

Looking at Business Relationships and Interaction through the Lens of Culture

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ABSTRACT

The concepts of business relationships and interaction between organizations developed by IMP group raised attention of a wide range of scholars. Nevertheless within time some of the perspectives put in the original work of IMP group of 1982 were blurred. Interaction at that time was emphasized to be conducted between individuals and although the cultural influence was not much emphasized it still existed in the notion of cultural distance. Nowadays, although most of the research is being conducted with the help of individuals, their place in business interaction and business relationships seems to be forgotten. Most of the research within industrial markets is conducted on an organizational level. It also seems that less research within this sphere is being conducted in the international settings. As a consequence, the impact of culture is either left aside or used in an irrelevant way.

Although at first sight the concept culture can seem simple for understanding, it can be seen on different levels and from different perspectives. Much of the literature on culture emphasises the importance of values. Nevertheless it would be intricate to explain one's behavior through values, as they are to a certain extent invisible and perceptual based, which makes them hard to grasp. In their study IMP group also draws on values when explaining cultural distance, which can lead to misinterpretations. A new way of understanding culture within business is needed in order to revive the usage of culture in business relationships in industrial markets research. A cultural turn on business relationships and interaction is made by drawing on symbolic interactionism perspective.

This paper is of conceptual character. The objective is to form an appropriate theoretical framework for developing intercultural business relationships on an individual level. The focus is on interpersonal interaction, which is an indispensable attribute if short-term episodes which lead to business relationships development. The theoretical underpinning of this article is based on the IMP group interaction approach and symbolic interactionism perspective. A contribution to theory is to be made by reconsidering the interaction approach and looking at it from an individual perspective and in a cultural context.

Keywords: Business relationships, interaction, individual perspective, symbolic interactionism, culture

*"The first condition of having to deal with somebody
at all is to know with whom one has to deal"
Georg Simmel ([1908] 1950, 307)*

International business literature with such subtopics as internationalization, globalization, multinational corporations, foreign direct investments is predominantly based on an economic approach. In the beginning of 20th century economics was more of a social science and applied psychological factors to explain economic behavior, but after the end of World War II economists started to develop more rational models (Thaler 2000). Nowadays scholars within economics and international business start to reconsider the role of individual in developing business. In post-industrial era the movement towards "homo-sociologicus" or "homo-sapiens" (c.f. Thaler 2000) in business studies started in 70s-80s, with the application of social theories in business research and appearance of "relationship management", "interaction/network approach" and other related concepts. Thus the inanimate business concept was given life by implying such human features as engagement in relationships and interaction.

Our world represents a web of linked entities in any sphere of activity. An entity can not act on its own, the scarcity of resources makes him connect with other entities. Thus, it is crucial to view the company as being in business relationships with other companies, and not as one isolated from the "big business world". 'Business relationships' concept was introduced in industrial markets research by IMP group. "The IMP Group was formed in 1976 to develop and carry out cooperative research into the nature of the relationships between companies in these complex markets" (Turnbull, Ford & Cunningham 1996, 45). During its existence IMP group produced two main approaches to business relationships on industrial markets: interaction approach (Håkansson 1982) and network approach (Håkansson & Snehota 1995). This paper mainly aims to contribute to the discussion on IMP group interaction approach (Håkansson 1982).

A prerequisite element of business relationships is interaction between parties and represents itself one of the core elements of IMP group interaction approach (Håkansson 1982). Interaction process is seen as an attribute of short-term episodes. These episodes lead to long-term relationships and are seen as vital in managing and shaping the relationships and changes within them. Thus, interaction process represents a mechanism for changes within business relationships. Nevertheless the mere concept of interaction as a process seems to be overlooked by IMP researchers. Moreover business interaction and relationships are studied in a considerably impersonalized and homogenous way. It leads to disregarding individual actors as the main entities of interaction and the role of culture as a context and root metaphor for understanding interaction.

In the following sections I will revisit the concept of interaction and interaction approach as introduced by IMP group. After which I will take a view on predominant cultural theories used in IMP group research and business studies in whole. Following the critical review of IMP group work and predominant cultural theories, I will shift towards finding appropriate concepts for understanding intercultural business interaction and relationships on an individual level. In search for inspiration I turned to symbolic interactionist perspective.

Finally an attempt towards developing a theoretical framework for the study of intercultural business interaction and relationships on an individual level is made.

INTERPRETING THE 'INTERACTION' CONCEPT

The concept of interaction has been and is being studied within an abundant number of sciences, ranging from chemistry to sociology. When reviewing the history of business theory it seems that the concept of interaction was widely omitted in B2B markets during the industrial era. Although it should be mentioned, that in 1920s an acclaimed social theorist Elton Mayo applied human interaction and relations concepts to organizational studies. His works raised a lot of negative and positive discussions, but what is important is that already back then he emphasized the uniqueness of individuals, the interaction between them and the meaning they gave to situations (Smith 1998).

