That is how we are at B. (Marie, B)

Marie's closest assistant expressed the same feelings and intense attachment to B, and used the same vocabulary when discussing the brand and the other saleswomen. This high level of attachment was found not only in the domain of luxury goods but also in a company specializing in cutting tools.

In the functional distinction perspective, the focus is on people's knowledge and expertise rather than values, or attitudes and behaviors. Technical skills (planning, warehousing or otherwise unambiguous jobs) and managerial skills (leadership and empathy) are often summed up with the expression 'professionalism':

> The manager not only has ideas, he is also a man of action. He is one man who will basically come down to the lobby and see. He is very professional . . . His kind of leadership is different . . . his kind of energy level – to turn ideas into real action . . . That is the beauty of his leadership style. (Vijay, E)

In this perspective, Indian employees rarely criticized and often praised the competences of their French managers. Likewise, French managers often acknowledged the professionalism of their Indian staff. Critiques, when they occurred, were usually made on a personal basis and focused on people's lack of knowledge or expertise. French managers did not refer to national identity or status, and they disregarded general values or attitudes. Rather, they focused on the professional situation. In short, as illustrated below, the way they socially constructed differences was structural rather than cultural:

> The departments used to work separately and did not communicate. One day, I told them: 'We will organize a meeting every morning, like this.' It was easier said than done because in order to work like that, they needed appropriate documents and information that they did not have. These documents did not exist . . . When I say there was no budget, I mean that there was no daily turnover report. When money came in, they put it in a column without consolidating. So we could not analyze what happened. This was the same everywhere in the hotel sector in India; our facility was not an exception. (Paul, E)

Implicitly, the functional distinction perspective refers to a way of defining diversity – in this case, functional diversity – that is similar to Harrison and Klein's (2007) discussion of 'variety.' The company is the group; there is a strong attachment between individuals and the company, and between individuals; and the group is perceived as homogeneous. Diversity is distributed uniformly according to functions and roles, and national culture differences matter little, if they matter at all:

> I meet too many Europeans who endlessly compare everything to their home country, saying 'Oh, it's a mess here,' and so on. Personally, I tell myself that this is what it's like and that's it. When I'm here, I don't even realize that people drive the wrong side of the road, or that it's dirty. (Thibault, L)
>
> I have never found anything different. [The manager] is like an Indian. I never call him French. (Krishna, L)

From a linguistic point of view, the 'inclusive we' figure of speech that refers to the brand and/or the company was ever present. The interviews reflected joint (managers and employees) efforts to achieve common goals and high levels of identification with the respective companies:

> It is important to improve the required standard. We are in India, but we do not accept the local standard. We absolutely want to be 'world class' and that is the policy we have developed. We want to be world class but with our own model. People came here to find ideas and we became the benchmark. (Thibault, L)

Typical of the functional distinction perspective is the linguistic tool of applying the same treatment to two situations, as illustrated by Krishna (L): 'Human beings are always the same everywhere, regardless of whether they are Indians or foreigners.' In the third series of interviews, we were careful to avoid mentioning predefined categories (such as 'Indian' or 'French'). However, on some occasions, we did. People who had adopted a perspective of functional distinction challenged our use of these categories and insisted that such categories were not relevant to them. In so doing, they emphasized the unity of their organization as a single group that encompassed diversity (or variety) in terms of functions, and levels of knowledge and expertise.

Provisional summary. In the functional distinction perspective, differences in functions and levels of knowledge and expertise are the salient, relevant and core explanatory dimensions. Actors are not blind to national cultural differences but they do not view them as important in their daily interactions. They are able to praise the expertise of their staff or managers, even though they also refer to attitudes. Here, the experience of difference is not primarily cultural: diversity results from other (functional) dimensions. If national differences are perceived, they are seen as sources of enrichment rather than sources of trouble.

Why people differ in their perspectives on differences

In the previous section, we established the existence of three typical perspectives on differences in international settings *qualitatively*. In this section, we investigate what factors could help explain why people adopt one perspective or another, and if so, whether other factors can explain transitions from one perspective to another. To this end, we exploited the third series of interviews and proceeded in two stages.

In the first stage, we used the three bases for categorization (nationality, status and function) and the three foci of attention (values, attitudes and behaviors, and knowledge and expertise) to code the 30 interviews on NVivo 8. Given the undirected nature of the interviews, we assumed that the portion of an interview (in minutes) dedicated to a specific theme could be interpreted as an approximation of the importance of that theme for the interviewee[6] (Ou et al., 2006). We then computed the proportion of each interview dedicated to each basis for categorization and focus of attention. In Appendix 1, we provide and succinctly interpret the descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, minimums and maximums) of six codes (nationality-, status- and function-based categories, and value-,

attitudes and behaviors- and knowledge and expertise-based attention) for the entire sample of 30 interviews, and for the sub-samples of 15 (French) managers and 15 (Indian) employees. In Table 2, we report the findings for each of the 30 interviews.[7] We have highlighted individual scores that are greater than the mean plus one standard deviation or smaller than the mean minus one standard deviation. In so doing, we intend to reveal 'typical' cases of each perspective (i.e. interviews in which people socially construct their experience of differences with particular weights and with consistency).

