

CAN WE TALK, AND SHOULD WE? MANAGING EMOTIONAL CONFLICT IN MULTICULTURAL TEAMS

MARY ANN VON GLINOW
Florida International University

DEBRA L. SHAPIRO
University of Maryland

JEANNE M. BRETT
Northwestern University

We highlight linguistic-related challenges in multicultural teams that increase the likelihood of emotional conflict, and also highlight the difficulty of "finding words" in emotional situations because of the nonlinear, fragmented, image-driven qualities of these circumstances. As a result, we question whether team members embroiled in emotional conflict ought to be advised to *talk* (discuss their feelings with the goal of repairing frayed relationships), whether this meaning of talk is shared by people from culturally different backgrounds, and what conflict management alternatives may exist when talk is not possible or desirable.

Emotional conflict—negative emotions such as frustration, irritation, even anger—is dysfunctional for team performance¹ (see DeDreu & Weingart, 2002, for a review). Yet emotional conflict is likely to occur in heterogeneous teams because of "interpretive barriers" stemming from members' different values, beliefs, and language systems, acquired from varying socialization experiences (Dougherty, 1992). These differences lead to differences in conventions for social interaction; thus, emotional conflict in multicultural teams (MCTs) seems particularly likely.

Managing emotional conflict in MCTs is a matter of practical as well as theoretical importance (cf. DeDreu & Weingart, 2002). The expansion of global companies has resulted in widespread use of MCTs to identify global efficiencies and creative initiatives (Galbraith, 2000; Kirkman & Shapiro, 2001). Furthermore, the interdependent nature of most MCT assignments makes "ignoring the problem" of emotional conflict a less than satisfactory option. The common prescription for

managing emotional conflict seems to involve *talk*—candid dialogue among those in conflict for the purpose of repairing the strained relationship (cf. Cameron, 2000; Heracleous & Barrett, 2001; Montoya-Weiss, Massey, & Song, 2001; Moore, 1986; Shapiro & Kulik, in press). We question this advice.

Our skepticism about the general utility of the advice to talk out emotional conflict is grounded in our recognition that MCT members may not always be able to talk, and, even if they can, talk may not be viewed as an appropriate way to manage conflict. MCT members' ability to talk about the emotional conflict they are experiencing is likely to be impeded by (1) the difficulty people generally have in placing their thoughts and feelings into words when they are highly emotionally engaged; (2) the difficulty people have in finding word equivalents for emotions across cultures (Wierzbicka, 1992); and (3) the difficulty people have in interpreting a communication when its delivery includes "contextualization conventions" that differ across cultures (cf. Gumperz & Gumperz, 1996), especially since such conventions are often embedded within one another, further complicating talk (cf. Von Glinow, Drost, & Teagarden, 2002). Furthermore, MCT members may not all find it desirable to talk, even when possible. Viewing talk as appro-

¹ The terms *emotional conflict*, *affective conflict*, and *relationship conflict* have been used interchangeably (e.g., Amason, 1996; Jehn, 1997; Pelled, Eisenhardt, & Xin, 1999). We refer to *emotional conflict* to highlight that our focus regards the onset of negative emotions in culturally diverse teams.

appropriate for conflict management additionally seems to have a distinct Western cultural bias (cf. Brett, 2001; Cameron, 2000).

We begin by discussing why talk may not be possible or desirable in MCTs. We then suggest interventions that are alternatives to talk. Among these are actions designed to help MCT members access their sensory- or visual-based ways of knowing (cf. Edwards, 1986). Our interest in issues and interventions relating to emotional (as opposed to task-based) conflict is due to the emotion-checking and interpersonally focused nature of talk, and to the fact that relatively little attention has been paid to how to manage emotional conflict in teams (other than to say that it, unlike task-based conflict, should be avoided [cf. Amason, 1996; Jehn, 1997]). We conclude by discussing the implications of our propositions for management scholars and practitioners—whom we encourage to rethink what talk means, when it is possible and/or desirable, and what alternatives to talk may exist.

TALK—WHAT IS IT?