In the 1960s interaction started to be widely considered by social psychologists, anthropologists in administrative science and research on human relations in a work context (e.g. Levine & White 1961, Berkovitz & Beniz 1961). Appliance of interaction concept within the social field was closely related to people and their behaviour in certain situations. In business studies of post-industrial era the word interaction began to emerge within relationship marketing theories in the end of 1970s and was mainly seen as a useful concept regarding B2C markets. In B2B markets interaction started to be regarded as a significant concept in early 1980s, when IMP group introduced their interaction approach (Håkansson 1982). The interaction approach focused on dyadic business relationships and consisted of four main elements: interaction process, parties, atmosphere and environment. Although the mere name of IMP interaction approach draws our attention to the importance of interaction, IMP group have not fully defined this concept (Medlin & Törnroos 2006).

If we take a look on the definition of the word "interaction", its close relation to human behaviour is clear. *The word 'interaction' is defined in Merriam-Webster Dictionary as "a mutual or reciprocal action or influence"*. While one of the definitions of the word 'action' is *"the manner or method of performing an actor's deportment or expression by means of attitude, voice, and gesture"*. Once again we come to a notion that "interaction" can not be impersonalized, it is clearly a concept related to human.

BRINGING MEN BACK IN

Interaction at the time of the interaction approach emergence was considered to be based on four types of exchange: product or service, financial, information and social (Håkanson 1982). Despite emphasizing the fact that interaction is conducted between individuals, only product and information exchange variables were used in the interviews of the interaction approach project (c.f. Håkanson 1982). Social exchange, which was stated to be a crucial function in reducing uncertainties between the two parties and maintaining relationships (Håkanson 1982) was avoided. Although afterwards social exchange was widely considered in IMP studies, the origins of social exchange theory seemed to be forgotten. The origins of social exchange theory were at the individual level and it was developed to examine interpersonal exchanges that are not purely economic (Das & Teng 2002). It should be noted that in some cultures business relationships can not be considered purely economic and in order to understand them one needs to consider social dimensions of business relationships. Although some of IMP studies attempted to study the social aspect of business relationships (e.g. Halinen & Salmi 2001, Mainela 2003, Naudé & Abosag 2007, Bories 2009), the main

emphasis of IMP studies is made on firm or network-based analyses (Henneberg, Naudé & Mouzas 2010).

We should not forget that the company itself should not be seen as a faceless entity, but as certain group of individuals. Here we are talking in terms of individual level of analysis as we regard the company as a group of individuals and not as the one containing multiple groups (c.f. Rousseau 1985). Business interaction is conducted between individuals as social entities and not as inanimate parts of a business apparatus called organization. The interaction process is the driving factor for business relationships dynamics and development. Human is obviously the central figure in interaction and relationships, whether it is a business one or not. As it was said by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry in his memoirs, “Man is a knot into which relationships are tied.” Business studies and especially those of the IMP group need a turn, as the one done in sociological studies in the 60s. This turn could be depicted simply by quoting the presidential address delivered at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association in Montreal in 1964 and the title of an acknowledged scientific article by Homan (1964): “Bringing men back in”. It should be remarked that this notion does not imply that sociologists before 1960s were not concerned about individual actor aspects, it meant that the turn should be made from focusing on the role of individual towards an acting individual (Homan 1964). Though within business relationships studies neither one of these turns received much of attention, *it is the acting individual that is of focus within this particular article.*

When closed economies as those representing former Soviet Union countries became open, the economic and social exchange became even more international. Nowadays businesses throughout the world are not restricted by the opportunities and resources, which their domestic economy can give them. They can seek for better options in other countries. The following section will deal with cultural issues in business studies, in particular with that of IMP group.

CULTURE: THE MISSING CONCEPT IN BUSINESS RELATIONSHIPS STUDIES

When investigating international business relationships there is obviously a need to conduct an intercultural research. Although business is becoming more global and people try to create common rules that could be applied to all individuals, the world and business in particular still can not be seen as a homogenous and stable system. Business relationship is a social construct as it occurs between individuals and the process of interpersonal interaction between individuals triggers business relationships development. It is crucial to remember that people are not globalized entities, they are different and hold within themselves diverse cultural backgrounds. When two business people from two different cultures interact, they bring their own backgrounds with them (Bolten 1999).

In the business world culture is often taken for granted and is not highly accentuated when building business operations strategy. Business scholars stand for the inclusion of culture as a base for theorizing in international business studies and state a need for a ‘cultural’ turn in social sciences (Redding 2005, Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2010, Brannen & Doz, 2010). The concept of culture has been more acknowledged in B2C markets and used while planning marketing communication strategies when entering a new geographic market with a certain product. Within B2B markets and particularly business relationships the concept of culture has been used seldom.