Among the French managers, we identified seven interviews in which the coding scheme and our qualitative interpretation led to the identification of a dominant perspective (three cases of national distance, one case of social differentiation and three cases of functional distinction). A similar analysis among the Indian employees yielded nine cases with dominant perspectives (one case of national distance, five cases of social differentiation and three cases of functional distinction). These typical cases paved the way for the second stage of the analysis. We returned to the transcripts of the typical cases and consequently identified explanatory factors for the three perspectives. For French managers, *international experience* and *country experience* on one hand, and *the purpose of business* (business development, business creation or business turnaround) on the other hand, could explain why some initially adopted a national distance perspective or a social differentiation perspective, then eventually – with *time* – a functional distinction perspective. For Indian employees, *work experience* and *company tenure* on one hand, and *the purpose of business* on the other hand, could explain why some initially adopted a social differentiation perspective, then eventually – with *time* – a functional distinction perspective (see Table 3).

Antecedents of the national distance perspective

As previously mentioned, the national distance perspective was predominantly adopted by French managers (six out of seven cases).[8] Interestingly, four of these six interviewees had mandates to *develop an existing business*. Compared with the average, Arthur, Jacques, Dominique, Hector, Joseph and Patrick had a *limited experience of the country* (average time in India, 2.4 years, is shorter than in other perspectives). A primary reason for their expatriation to India had been to pursue their career in their respective companies, a finding supported by data on company tenure, and most of them were professional expatriates who had an already *long history of international assignments* abroad, both in developed and developing countries. For instance, India was Jacques' fourth international assignment, after Australia, UK and Mauritius. Interestingly, Jacques mentioned that business relations in Mauritius are very much influenced by Indian communities that control key portions of the Island economy and his earlier international experience in Mauritius smoothed his arrival in India. India was Joseph's third international assignment after Japan and Turkey. Hector had been working for different SMEs and he was undertaking his third international assignment in India, after a previous assignment in India and another in Canada.

These findings are somehow paradoxical. Indeed, the literature on expatriation suggests that extensive exposure to international experience is frequently associated with open-mindedness and an ability to adapt. It has promoted the model of a 'global manager' as someone who has extensively travelled and accumulated extensive experience abroad

Table 2. Exploratory analyses of the antecedents of interviewees' perspectives on differences in international settings.

Firm type	Industry	Staff	Name (firm) nationality	Age	Gender	Experience in India	Firm tenure	CAT: Nationality	CAT: Status	CAT: Function	ATT: Values	ATT: Attitudes behaviors	ATT: Knowledge expertise	Perspective*
MNC	**IT**	**50**	**Jacques (C)** F	**45**	**M**	**1.5**	**16**	**+**			**+**	**–**	**–**	**ND**
MNC	**Energy**	**18**	**Raj (I)** I	**45**	**M**		**4**	**+**		**–**		**–**	**+**	**ND**
MNC	Molding	350	Dominique (K) F	55	M	6	30							ND
MNC	**Sports**	**32**	**Joseph (M)** F	**29**	**M**	**1**	**7**	**+**	**–**	**–**				**ND**
SME	Consultancy	8	Patrick (F) F	32	M	2	6					+	–	ND
Start–up	Leisure	12	Arthur (D) F	30	M	2	2	+		**–**				ND
SME	**Software**	**75**	**Hector (O)** F	**42**	**M**	**2**	**10**	**+**	**+**	**–**	**+**		**–**	**ND**
MNC	IT	50	Uma (C) I	28	F		1				–	+		SD
MNC	**Consulting**	**250**	**Anatole (G)** F	**28**	**M**	**2**	**6**		**–**					**SD**
MNC	Consulting	250	Pradip (G) I	25	M		2	–	+		–	+		SD
MNC	Cosmetics	50	Damien (H) F	43	M	6	12						+	SD
MNC	Cosmetics	50	Dayanand (H) I	32	M		5				–			SD
MNC	Energy	18	J–Claude (I) F	47	M	4	20			+				SD

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued)