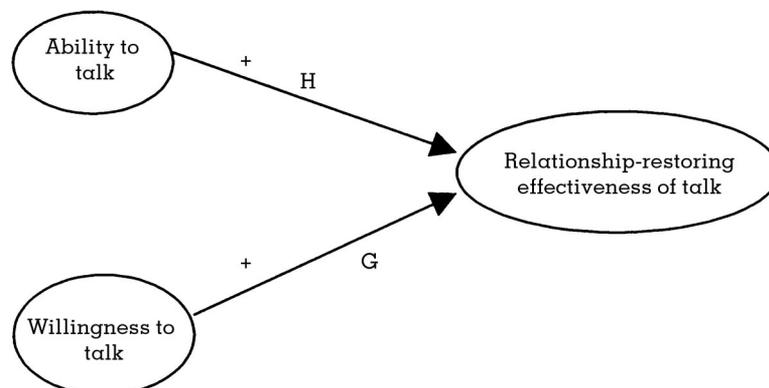
Conflict management scholars suggest that talk is effective in repairing relationships (cf. DeDreu, Weingart, & Kwon, 2000; Montoya-Weiss et al., 2001; Moore, 1986; Shapiro & Kulik, in press). In contrast, we wish to emphasize that talk is likely to be effective only when conflicted parties *can* and *will* talk (illustrated by arrows H and G in Figure 1, respectively)—an ability and willingness we question in the context of MCTs.

Our skepticism is due, in part, to the fact that talk is *not* a matter of merely speaking or mak-

ing linguistic utterances—a verbal articulation of thoughts, which “team talk” refers to in other research (cf. Donnellon, 1996). Rather, talk refers to candor associated with interpersonally sensitive issues. “Can we *talk*?”—a colloquial expression made famous by comedienne Joan Rivers—expresses a desire to discuss negative personal feelings (e.g., criticism or interpersonal concern) associated with a relationship and to repair whatever relational “fraying” has occurred. The candid nature of talk shares characteristics with what others have called “direct communication” (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988; Leung & Lind, 1986; Ting-Toomey, 1988; Wolfson & Norden, 1984), but, rather than focusing on finding solutions to task-related issues, talk emphasizes the emotional: “Have I upset you?” “Can I tell you why I’m feeling upset?” “Do you think I was ignoring you?” “Did I do something offensive?”

Conflict management scholars consistently identify conflict management styles lacking talk, such as avoidance or withdrawal, as less effective than those emphasizing talk, such as integrative bargaining or discussing interests (see reviews by DeDreu et al., 2000; Montoya-Weiss et al., 2001; Shapiro & Kulik, in press). Mediators are explicitly encouraged and/or legally required to get disputing parties to talk openly and constructively about their dispute (Moore, 1986; Shapiro & Kolb, 1994). Scholars writing about teams recommend that members adopt “process norms” emphasizing talk (Janssens & Brett, 1997; Jehn, 1997). Counselors pair talk and therapy—as in “talk therapy”—and use this idea in behavioral counseling designed to

FIGURE 1
Common Assumptions Regarding the Relationship-Restoring Effectiveness of Talk



improve relationships (Paleg & McKay, 2001). Researchers recommend empathetic discourse to strengthen rapport among people who are interdependent (Brief & Motowidlo, 1986; Goleman, 1998). Even counselors who work with children set up events such as "circle time" to encourage them to talk openly but sensitively about their feelings and to listen openly to others' feelings (cf. Cameron, 2000). Cameron explains that such programs are designed to "promote discourse which is egalitarian, emotionally 'literate', non-judgmental, supportive and empathetic" (2000: 148). And, of course, there is a long history of sensitivity training and T-groups, in which participants are encouraged to talk openly regarding their feelings about one another (Stock, 1964). Cumulatively, then, there is a protalk view with regard to what emotionally conflicted parties ought to do. Relatively few scholars address why talk might not be possible or, even if possible, undesirable.

CAN WE TALK?

We question whether MCT members embroiled in emotional conflict can convey the meanings they intend when they speak with each other—hence, whether MCT members can talk. Figure 2 illustrates the language-related dynamics that can make talk impossible.²

Emotion and Our Ability to "Find Words"

Sometimes we just *cannot* talk. Anecdotal evidence amply demonstrates that when people are emotionally upset, or even overjoyed, they are often unable to put their thoughts or feelings into words. The difficulty in doing so, Edwards (1986) explains, is because when people feel intense emotions, their reasoning ability ("L-mode") is dominated by visual imagery and sensations ("R-mode"),³ including "hot cognitions" that apparently block their ability to find words

² Negative emotions in MCTs can be affected by factors other than those in our model, including technological issues that emerge when MCT members are globally dispersed (see Shapiro, Furst, Spreitzer, & Von Glinow, 2002, and Von Glinow & Kumar, 2004, for an elaboration), but our focus is on antecedents that are linguistic in nature.

³ L-mode and R-mode refer to the left versus right hemisphere of the brain, where verbal versus visual/sensory skills reside, respectively (Edwards, 1986).