Research within IMP group was conducted mainly in a Western, ethnocentric way, without considering the heterogeneity of the world and importance of cultural aspects (Lowe 2001). It should be noted that although in the interaction approach work (Håkansson 1982) cultural influence was not much emphasized, it still existed in the notion of cultural distance. While the following IMP group work on the network approach (Håkansson and Snehota 1995) has no direct reference to culture at all (Lowe 2001). In their taxonomic study of IMP conference papers Easton, Zolkiewski and Bettany (2002) that at that time there were 4 cross-cultural studies from which only one considered the interaction approach. This is quite a small number, considering that the amount of papers presented on IMP group website (www.improup.org) is 1877, dating from the year 1994. It could be also remarked that IMP conferences were held since 1984, thus the number of 1877 is even not the total amount of conference papers. After overviewing interaction approach in previous sections and identifying gaps in its current application in academia, it can be emphasized that there is a need to look at business interaction and relationships on an individual level and in a cultural context.

It should be noted the mere inclusion of culture as a base for international business studies does not automatically improve them. Cultural issues are not as clear as it can appear at first glance. There is a need for a proper application of relevant cultural concepts to certain situations, which are of focus in a particular research. Thus, the question remains on what kind of cultural theories and concepts to use when studying intercultural business relationships and interaction on an individual level.

FROM “ETIC” TO “EMIC”

Most of cultural studies in business are theoretically based on models of national culture as that of Hofstede (1980) and Trompenaars (1993). Nevertheless when taking an individual level of analysis, cultural models based whole nations (e.g. Hofstede 1980, Trompenaars 1993) appear to be superficial, ambiguous. Moreover this kind of studies (e.g. Hofstede 1980, Trompenaars 1993) is based on an ”etic” approach (Fletcher 2006), which is usually applied in functionalist studies, where the goal is not to understand, but predict (Smircich 1983, Martin & Nakayama 1999). Researchers using an ”etic” approach see culture as a set of variables, which could be applied uniformly (Fletcher 2006). Moreover in Merriam Webster dictionary the word “variable” is defined as “a logical set of attributes”. But if we apply logic, then we should assume that the logical models which we apply represent themselves an absolute truth. Perhaps it is viable in hard sciences as, for example, mathematics, physics, chemistry, which are to a large extent based on the use of logical models that are undeniable and stable. But how can we apply logical thinking to culture, which is highly dependent on individual actors, the actions of which by all means are not stable? Here a conclusion could be made that a view on culture as a variable ignores its dynamics and the existence of multiculturalism.

Studies within IMP group, when applying cultural theories, mainly used national culture models and the concept of values. They state that during interaction process an exchange of values occurs (c.f. Håkansson 1982; Ritter & Gemunden 2003; Olkkonen, Tikkanen & Alajoutsijärvi 2000). But is it possible to grasp values so that one could understand interaction with their help? Cultural models of Hofstede (1980) and Trompenaars (1993) are based on values concept. Values have little explanatory power. It would be intricate to explain one’s behavior through values, as they are to a certain extent invisible and perceptual based, which makes them hard to grasp.

To obtain a more comprehensive, deeper view on culture, “emic” approach to culture should be applied. “Emic” approach lies within the interpretivist paradigm and is culture-specific (Hui & Triandis 1985). This approach attempts to look for the idiosyncrasies of individual cultures in order to understand how relationships and networks might operate, the appropriate forms of interaction and the most effective negotiating behaviors to employ when dealing with managers from that culture (Fletcher 2006). If looking at culture from an ‘emic’, interpretive perspective, symbolic anthropology works as that of Geertz (1973), Shneider (1968) and Turner (1967) come into mind. They viewed culture as a system of symbols and meanings, which makes it more ‘material’ and thus easier to grasp. Symbolic anthropologists were adherent to interpretivist paradigm. The central concept when doing interpretivist research is Verstehen. When translating from German it means “interpret”, “understand” and was first introduced by German philosopher of human studies, Wilhelm Dilthey (Rickman 1979). Looking for Verstehen is a dynamic process because language, customs, meanings, and culture are continuously being created by the joint activities of individuals (Hudson & Ozanne 1988). However, the view on culture, implied by symbolic anthropologists, stresses stability in it by viewing symbol systems as autonomous from other features of social life (Spiegel 2005). The notion of stability in culture implied by symbolic anthropologists made it difficult to explain change (Hallet 2003). Other field of studies, which goes head to head with anthropology is sociology and if we return to IMP group works we can recall that they partly based them on sociological theories. Let us turn to a more detailed review of symbolic perspective, especially as applied in sociology, in order to reach an understanding on how it could be applied in business relationships studies.

SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM: CULTURE IN INTERACTION

In their literature IMP group widely uses social exchange theory as an underpinning (Hallen, Johanson & Seyed-Mohamed 1991; Möller & Halinen 1999; Blankenburg Holm, Eriksson & Johanson 1996). In turn social exchange was argued to have points of convergence with symbolic interactionism perspective (Singelmann 1972; Stephen 1984), which has its applicability to cultural studies. A field that converge traits of anthropology and sociology is sociology of culture (Williams 1995). Sociology of culture has its base in symbolic interactionism paradigm, as well as symbolic anthropology has to some extent. And as symbolic anthropology scholars, researchers in the field of sociology of culture view culture as symbols.

“Culture consists of such symbolic vehicles of meaning, including beliefs, ritual practices, art forms, and ceremonies, as well as informal cultural practices such as language, gossip, stories, and rituals of daily life” (Swidler 1986, 273). As it was denoted in the previous section, symbolic view on culture makes it easier to grasp and understand. Nevertheless it should be mentioned that symbolic interaction is not simply concerned with the study of symbols. Rather, it is primarily concerned with the study of human meaning, which is seen as existing in symbolic realms, and related meaningful action (Prasad 1993). Following the title of Swidler’s (1986) article it would be reasonable to say that symbolic interactionism perspective views culture in action. Symbolic interactionism point of view corresponds with social constructionist approach, therefore structure is viewed as constructed through individual actions, coordinated by patterns and expectations (Burrell & Morgan 1979, Fine 1993). Keesing (1974) gives on the example of Trobiand culture shows that one can not understand the events in other people’s lives without understanding their ‘internal models of reality’. Swidler (1986) argues that culturally-shaped skills, habits, and styles, which can be

seen through symbols, offer better opportunities for explaining patterns of action. Culture should not be seen only as a contextual variable, one should look on how culture is applied in human actions within specific events. Culture along with structure is not seen here as neither macro- nor micro- but rather as something in between. Trying to link the macro-micro levels interactionists brought up a middle level: the meso-structure (Fine 1993). Meso-structure idea stands for understanding the structures by understanding how they are enacted through the process of interaction (Maines 1982). In turn human interaction is mediated by the use of symbols, by interpretation, or by ascertaining the meaning of one another’s actions (Blumer 1969).

As was stated before, the IMP group in their studies to a big extent followed functionalist paradigm and saw culture as a stable variable. Of numerous IMP scholars only few seem to view culture from a symbolic perspective (e.g. Lowe & Watkins-Mathys 2002, Ellis, Lowe & Purchase 2006). “The context of an organization is a ‘learned’ social symbolic reality that is ‘framed’ through interpretation and ex-post rationalization of past experience involving a social process of communication through codes, symbols and routines” (Lowe & Watkins-Mathys 2002, 7). “Researching business relationships and networks requires the researcher to include the network of ideas and symbols, which is the foundation of culture” (Ellis, Lowe & Purchase 2006, 23). Culture from a symbolic perspective is not seen as a variable but rather as a root metaphor for conceptualizing and understanding organization and a context for business actions (Smircich, 1983).

Symbolic interactionism as depicted by Blumer (1969) is grounded in “root images”, which refer to and depict the nature of several crucial things: human groups or societies, social interaction, objects, the human being as an actor, human action, and the interconnection of the lines of action. If we put together Swidler (1986) view on culture and the grounds of symbolic interactionism defined by Blumer (1969) with main IMP concepts we can depict business interaction and relationships in the form of figure 1.

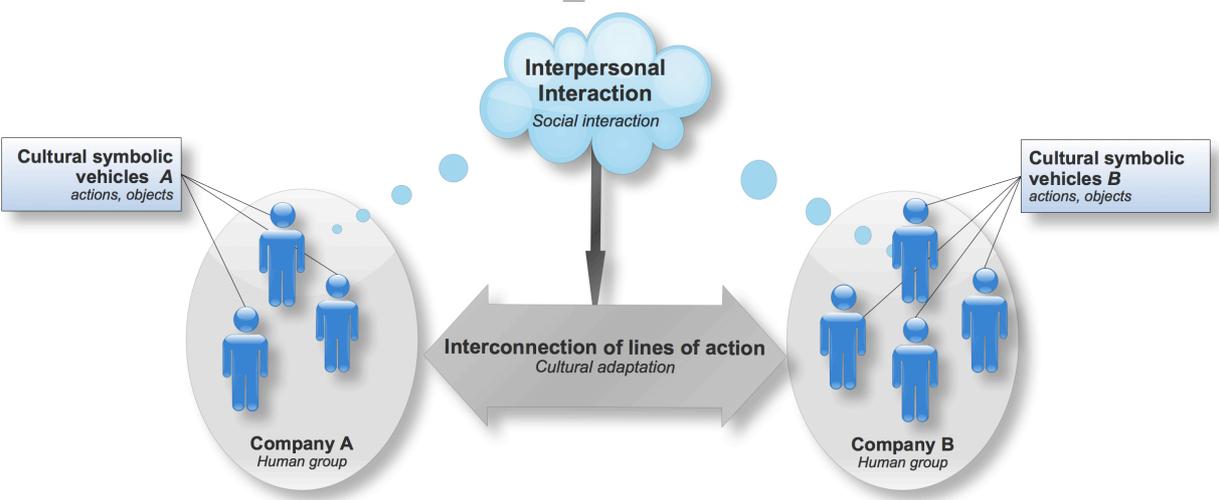


Figure 1. Business interaction and relationships from a symbolic interactionist perspective.