Firm type	Industry	Staff	Name (firm) nationality	Age	Gender	Experience in India	Firm tenure	CAT: Nationality	CAT: Status	CAT: Function	ATT: Values	ATT: Attitudes behaviors	ATT: Knowledge expertise	Perspective*
MNC	Molding	350	Arun (K) I	43	M		5	+		–	+			SD
MNC	**Sports**	**32**	**Nikhil (M) I**	**27**	**M**		**2**			**–**	**+**			**SD**
SME	Consultancy	8	Anand (F) I	25	M		2		–		–			SD
SME	**Software**	**75**	**Mahesh (O) I**	**28**	**M**		**4**				**–**	**+**		**SD**
Start–up	**Garments**	**6**	**Camille (A) F**	**29**	**F**	**7**	**2**		**+**			**+**		**SD**
Start–up	Garments	6	Rajiv (A) I	26	M		2	+	+	–				SD
Start–up	**Leisure**	**12**	**Kamal (D) I**	**27**	**M**		**2**					**+**	**–**	**SD**
Start–up	Food	80	Etienne (N) F	39	M	7	4					–		SD
Start–up	Food	80	Rahul (N) I	34	M		4	–	–	+	+			SD
SME	Aid	14	M–Amélie (J) F	32	F	6	6							SD
MNC	**Luxury**	**7**	**Marie (B) F**	**50**	**F**	**2**	**15**	**–**	**–**	**+**	**–**		**+**	**FD**
MNC	**Luxury**	**7**	**Leyla (B) I**	**40**	**F**		**2**		**–**		**–**	**–**	**+**	**FD**
SME	**Hospitality**	**750**	**Paul (E) F**	**50**	**M**	**6**	**6**	**–**		**+**	**–**			**FD**
SME	**Hospitality**	**750**	**Vijay (E) I**	**49**	**M**		**5**	**–**		**+**	**–**		**+**	**FD**
SME	**Machinery**	**220**	**Thibault (L) F**	**44**	**M**	**6**	**12**	**–**		**+**	**–**			**FD**

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued)

Firm type	Industry	Staff	Name (firm) nationality	Age	Gender	Experience in India	Firm tenure	CAT: Nationality	CAT: Status	CAT: Function	ATT: Values	ATT: Attitudes behaviors	ATT: Knowledge expertise	Perspective*
SME	**Machinery**	**220**	**Krishna (L) I**	**51**	**M**		**6**	**–**			**–**	**–**	**+**	**FD**
SME	Aid	14	Gayatri (J) I	29	F		3	–		+	–			FD

Note: Typical cases in **bold** (coding and reading are mutually reinforcing).
* : ND for National distance ; SD for Social differentiation ; FD for Functional distinction.

Table 3. Antecedents to perspectives on differences in international settings: a tentative model.

Perspective on differences	= f (	Purpose of business ;	Manager's personal factors ;	Employee's personal factors	)
National distance (based on nationality)	= f (	Business development in SMEs and MNCs	+ International experience – Country experience	N.A.	)
Social differentiation (based on status)	= f (	Business creation	– International experience + Country experience	– Work experience – Company tenure	)
Functional distinction (based on competence)	= f (	Business turnaround in SMEs and MNCs	+ International experience + Country experience + Company tenure	+ Work experience + Company tenure	)

Caveat: for the purpose of the demonstration, we present our model as a function. Of course, this function should not be interpreted in a mathematical sense, but in a theoretical sense.

(Barlett and Ghoshal, 2003; Kedia and Mukherji, 1999). Such managers should be able to adapt to any circumstance in any country, and relate global factors to local considerations in order to create a transnational culture. Consequently, we would expect them to adopt either a social differentiation or a functional distinction perspective. However, our findings suggest that professional expatriates distance themselves from their local employees.

Their *short-term mandate to develop an existing business* is – we argue − a primary explanation. Not surprisingly, several managers attempted to reproduce either the headquarters' way of doing business or what they had previously done successfully in their previous international assignments, and did not necessarily examine the local context in depth. Typically, their mandate in India was expected to last three years and, with the exception of Dominique (K) who renewed his contract, none of them expressed a desire to stay longer.[9] Moreover, most of their companies' policies did not encourage them to extend their stay for fear of management 'indigenization' (Hocking et al., 2007: 529−30). Consequently, as they knew they would not stay for long, these managers preferred to maintain a certain distance from their employees.[10]

Antecedents of the social differentiation perspective

The social differentiation perspective was adopted by six French managers and 10 Indian employees. These 16 people worked in MNCs (eight people), SMEs (three) and start-ups (five). Interestingly, all but one of those in the sample employed in a *start-up context* had adopted this perspective. On average Indian employees had a limited *work experience* (29.5 years old on average, they were much younger than in the functional distinction perspective) and short *company tenure* (2.9 years on average and fewer than in the

functional distinction perspective). On average, French managers had more *country experience* (average time in India, 5.3 years, was longer than in other perspectives), and while three of them had some international experience (Anatole in Egypt, Damien in Finland and Egypt and Jean-Claude in Brazil and several African countries), the three others (Camille, Etienne and Marie-Amélie) had no other international experience before India. Company A provides a good illustration of social differentiation in a start-up. Camille, a young French manager in Delhi, ran her two-year old garment company. For her, status was the basis for categorization, while employees' attitudes and behaviors were the primary focus of attention. As managing director, she struggled every day to develop the company and, in her case, reflections on national differences were simply not relevant. This view was shared by her employees, notably the Rajiv.