(cf. Janis & Mann, 1977; Simons & Peterson, 2000). A vivid example of this comes from New York City fireman Richard Picciotto, who recalls the collapse of the World Trade Center (WTC) on September 11, 2001, in this way:

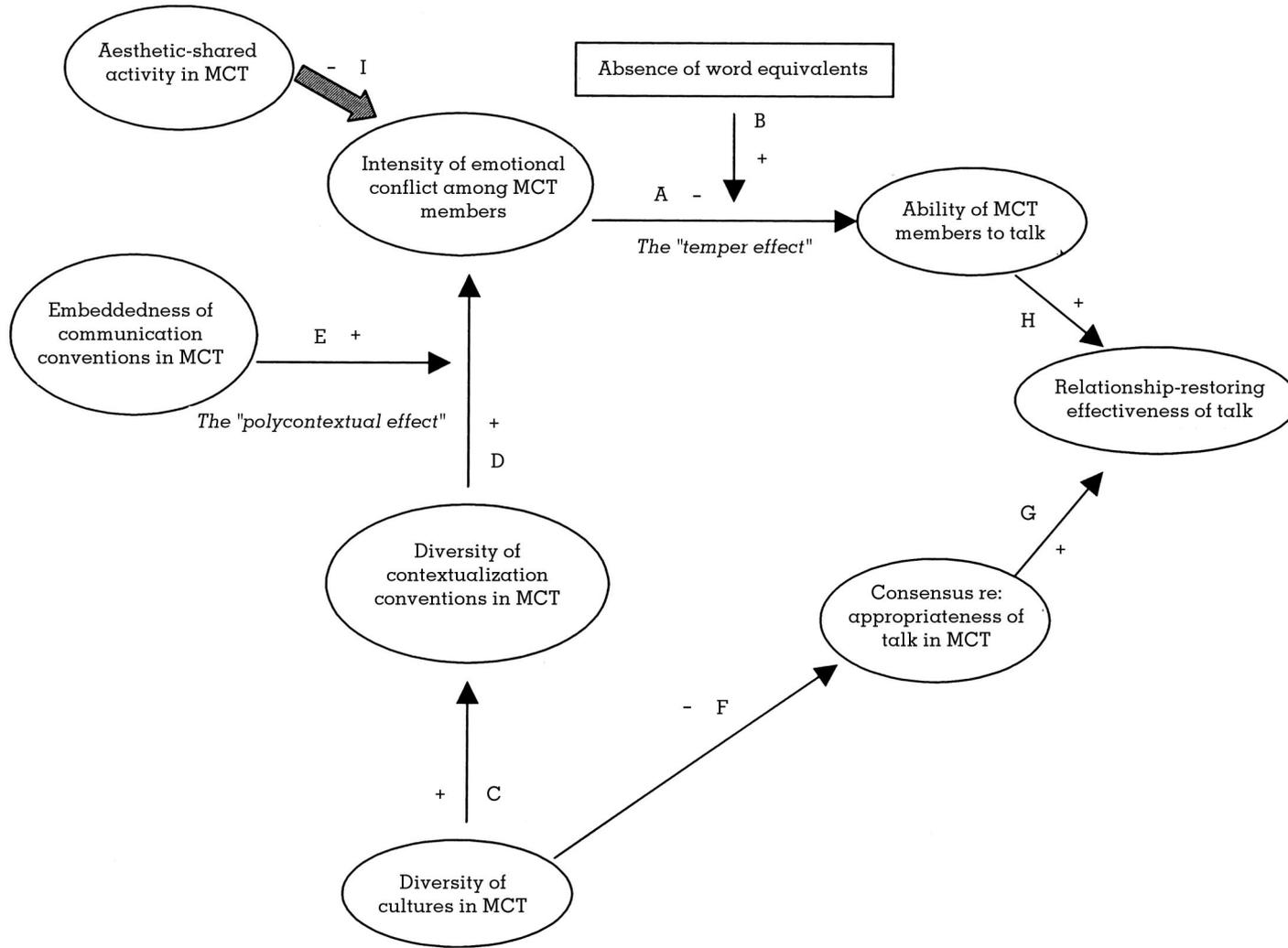
And then the noise started, and the building began to tremble, and we all froze. Dead solid still. . . . To a man, no one moved, except to lift his eyes to the ceiling, to see where the racket was coming from. As if we could see clear through the ceiling tiles for an easy answer. No one spoke. There wasn't time to turn thoughts into words, even though there was time to think (2002: 2).