If we interpret the elements of figure 1 in terms of symbolic interactionism perspective:

- Company A and B represent itself 'human groups' and not simply a faceless entity, mechanism as it is usually done in organizational level studies. Moreover within time the context of the company A becomes a 'learned symbolic reality' for company B and vice versa.
- Interpersonal interaction represent itself 'social interaction' within a business situation and occurring on an individual level.
- Key persons in the business dyad can be represented as 'actors', which take part in the key events within business relationships;
- Cultural symbolic vehicles represent themselves 'actions' and 'objects', which are applied and interpreted by individual actors from companies in the course of interpersonal interaction. It should be noted that symbolic vehicles representing actions are of particular interest and importance, and will be explicated further.

Finally the 'interconnection of the lines of action' idea drives us to the notion of adaptation. Blumer (1969) state that it is not separate lines of action that are of interest, but how they fit each other and are merged. Thus the main idea behind figure 1 is the importance to understand and interpret cultural symbolic vehicles, how they are applied by actors in various key events and how actors learn and adapt to each other's symbolic vehicles in order to fit each other's lines of action. The following sections an attempt is made to clarify the concept of symbolic vehicles of and why learning and adapting to them is crucial in reducing cultural distance.

IN SEARCH FOR CULTURAL SYMBOLIC VEHICLES

Symbolic interactionism perspective is widely applied in research on consumer behavior, branding, organizational culture and is linked with organizational symbolism. Organizational culture mainly describes the way things are done within the organization. Nevertheless the conceptualization of culture within organization theory has largely ignored the organization's relationship with its environments. *Business culture on contrary seems to link the organization with the outward society, characterized as a loose complex of symbols said to define how people from a given nation do business* (Moore 2004).

However, *of foremost consideration is not to which level of culture the symbolic vehicles pertain to, but the issue of how these symbolic vehicles are interpreted and understood.* By reaffirming the idea of symbolic interactionist in trying to understand society Turnbull, Ford and Cunningham (1996) conclude that understanding of business relationships for any participant in those relationships depends on being able to understand the definition of the situation and the expectations of the other party in a relationship. Definition of the situation and the expectations of the other party is rooted in culture, as what and how we see is always embedded in a cultural context (Kloos & Lojen 2011). Symbols are of particular value in understanding one's actions and their connection with cultural background. As one cannot directly access the internal thoughts of another person, he should rely on and interpret the use of verbal and nonverbal symbols to represent those thoughts (Samovar, Porter & McDaniel 2009).

Still the question remains, do we need to divide the levels of culture at all, when studying business relationships and interaction from a symbolic interactionism perspective? Different cultural layers have been applied in business studies, such as national, organizational,

corporate, business. But is it possible to distinctly separate them when talking about interpersonal interaction and looking at it as a symbolic one? Culture is a “nested” phenomenon (Swidler 1986, DiMaggio 1997) and various cultural layers can affect one’s behavior (Möller & Svahn, 2004). Within business interaction symbols stemming from all kinds of cultures mentioned above are likely to be used. In this case one should *focus more on the situation in which business interaction occurs, what symbolic vehicles are being used by individual actors and how they are interpreted*. Still one could surely say that the focus should be on symbolic vehicles used to conduct business-oriented activities. It would be useful to look at organizational symbolism field, as it is business situations that are of focus in business relationships and interaction and thus organizational symbols are supposed to be used more.

Symbols are often misconstrued with artifacts, which is inaccurate. Not all artifacts are symbols (Hatch 1993). A symbol requires interpretation and attainment of meaning. As one actor enters into a social situation, others make rapid interpretations of their words, expressions, actions, and appearance (Flint 2006), which only through interpretation become a symbolic representation. To explain the transformance of a material artifact into a symbol Hatch (1993, 670) takes an example presented initially by Barthes (1972): “a bouquet of roses is given, not only as a bundle of flowers, but also as an expression of appreciation”. Another example is that of taking food together, which can symbolize a certain level of reciprocity towards the one with whom you share it with and can be a catalyst for relationships (c.f. Saint-Paul 1997)

So what could be the symbolic vehicles that should be understood when engaging in business relationships with someone? As was said earlier organizational symbolism is a fruitful area to grasp ideas from. Dandridge, Mitroff and Joyce (1980) in their article on organizational symbolism categorized symbolic vehicles into three types:

- Verbal – myth, legend, stories, slogans, creeds, jokes, rumors, name;
- Actions – ritualistic special acts (repeating/nonrepeating) parties, rites of passage, meals, breaks, starting the day;
- Material – status symbols, company products, logos, awards, company badges, pins, flags.