Interestingly, managers and employees in the start-ups developed the same perspectives on differences. The context of business creation represents both a challenge and a motivation for managers and employees. It somehow generates a community of interest that moves managers and employees toward a common goal, and transcends national differences. Rajiv, Camille's assistant manager, expected the same behaviors from her as she expected from him and the other employees. To the employees, the manager was the 'boss' (status) rather than 'a Frenchman' (nationality).

In other contexts, some Indian employees also adopted a social differentiation perspective. For instance, both Uma (C), a young woman working in IT in an MNC in Delhi, and Mahesh (O), a young software professional working in an SME in Bengaluru, paid attention to attitudes and behaviors, but gave little consideration to values. In both cases, their French managers adopted a national distance perspective, expressing dissatisfaction with the country itself and with the way their employees – Uma and Mahesh – worked. In both cases, the working atmosphere was tense; the attrition rate was high and employees – including Uma and Mahesh – expressed dissatisfaction. Uma and Mahesh attributed the responsibility for these tensions to their managers' attitudes and behaviors: 'It is difficult and it is sometimes also really frustrating because he [Jacques] does not give me any guidance' (Uma, C). These employees did not consider their managers' nationalities or values, but instead their attitudes and behaviors. In all contexts – start-ups, MNCs or SMEs – the Indian employees were relatively young and inexperienced, and had no significant international experience or experience with foreigners. These were probably sufficient reasons for them to focus their attention on the attitudes and behaviors of their managers.

Antecedents of the functional distinction perspective

The functional distinction perspective was adopted by seven people, three of whom were French managers and four were Indian employees. They worked in SMEs (five) or MNCs (two). Interestingly, five of these people (including both the manager and the employee at companies E and L) had been involved in the *turnaround of their company*, which was in a poor economic and financial situation when the manager was appointed. On average, these people had *extensive work experience* (French managers − 48 years old on average − and Indian employees − 42 years old on average − were much older and experienced than in other perspectives) and, not surprisingly, *long company tenure* (11

years for French managers and four years for Indian employees). The three French managers had *international experience* following the former assignments abroad (Thibault in Germany, Marie in Indonesia, Paul in the USA and Mauritius) and *more extensive experience in the country than French managers in the national distance perspective* (4.6 years on average in India as compared to 2.4 years).

These interviewees focused primarily on the functions people fulfilled, as well as their knowledge and expertise; nationality was less salient and relevant in their discourses, and they paid little attention to values. In their companies (B, E and L), Indian employees respected their managers for two reasons: their experience in India and their 'professionalism,' which was related to their extensive work experience. The managers mentioned their happiness in the country, if not love for India. The case of Company L, where the first author spent several days in non-participative observation, is illustrative. Thibault (a French manager) had lived in India for six years. When he arrived, the situation was grim: the company was reporting significant losses and was completely disorganized compared with what he had experienced in his previous position abroad (Germany). Thibault was given a mere three years to get the company back on track. At the time of observation, Thibault was highly respected by his employees because he had managed to make the company profitable in six years and to create a new 'world-class' business model (according to HR Manager Krishna and other employees). Thibault's closest employees, especially Krishna, shared his enthusiasm for the company. They expressed parallel ideas using similar vocabulary during their respective interviews. Similar observations were made at B and E: the employees had developed strong attachments to their company and wished to stay even though their (French) manager might leave at some point.

Two complementary factors may explain the prevalence of the functional distinction perspective in these three cases. First, people had been working closely together over an extended period of time and had faced the same difficulties together. As with the social differentiation perspective in the context of business creation in start-ups, their shared experience created a kind of 'community of destiny' between staff and management. Second, as the survival of their companies was at stake, they focused on leveraging their knowledge and expertise in their specific functions. Differences in values were viewed as less relevant and could possibly have contradicted the need to be united and move beyond national differences.

The dynamic of perspectives: Defaults and transitions

The above analyses provide new evidence of dynamic patterns – different for managers and employees − with default perspectives and transitions between perspectives. *Initially and by default*, French managers tend to adopt the national distance or the social differentiation perspective, depending on business factors: business development in existing firms (often MNCs) or business creation (notably in start-up companies). In the former case, nationalities act as a fault-line. In the latter case, status does. Interestingly, our observations above suggest that the functional distinction perspective is associated with longer country experience (i.e. length of stay in the country, longer work experience and longer company tenure). The *passing of time* generates greater experience in general and greater experience of the country more specifically, and may have the effect of attenuating the

initial role of nationalities and statuses as fault-lines. This scenario of transition from one perspective to another concurs with the literature suggesting that expatriate adjustment increases in accordance with the length of the local assignment (Yamazaki, 2010). MNC managers on their three-year contracts may simply not have the time or the incentive to move beyond national distance as a default strategy for coping with cross-cultural relationships. Experienced managers with a deeper knowledge of the country may get beyond defaults and consider knowledge and expertise. We would add that such a scenario of transition is all the more likely if critical issues arise and require turnaround strategies that generate a community of destiny between people and induce them to tap into their respective knowledge and expertise, notwithstanding prevalent nationalities and statuses.