The inability to express thoughts in words while experiencing intense emotion is not that rare: the firemen at Picciotto's station stared speechlessly at the television reporting the 9/11 disaster; many of those buried alive in the WTC's collapse, including Picciotto, waited for rescue in nearly complete silence, despite being within speaking distance of others. Even years after a horrific event, trauma-associated memories can prevent the sufferers (e.g., survivors of rape, the Holocaust, and other tragedies) from speaking about it (cf. Matsakis, 1996, for a discussion of posttraumatic stress disorder). Not surprisingly, then, discussing highly emotional events is difficult, too. With regard to 9/11, Starbuck notes:

Events do not speak for themselves. . . . people's perceptions of this event exhibit extreme differences, so extreme that I wonder if they could ever discuss it with each other. Especially remarkable, I think, are differences in the [visual] clarity with which people categorized the event and its causes (2002: 213–214).

We insert "visual" in front of "clarity" because, whether we are aware of it or not, *visual images tend to coincide with strongly felt emotions*, which is why it is said that people "see red," for example, when they are extremely angry (cf. Edwards, 1986). As another illustration, those who feel extreme grief associated with "September 11th" probably associate visual images with that date, including the inferno that engulfed the WTC, the people who jumped to their deaths, and/or the eventual collapse of the buildings. Edwards notes, further, that people generally lack awareness that images tend to organize the storage and retrieval of their strongly felt emotions and that this is why drawings are sometimes more effective than words in

FIGURE 2
Factors Impeding MCT Members' Ability and Willingness to Talk



enabling people to become aware of the emotions they feel.

We recognize that the above examples are more extreme than the emotions MCT members will normally deal with. Yet even in less extreme emotional circumstances, evidence indicates that more emotional (e.g., more angry) employees tend to have more difficulty communicating than those who are less emotional. For example, in an imminent layoff situation, employee messages posted to a company's electronic bulletin board were less understandable the more they expressed temper flare-ups and anger (Conlon & Shapiro, 2002).

When the emotion we feel is intensely positive, a similar phenomenon—being unable to verbalize our thoughts initially (in at least understandable ways)—occurs. Famous inventors and scientists describe how their moments of inspiration are often accompanied by visual images or sensory-guided experiences, but not words (Edwards, 1986). Indeed, according to Edwards, this inability to express thoughts is the origin of the nonsensical term *eureka*. Images that can be used as metaphors appear to come first—evidenced by English chemist Mendeleev's visualization of a piano keyboard to guide his development of a periodic system of elements, and Einstein's visual image of taking a journey on a ray of light, holding a mirror as he did so (expecting *not* to see his reflection since light cannot go faster than the speed of light), when developing his theory of relativity (Draaisma, 2000). Draaisma explains that it is precisely the concrete and graphic imagery provided by metaphors that accounts for why metaphors are commonly "found in the phase which historians of science usually call the 'context of discovery' " (2000: 17)—this being the moment when scientists realize the theory that can explain whatever phenomena they have been attempting to understand.

Perhaps the times we find ourselves unable to express our thoughts and feelings in words (or in words that are readily understandable to others) are when our brain's R-mode dominates the L-mode—that is, when the visions or sensations (e.g., extreme anger) overwhelm our analytical/verbal facility. This suggests, in turn, that it may not be possible to draw simultaneously (at least strongly) on both modes of our brain. And this would explain why conflict management scholars often suggest defusing emotion, via the as-

sistance of leaders or third parties in general, before attempting to engage in analytical verbal exchange (Maier & Hoffman, 1960; Moore, 1986). This leads us to propose the following, illustrated by arrow A in Figure 2.

Proposition 1: The more negative affect there is in MCTs, the less able to talk members will be (the temper effect).

Culture and Words for Emotion

Until now, we have assumed that people have the words they need to express their feelings but that they are blocked by the presence of strong emotions. However, in MCTs, word equivalents, especially words that express emotions, do not always exist across cultures (Wierzbicka, 1992). For example, there is no word equivalent for "fair" in Japanese (Kidder & Miller, 1991). Feelings of injustice are often intricately tied to feelings of anger (cf. Conlon & Shapiro, 2002) and are at the core of people's disputes (cf. Ury, Brett, & Goldberg, 1993). Thus, the absence of "fair" or other words that may be relevant to issues associated with emotional conflict will probably impede MCT members' ability to talk about the emotions they feel. Thus, we propose the following, illustrated by arrow B in Figure 2.

Proposition 2: The temper effect (described in Proposition 1) will be stronger when word equivalents for MCT members' negative affect do not exist in all cultures represented in the team.