Verbal and actions symbols seem to be of particular interest when studying business relationships and interaction. Material symbols also can help to some extent in understanding the beliefs of the company, but are of less importance in this particular focus.

As within this article the individuals in business relationships are seen as acting entities, therefore *understanding the symbolic meaning of actions – ritualistic acts, rites of passage, etc. – is of primary importance*. Rituals can be divided in macro- and micro-. While the former corresponds to ceremonies, the latter can be explained as rituals of interaction, simple procedures for facilitating everyday contacts (Cova & Salle 2000). *Ceremonies* were defined by Trice and Beyer (1984, 655) as “*relatively elaborate, dramatic, planned sets of activities that consolidate various forms of cultural expressions into one event, which is carried out through social interactions*”. The elaborate, planned activities within the ceremonies are defined as *rites*. In their research on the use of rituals for managing extrabusiness relationships Cova and Salle (2000) came to a conclusion that it appears possible to use rituals, or a type of rituals, to shorten any type of distance (e.g. cultural, psychic, geographical) which may exist within a dyad. They observe notably extrabusiness relationships, which they explain as non-business ones. Moreover they cite Goffman (1959)

who mentioned three main occasions when people meet and where rituals are at play: business, chance encounters and ceremonies. In intercultural business relationships both formal and informal ritualistic acts and ceremonies are of interest. It is obvious that in various cultures the level of importance of diverse types of ceremonies and the symbolic meaning that they represent will be different.

Business relationships development is event based, thus understanding rites and ceremonies of the partner is of crucial importance. Ceremonies and rites not only represent themselves some symbolic meaning, but also contain within themselves verbal and material symbolic vehicles. In performing the activities of a rite or ceremonial, people make use of certain customary language, gestures, stories, material artifacts, to heighten the expression of shared meanings appropriate to the occasion (Trice & Beyer 1984)

Categorizing things is in the human nature and it brings us back to the question of associating symbols to some sort of culture. As was said earlier, they can be rooted in various kinds of cultures – national, industry, corporate. When dealing with particular company recognition of symbolic meaning foundations is of secondary importance. Although for further application of knowledge affiliating the organizational symbols to a certain layer of culture could be useful. It can help when identifying similar companies to which the knowledge could be applied to, although one should not forget that there are no companies with totally identical cultural background. The mere mentioning of the importance of knowledge leads us to another question. How should cultural symbolic vehicles of the partner be learned and why is the correct learning and adapting to each other's symbolic vehicles important? Let us try to answer this question in the next section.

CULTURAL LEARNING AND ADAPTATION IS THE KEY

When looking at the definition of the word “relationship” one can encounter the words “sameness, alikeness, resemblance, similarity” as the ones related to it. It would be by all means accurate to state that when entering business relationships it is helpful to become one of a kind. Here I will borrow an illustration presented by Huemer (2001). The author described Disney's version of the Chinese saga “Mulan” and how the main hero despite certain obstacles, succeeds to become ‘one of the guys’ by learning to act congruous with her superiors' expectations. Apparently, the manager of company A can be seen as a new member of company B, with a minor distinction: it is highly doubtful that he ever become one of a kind. Nevertheless the manager of company A can over time be seen as one of a similar kind, that could ease business interaction and relationships between parties. The grounds for becoming similar, or in other words adapting to another party, is learning and understanding its actions.

In the IMP literature learning is associated with the concept of internationalization. It would be crucial to mention that within the model by Johanson and Vahlne (1977) internationalization was considered as a process where a firm focuses on the development of an individual firm and on its acquisition. While this study focuses especially on interaction and dyadic relationships between companies which do not have an initial intent on making an acquisition. Nevertheless the idea of learning as described by Johanson and Vahlne (1977) could be useful within the context of this study also. *The core idea behind the learning concept is to improve relationships by learning how to deal with the other party.* In relationships, the parties cultivate their knowledge of each other by gathering data, seeing each other in different contexts, and noticing reactions to different situations (Lewicki &