Our analyses also suggest a possible pattern for Indian employees. It is reasonable to speculate that social differentiation is the default perspective for young and relatively inexperienced employees such as Uma (C) or Mahesh (O). Lacking any international experience, they focus their attention on the attitudes and behaviors of their managers, and statuses (boss, second, director, manager, employee, etc.) act as fault-lines. Interestingly, Indian employees who adopt the functional distinction perspective tend – like French managers − to have more work experience and company tenure. For them too, the *passing of time* may generate greater experience in general and greater experience of the intercultural situation more specifically, and may attenuate the initial role of status as fault-line. Experienced Indian employees with a deeper knowledge of their foreign manager may get beyond status and consider knowledge and expertise. As in the case of managers, such a transition is all the more likely if critical issues arise and require turnaround strategies that generate a community of destiny between people and induce them to tap into their respective knowledge and expertise, notwithstanding prevalent statuses.

Contributions and conclusion

Contribution to cross-cultural studies

Our findings suggest that people interpret their working environments in several ways. Specifically, we have characterized three perspectives: national distance, social differentiation and functional distinction. Tables 4a, b and c summarize the dominant bases for categorization (nationality, status and function), as well as the dominant foci of attention (values, attitudes and behaviors, and knowledge and expertise) and the underlying conceptions of diversity (separation, disparity and variety).

This article's first contribution to cross-cultural studies is straightforward: when considering their cross-cultural working relations, only a small proportion of people (seven out of 30 in our study) put national cultures at the center of their analysis (Barinaga, 2007). These people make sense of the cross-cultural differences as (many) cross-cultural scholars expect them to do – through the lens of national distance. In these cases, cross-cultural differences are objectively salient and subjectively relevant, and people organize their working worlds along nationality-based lines. Nationality is often associated with negativity and criticism (i.e. as a way for foreign managers to professionally distance themselves from their local employees). Indian employees use nationality in a more subtle way, but regional identities emerge when Indians want to distance

themselves from other groups of Indians with less education. Some Indians also refer to wider categories such as 'Europeans' or 'foreigners' when they refer to foreign managers. Thus, a strong focus on national distance alone would further contribute to extant essentialization and homogenization (McSweeney, 2002; Osland and Bird, 2000; Sackmann and Phillips, 2004), two pitfalls of current cross-cultural research.

Unlike the findings presented in many international and cross-cultural studies (for instance, Hofstede, 1991; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1998), we find that national cultures, while important, may not be predominant in people's lives. People develop alternative views on differences in international settings, which we label social differentiation and functional distinction. By considering alternative bases for categorization, such as status and function, people reveal the richer, more subtle meanings attached to their cross-cultural experiences. Nationality-based values are disregarded, and people insist on structural rather than cultural justifications for issues at work. In these cases, cross-national differences do not really make a difference. Altogether, our findings respond to the call for a more subtle view of cross-cultural diversity, one that reveals, rather than masks, actors' complex descriptions (Latour, 2005).

Contribution to diversity studies

One major finding of our research led us to reframe our research question and to add a third series of interviews to our research design. This finding can be summarized as follows: *the major issue in a cross-cultural working context might not be the question of cultural difference but the question of difference at a more general level*. Recently, scholars of diversity have examined the concept of difference in depth (Rink and Ellemers, 2007), most notably from a constructionist perspective (Zanoni et al., 2010). They have shown that diversity among actors is expressed in selective and instrumental ways (Zanoni and Janssens, 2004), and that individuals consider and perceive diversity as either a deficit (inferior to an ideal model) or an added value (Janssens and Zanoni, 2005). In short, scholars of diversity have noted that people make sense of differences in multiple ways.

By empirically deriving alternative perspectives on differences in the international workplace, we contribute to this ongoing development of diversity studies (Harrison and Klein, 2007). Specifically, the national distance perspective perceives diversity bimodally, with two value-based groups standing at opposite points. The social differentiation perceives diversity as disparity with a positively-skewed distribution that reflects the different status of people in the company (and society). Finally, the functional distinction perceives diversity as variety with a cohesive company-level group accompanied by a distribution of people or subgroups in the company based on expertise.

Beyond the mere description of these three perspectives, we have also explored the factors that could induce people to adopt one alternative or another. Apart from the passing of time, one contextual factor: the purpose of business (business creation, business development or business turnaround), and two personal factors: international experience and country experience, seem to influence the adoption of specific perspectives. Although exploratory, these findings offer some guidelines for corporate human resource officers wishing to address 'the challenge of differences – of diversity – [that] is a crucial one for managers and scholars' (Harrison and Klein, 2007: 1223).

Table 4a. National distance.