Bunker 1996). The question on how people use collective representations, such as symbols, codes, rituals etc. in order to make meaning together in everyday life is the central in sociology of culture studies (Eliasoph & Lichterman 2003). A proclaimed sociologist Erving Goffman in his work "Presentation of Self in Every Day Life" (1959) applied dramaturgical approaches to show how actors developed roles in interaction. In his work expressive symbols were seen as manipulable props and masks that could be grabbed from the costume room as needed (Peterson 1979). William Shakespeare once said that "all the world is a stage". Business world seems to resemble a stage even more as human actions here are usually more prudent and carefully thought than in real life. As you should have noticed already, in this paper I already try to apply the interpretivist approach by looking for interpretation of the words in the Merriam-Webster online dictionary. Following this tradition if we look at the definition of the word "vehicle" in the dictionary we will find that one of the definition is "a medium through which something is expressed, achieved, or displayed". It is obvious that when speaking of symbolic vehicles we are not talking about something material as masks for the business actor, but they definitely help the business actor in expressing himself during the events. Thus, *learning and understanding cultural symbolic vehicles used by the business actor could help in understanding the nature of his actions. The definition of cultural learning could be outlined from the foregoing discussion as a need to learn and understand cultural symbolic vehicles of a person or group, which of these symbolic vehicles are applied in different situations and events and how they are applied.*

Blankenburg Holm, Eriksson and Johanson (1996) mention that mutual understanding based on past experience of interaction with each other can reduce uncertainties. But what will occur if there was no past experience with the partner or even with a similar one? It is crucial to accentuate, that without direct interaction, knowledge about each other's culture can be distorted and stereotypes can dominate the real knowledge. *"Stereotypic beliefs are a well-established source of inimical attitudes toward the culturally different, especially where there has been minimal prior intergroup and interpersonal contact"* (Spencer-Rodgers & McGovern 2002, 613). Moreover making assessments of others basing on our own cultural background is frequently the starting point when we deal with other cultures (Törnroos 1991). Information acquired through intergroup contact is seen as the best means of change (Hewstone & Brown 1986) and as a consequence, means for breaking stereotypic beliefs. It should be reminded that as in this study a company is seen as a group of individuals, intergroup contact is seen as interpersonal contact and interaction among multiple individuals.

Möller and Halinen (1999) point out that several scholars emphasized the role of both well-planned procedures and personnel who can match the other party's expectations and interaction style in a smooth management of relationship episodes. Basing these procedures on stereotypical assessment of the party can cause expectancy violations (c.f. Burgoon 1993). According to expectancy violation theory, when information about a partner violates stereotype-based expectations, he will be judged negatively (Biernat, Vescio & Billings, 1999). Thus the possibility for positive relationships development will be undermined. As was said by Gupta and Govindarajan (2000) summarizing several authors, "when the interacting individuals share common meanings, a mutual subcultural language, and are alike in personal and social characteristics, the communication of new ideas is likely to have greater effects in terms of overt behavior change". *Matching other party's expectations and interaction style can be reached by learning its symbolic vehicles of meaning through interaction and by adapting to them depending on the situation to which they are applied.* The positive and overt behavior towards each other is reached through adaptation within the dyad in the process of business relationships development.

IMP group views on adaptation presented by IMP group scholars in the beginning of their work were to a major extent product-centered (c.f. Håkanson 1982, Hallen, Johanson & Seyed-Mohamed 1991). Early studies by IMP group have tended to neglect “soft” adaptations, for example adaptation of managerial skills, attitudes (Schmidt, Tyler & Brennan 2007). Brennan, Turnbull and Wilson (2003) defined dyadic adaptation as “behavioral or organizational modifications at the individual, group or corporate level, carried out by one organization, which are designed to meet the specific needs of one other organization”. Still, recent studies on adaptation within IMP group are mainly conducted on an organizational level and from a resource perspective (e.g. Gadde & Snehota, 2000, Jahre & Fabbe-Costes, 2005, Hagberg-Andersson 2006). Thus *there is a gap in the research of “soft” adaptations, one of which can be described as cultural adaptation.*

Cultural adaptation can be defined as an attempt to accommodate the perceived foreignness of the “other culture participant” by altering communication style and adjusting to practices, behavioral norms, differences in beliefs (Ellingsworth 1983, Francis 1991, Pornpitakpan 1999). Within this study we can substitute “practices, behavioral norms, differences in beliefs” by cultural symbolic vehicles, since following the definition of culture given earlier in this paper we can put an equal mark between these statements. After learning how cultural symbolic vehicles are applied in certain key events, cultural adaptation can be easily achieved. It should be mentioned still that cultural adaptation should not be a process of producing an ‘identical reflection’ of other’s culture. Francis (1991) in her study examined three levels of adaptation – moderate, substantial and no adaptation on the example of American-Japanese and American-Korean business negotiations. It was found that only moderate adaptation had a positive effect on negotiations, while substantial adaptation was seen by parties as a threat towards the group distinctiveness. On the basis of Francis (1991) study it could be said that *moderate adaptation can be described as partial adaptation to other’s business culture, which also considers retaining one’s own culture.* Parties seek to preserve their cultural identity and attempts of imitating instead of adapting to other’s culture could be assessed as violation of their ‘cultural space’.