Basis for categorization	**Nationality/territorial identity**
Examples	*Clear-cut dichotomy among groups*: 'Yes, of course there is a different way of working, but I would say it is cultural. It is cultural because what is important for us – the deadline or tomorrow – is not for them.' (Hector, O) *Irreconcilable positions between groups*: 'If you split India into four parts, it will be easier to understand . . . In the north, aggressive. You have been in Delhi – it is not very safe . . . For example, our team, when we travel after 8 p.m., we are careful. On the other hand, Bombay is one of the safest cities that I have ever been to.' (Dayanand, H)
Focus of attention	**Values**
Examples	*Essentialist explanation*: 'There is a notion of hierarchy. It is directly linked to their history with the Russians. All of their values are pseudo-communist.' (Jacques, C) *Essentialist explanation*: 'For us, a deadline is a deadline. To them, it is a guideline . . . For them, ASAP (as soon as possible) means ASIP: as soon if possible!' (Maurice, second series of interviews) *Expression of negative judgments*: 'I would say there are other values . . . in social behavior, for instance . . . The condition of women, for instance . . . It is absolutely intolerable to me.' (Dominique, K) *Expression of condescension:* 'It is very difficult to trust them because they do not respect their commitments . . . It is because they do not have the same system of values.' (Patrick , F)
Definition of diversity	**Separation**
Examples	*Bimodal distribution (with members at opposite standpoints)*: 'It is very difficult to trust them because they do not respect their commitments and, from my short experience here, I think it is because they do not have the same system of values.' (Patrick, F) *Linguistically, frequent use of the national collective singular*: 'The Indian man, if he receives little, he gives little.' (Jean Pascal, second series of interviews)

Note: All from third series of interviews unless otherwise noted.

Finally, we have proposed to consider some perspectives as a default and speculate about transitions between perspectives. Time, as reflected in growing country experience, growing work experience and growing company tenure, could be the driver of transition between perspectives. These propositions and speculations, that should be considered with due caution and deserve further empirical analyses, relate to two underlying research questions that need to be further addressed: Do people shift from one perspective to another? If so, what factors predict these shifts or transitions?

Contribution to social constructionism

We have adopted standard social constructionist postures to cross-cultural management, namely we have rejected essentialism and homogenization, and attempted to rethink extant categories and concepts (Tsui et al., 2007). The three perspectives on differences that we have identified, described and modeled are the outcome − within specific professional contexts (purpose of business) − of singular interactions among individuals with

Table 4b. Social differentiation.

Basis for categorization	**Status**
Examples	*Distribution of power in the company*: 'As a boss, I am someone who gives plenty of responsibility to employees.' (Camille, A) *Distribution of power in the society (caste):* 'When people at the management level look at and talk to their technicians, or recruit new ones, they say: "OK, he is from my caste, he comes from my native area, etc." All of these things are still there.' (Mahesh, O) *Distribution of competences in society (labor)*: 'Indian society is very sophisticated in some aspects . . . For example, top management in India is absolutely top class. But, at the same time, if you want things to be done at a lower level [i.e. the operational level], then it is far more difficult. It is what can be called a dichotomy with extremes: very good and very bad.' (Dayanand, H)
Focus of attention	**Attitudes and behaviors**
Examples	*Hard work (positive evaluation):* 'What I like about my staff is their listening skills, the fact that they are interested in many things . . . They are also hard working.' (Joseph, M) *Learning capacities (negative evaluation):* 'They take very few initiatives. That is the main problem. The "Yes-boss" syndrome.' (Joseph, M) *Type of leadership*: 'During my 25-year working career, I have seen so many leaders. But I see him as a leader who is by and large complete in his repertoire . . . He is very strict: he gives you a chance, but if you do not seize it . . . beware.' (Vijay, E) *'Defined freedom,' i.e. restricted autonomy*: 'No one with Jean-Claude has full autonomy. So certain constraints and rules are there. But within those rules, you have freedom. You have to use the freedom that is available to you . . . It is a defined freedom.' (Raj, I)
Definition of diversity	**Disparity**
Examples	*Positively skewed distribution (one member at the highest endpoint):* 'My second boss was a master. He was very strict. His work philosophy was: let us keep the leash tight, and when you get a little bit of freedom, you will appreciate it more. But he was a very good boss.' (Rahul, N)

Note: All from third series of interviews unless otherwise noted.

their personal characteristics. Our study is part of a wider research stream that attempts to move away from predefined concepts (such as 'national culture,' Sayer, 1997) and over-simplified assumptions of the following kind: 'national differences necessarily generate perceptions of cultural difference'; and/or 'national cultural differences are more salient and relevant than other kinds of differences.' In our research, we have rather focused on the individual encounters and insisted on the discovery process of differences in international settings.

How people think and conceptualize their world to elaborate and use meaning frameworks is deeply rooted in language − a precondition for thought (Burr, 2003) − and meaning frameworks are mainly accessible through rhetorical and linguistic analyses. Yet, such analyses should be closely coupled with the careful analysis of their personal situations. Methodologically, we have attempted to do so: we have examined individual

Table 4c. Functional distinction.