Adaptive behavior is motivated by a desire to bridge cultural distance (Francis 1991). Here we return once again to the original work by Håkansson (1982) where a notion of the importance of cultural distance reduction for business relationships development was made. Cultural distance at that time was defined as “the degree to which the norms, values, or working methods between two companies differ because of their separate national characteristics”. Perhaps due to mentioning the word “national”, cultural distance was interpreted so that the use of Hofstede’s (1980) cultural distance dimension prevailed in further studies (c.f. O’Grady & Lane 1996). Culturally grounded working methods or ways of doing business can not be defined simply by referring to national characteristics. As it was discussed earlier in this paper, culture is a complex and “nested” phenomenon. The firm’s culture is an integrated whole of different cultures through its personnel, and especially its leading personnel. (Törnroos 1991). Learning the symbolic vehicles of the partner again seems quite reasonable for reduction of cultural distance, as they can represent different layers of culture.

Reviewing cultural distance concept Shenkar (2001) outlines several illusions concerning it: illusions of symmetry, stability, linearity, causality. Following this article one could say that IMP group was fairly delusional regarding the application of cultural concepts in its studies. Implying symbolic interactionist perspective on intercultural business relationships allows us to avoid illusions of:

- symmetry and linearity, by implying individual interpretations of cultural differences, understanding of which will vary within groups of individuals and even certain individuals, and could be rooted in terms of their own culture.
- stability, by looking at culture in action, thus implying a process view;
- causality, by looking at culture as a “root metaphor” and not as a “variable”.

CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Sometimes it is useful to look in the past for answers. In this paper the study on the interaction approach by Håkanson (1982) was revisited. It resulted in finding some gaps that would be beneficial to fill in. Although individual and cultural aspects were mentioned in the work by Håkansson (1982), they were blurred over time and now seem to need a revival. It was concluded that reconsidering the importance of culture and individual in business interaction and relationships could be beneficial for the interaction approach improvement. A company is not a faceless machine for doing business, but a group of individual actors which represent it. Business interaction is seen to be conducted on an individual level and an emphasis is made on an acting individual. Regarding cultural issues it should be noted that simply including culture in the studies on business relationships and interaction could be insufficient. A switch from positivist, functionalist view on culture, which prevails in IMP studies, is needed. Here a remark should be made that this study regards an individual level of analysis, thus functionalist view on culture could still be useful for the studies, which are made on an organizational level. When talking on intercultural business relationships and interaction on individual level, symbolic interactionism perspective on culture appeared to be suitable. It follows the interpretivist paradigm and views culture in action, implying its dynamics. The symbolic interactionist view on culture applied by Swidler (1986) is taken as central. Culture is defined as consisting of symbolic vehicles which are applied by individual actors differently according to a specific key event and allow understanding the meaning of individual actors' actions.

People love to categorize things but in the case of culture one should not try to set up borders. Culture is complex and multilayered. Symbolic vehicles applied by individual actors can be grounded in different layers of culture. For the study of business relationships categorizing symbolic vehicles according to the types of culture is of secondary importance. Nevertheless an exploratory study, which explores and categorizes various symbolic vehicles according to cultural groups could be of interest. The crucial issue is to understand the meaning which individual actors ascertain to the symbolic vehicles. Search for relevant symbolic vehicles to grasp lead to a conclusion that actions symbols are of particular importance in the study of business relationships and interaction. Actions symbols, as ceremonies and rites, not only carry some symbolic meaning within them, but contain material and verbal symbols, as language, gestures, stories, material artifacts. Viewing individuals within business relationships as acting entities makes us consider actions symbols as prior for studying. Further empirical research could be done in order to investigate how particular symbolic vehicles are applied in certain events within a business relationship and explore how they are understood and interpreted by business partners.

The processes of learning the cultural symbolic vehicles of the parties through interaction and adapting to their usage in specific events are seen as prerequisite for positive business relationships and their development. It is accentuated that correct cultural learning and adaptation could be reached specifically in the process of interaction with another party. Applying knowledge acquired without interaction, could result in stereotypic beliefs and

expectancy violations, undermining the possibility for positive business relationships. It should be reminded that as this paper considers individual level of business relationships, interaction is seen as interpersonal. Further empirical studies could be conducted which would try to find answers on the following questions: “What role does interpersonal interaction play in learning cultural symbolic vehicles of the business partner and their application? How interactive learning of cultural symbolic vehicles is conducted? How business partners adapt to each other’s cultural symbolic vehicles and what role does it play in business relationship development?”. Moreover a research on how the interpretations of partner’s business culture and attitude towards it change over time within the business relationship could be of particular interest.

In the end it should be mentioned that the researcher also plays a certain role in the interpretation of intercultural business relationships. Thus there are not only two views on the situation, but at least three. Dealing with the question of interpretations, one could cite Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: “What is the hardest thing of all? What one thinks easiest, to see with one’s eyes what lies in front of one’s eyes”. But it concerns methodological problems and is already a plot for another elucidative story.

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