Basis for categorization	**Function**
Examples	*Description of jobs:* 'The people working with me are very competent. From Vijay, the HR Manager, to the waitress, the cleaning lady and the peon, they are all very good. But it took me time to select them.' (Paul, E) *Description of functions*: 'The other saleswomen and I are in charge of welcoming the clients and, above all, explaining the brand. As the Fashion Advisor, Marie is here to supervise and order the latest collection from Paris.' (Leyla, B)
Focus of attention	**Knowledge and expertise**
Examples	*Type of leadership based on a balance between ideas and actions:* 'Paul has a very transformational style of leadership. He not only has ideas, but he is also a man of action.' (Vijay, E) *Vertical communication*: 'There is something I like very much: they accept criticisms. God knows I pay a lot of attention to the way I speak to the girls and to the relationship between the saleswomen and me.' (Marie, B) *Alternative explanation for high turnover rate (structurally related to the labor market, rather than culturally determined):* 'Attrition? Attrition is a question of supply and demand. No more, no less.' (Delphine, first series of interviews) *Structural (rather than cultural) explanations for organizational deficiencies:* 'Typically, a defective product is sent to a client. The client returns it to us. It is put back in stock, in the same place. They then send the same defective product to someone else and we get it back again . . . But it is not about being Indian; we simply have no inventory management system.' (Thibault, L)
Definition of diversity	**Variety**
Examples	*Uniform distribution (spread members across the group):* 'I think I have learned a lot. I think we share a lot, and it has been a great experience so far . . . I think the people I have interacted with so far, the company's culture, what B represents, I really love it.' (Krishna, B) *Variety*: 'It is a very young team over here. Lots of people are the of same age, in their mid-twenties . . . Working in such a team is a really good experience, regardless whether they are French or Indian guys.' (Sumita, Mumbai, second series of interviews)

Note: All from third series of interviews unless otherwise noted.

conceptualizations (perspectives on differences) while simultaneously analyzing their situations (purpose of business and personal characteristics). In short, categories, as well as conceptual frameworks, are part of daily life (Bowker and Leigh Star, 1999). Nevertheless, far from being an objective reality, they emerge as the outcome of personal characteristics and professional experience in non-random surroundings (organizations, countries, etc.). In this article, we have shown how people socially construct *a part of* their reality, *the category of difference in international settings* (Berger and Luckmann, 1991).

Limitations and conclusion

Our research is not without limitations. Theoretically and empirically, while we have explored some likely antecedents to the three perspectives on differences, it would be

interesting to examine whether these perspectives have consequences for organizational outcomes, such as turnover or learning. Methodologically, we have focused on a small, non-representative sample of French expatriates and their employees in one emerging country. It would be interesting to examine other contexts such as, for instance, Indian managers in western countries (Mahadevan, 2011). Also, qualitative cross-cultural research based on interviews is sensitive to language issues, and the nationalities of the interviewer and interviewee have to be taken into account. The question of interpreting data in a cross-cultural context has long been discussed (Earley and Singh, 1995; Punnett and Shenkar, 2004), especially the question of language. As Holden (2008) noted, interpreting the language of the interviewee can be a source of error if English is not the mother tongue of the interviewer (which is the case here). However, this bias can be partially overcome if the researcher has a good knowledge of the country itself, which is the case. The first author lived and studied in India for two years, and has visited India regularly over the past 15 years. That said, this cannot prevent all misinterpretations and a multicultural team would certainly be ideal.

Finally, our research reveals the complexity of cross-cultural relationships, which are often oversimplified in cultural analyses. By allowing the actors themselves to narrate their cross-cultural experiences and to decide what constitutes 'cultural,' we have tried to uncover how they construct differences in this cross-cultural setting, as this 'is both a question of personal awareness and sensitivity to the difference, and of willingness to tackle it' (Damien, H).

Appendix 1

Descriptive statistics, bases of categorization and foci of attention (N = 30)

The following table presents descriptive statistics for two themes (*basis for categorization* and *focus of attention*), three bases of categorization (*nationality, status* and *function*) and three foci of attention (*values, attitudes and behaviors* and *knowledge and expertise*).

N = 30)	*M*	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Categorization (1)	40%	12%	22%	65%
Nationality-based (2)	45	27	5	96
Status-based (2)	10	9	0	29
Function-based (2)	45	28	0	93
Attention (1)	33%	13%	16%	62%
Value-based (2)	17	16	0	57
Attitude & behavior-based (2)	59	14	29	82

(Continued)

Knowledge & expertise-based (2)	24	18	0	71
(*N* = 15: French managers)	*M*	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Categorization (1)	42%	11%	24%	60%
Nationality-based (2)	58	26	11	96
Status-based (2)	9	9	0	27
Function-based (2)	33	26	0	74
Attention (1)	35%	14%	16%	60%
Value-based (2)	26	15	0	57
Attitude & behavior-based (2)	59	9	43	74
Knowledge & expertise-based (2)	15	11	0	35
(*N* = 15: Indian employees)	*M*	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Categorization (1)	39%	13%	22%	65%
Nationality-based (2)	33	22	5	66
Status-based (2)	11	9	0	29
Function-based (2)	56	26	16	93
Attention (1)	31%	13%	16%	62%
Value-based (2)	8	12	0	37
Attitude & behavior-based (2)	60	18	29	82
Knowledge & expertise-based (2)	32	20	8	71

(1) Importance of the theme, expressed as a proportion of the full interview (%).
(2) Relative importance of each modality in the main theme, expressed as a percentage of (1).

Several findings are noteworthy. First, interviewees – both French managers and Indian employees – spent an average of 40 percent of their interview time categorizing people. There is no significant difference on this item between French and Indian interviewees in terms of standard deviations and minimum/maximum values. This first result suggests that the need to deal with diversity is of equal importance to French managers and Indian employees. Second, interviewees predominantly based their categorization process on nationalities and functions (45% each), while the status-based categorization was less important (10%). Third, the French managers predominantly categorized based on nationality and only thereafter categorized based on function. The findings for the Indian employees are the exact opposite and in the same proportions. It seems that French managers refer more to nationalities when interpreting their experiences, while Indian employees refer more to the functions people perform.

We discovered a similar pattern when examining the focus of attention. Interviewees spent, on average, about one-third of their interview time describing what was 'relevant' to them. There is no significant difference on this item between French and Indian interviewees in terms of standard deviations and minimum/maximum values. This suggests that the need to focus on elements of value in the cross-cultural situation is of equal importance on both sides. Second, interviewees predominantly paid attention to attitudes and behaviors (59%), while values (17%), and knowledge and expertise (24%) were given less weight. Nevertheless, and this is the third noteworthy finding regarding foci of attention, values were far more important for French managers than knowledge and expertise, while the opposite was true for Indian employees. In short, French managers pay attention to attitudes and behaviors, and then to values, while Indian employees pay attention to attitudes and behaviors, and then to expertise when interpreting an international situation.

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Notes

1 We use the term cross-cultural research to include those which involve different national or cultural groups.
2 In addition, a working knowledge of Hindi eased ongoing interviews with a few Indian interviewees.
3 We also conducted a rhetorical and linguistic analysis of narratives associated with each perspective (see Perelman and Olbrechts Tyteca, 1991). Given the reviewers' advice, we do not report the typical rhetorical and linguistic tools that interviewees used in each perspective.
4 In this article, we define attitudes and behaviors in the broadest and most common sense (Katz, 1960). 'Attitudes' refer to a person's inner evaluative reactions (thoughts and feelings) toward someone or something, while 'behaviors' refers to outwards expression of attitudes (i.e. the actions of a person facing a specific situation). Decades of research have shown that attitudes and behaviors are often but not always related. We do not analytically distinguish between attitudes and behaviors, as both relate to the same perspective on differences.
5 In this article, a perspective refers both to the representations people have from their colleagues/managers and the interpretation they make when confronted to what they consider as 'different.' For a similar 'perspective on perspectives' in cultural diversity studies, see Ely and Thomas (2001) and Thomas and Ely (1996).
6 As one reviewer rightly observed, equating the length of discussion of a theme with its importance might be misleading. The length of a discussion could be an indication of one's level of comfort with a particular theme. This observation is most likely true in some cases. Nevertheless, we are more interested in the comparison of figures between people than in the absolute figures. By focusing on 'typical' cases of individuals, we hope to rule out this alternative explanation.
7 To simplify, we have not reported the individual scores on all dimensions (data are available upon request).
8 Raj, a 45 year-old employee by an MNC in Mumbai, was the only Indian to fall in the national distance perspective. It was his first experience in a foreign MNC and with foreigners, and he clearly viewed nationality as a basis for categorization. When we met, Raj was preparing to be expatriated to the French headquarters and this situation might explain his sensitivity to national categorization.
9 Not a typical case of national distance (see Table 2), the case of Dominique is in many ways an outlier. A scientist who had run several plants and services in France over more than 25 years, he experienced at 49 his first foreign assignment in India. He extended his first two-year mandate because his company acquired a second facility in India and no one else was available to take over and merge the two geographically close facilities.
10 One reviewer mentioned an alternative explanation: hubris. An experience of international assignments – especially if concentrated in developed countries − might indeed lead to the hubris of having international experience without the actual experience of living in developing countries. However, the careful reading of all interviews and notes did not indicate traces of hubris or excessive superiority. So while we cannot definitely rule out hubris as a cause, we rather argue that people purposefully prefer to maintain a certain distance: given their short mandate of continuing an existing business, they do not fully engage in the intercultural encounter.

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