Contextualization Conventions and Meaning

The third reason we question MCT members' ability to talk about emotional conflict is that contextualization conventions influence how people interpret communications. These conventions refer to the "native language discourse-strategies" people use to convey messages (cf. Gumperz & Gumperz, 1996: 28). Such conventions, Gumperz and Gumperz explain, "are acquired as a result of the speaker's actual interactive experience, i.e., as a result of the individual's participation in particular networks of relationships" (Gumperz & Gumperz, 1996: 18), and they include verbal and nonverbal language, "such as space, touch, gestures, facial expressions, use of time" (Duffey, 2000: 144). The interpretive complexity caused by contextual-

ization conventions is because these conventions (1) are generally used habitually and therefore are outside people's awareness; (2) are more likely to be similar among those *inside* (rather than outside) people's networks of relationships (cf. Gumperz & Gumperz, 1996; Von Glinow et al., 2002); and, despite this, (3) are generally relied on to interpret others' (including outsiders') way of speaking (see Gumperz & Gumperz, 1996, for an elaboration).

For practical reasons, we tend to interact within (rather than across) cultures; consequently, the meaning of our contextualization conventions is often culture specific. This, in turn, explains why ethnically diverse people who use different conventions "may conclude that someone is being rude, irrelevant, boring, or not talking sense at all" (Gumperz & Gumperz, 1996: 18); why there is frequently an abundance of cultural-based misunderstandings and irritations among members of MCTs; and why, "if relations among [a multicultural] team's members are not sufficiently developed, the research project cannot be adequately implemented" (Teagarden et al., 1995: 1265).

A nonverbal contextualization convention that illustrates communication difficulties in multicultural settings is the use of head nodding. Head nodding among U.S. Americans generally indicates agreement with what has been said. Yet the head nod in the Swedish culture apparently indicates only that listeners *heard* what was being said, not that they agreed (Kanter & Corn, 1994). The verbal contextualization convention "yes" generally indicates agreement with a communication among U.S. Americans. But in the Japanese culture "yes" can mean agreement, it can mean "I hear you," it can mean "maybe," or it can mean "no" (see Hodgson, Sano, & Graham, 2000, for an elaboration)—a phenomenon that Hodgson et al. note commonly leads to frustration when negotiating with the Japanese.

Because the verbal and nonverbal contextualization conventions people use differ cross-culturally, the misunderstandings they create generally are below the level of conscious awareness. Gumperz and Gumperz claim that people's lack of mutual understandings as a result of differing convention use is a "largely unrecognized type of communicative problem" that results in interpersonal tension (1996: 18). As shown in Figure 2, we can articulate this as follows.

Proposition 3: The greater the MCT's cultural diversity, the greater the diversity in members' contextualization conventions will be (illustrated by arrow C), which, in turn, will result in more emotional conflict in the team (illustrated by arrow D).

Interpretive difficulties due to contextual conventions are not limited to face-to-face interactions (Cramton, 2002). Just as people tend to interpret others' way of speaking according to their own conventions, people tend to interpret the meaning of virtual actions and text messages according to *contextual knowledge that is local to them*. Differing interpretations of a virtual action (e.g., the lack of an e-mail reply) are likely when team members have different contextual knowledge of each other's circumstances (e.g., knowing that it is a holiday in a particular country when the e-mail was sent and/or that it is not customary in the e-mail receiver's experience to reply when not explicitly asked to do so). Cramton explains that dispersed collaborators

find it difficult to develop a picture in their mind of the contexts within which distant partners work. When people do communicate some of their operating constraints to their remote partners, this information often is lost or forgotten. This creates conflict, as remote partners fail to honor the deadlines of others, insist on particular points seemingly without reason, or drop out of communication without warning (2002: 359).

The problem of interpreting contextual conventions is likely to be compounded by the fact that, in practice, we tend to use multiple contextualization conventions at any given time, embedding one within another. Following Von Glinow et al. (2002), we refer to these multiple embedded contextualizations as *polycontextual* in nature. For example, someone says, "I am dead serious," while using the nonverbal eye wink. This embeds one convention within another. People with profound and intuitive cultural knowledge know which convention to "read" for meaning, but even people who are quite familiar with a culture may not understand when words are negated by behavior.

Evidence that we use polycontextual conventions can be found in the emotion-regulating instructions given to employees in service industries (e.g., airline flight attendants). Such instructions tend to include aspects that relate to

multiple, simultaneously used contextual conventions involving "the emotional eye," "the emotional ear," and "the emotional voice" (Free-mantle; discussed by Cameron, 2000: 81). Cameron explains that service-oriented employees are typically trained to deliver customer-directed messages using particular tones of voice and facial expressions (i.e., how to use their emotional voice and emotional eye, respectively) and how to respond to customers' remarks (i.e., how to use their emotional ear).

Even in text messages, various emotional cues are often injected via the conventions of the "smiley face" or "frown," among other text lexicons, and the use of capitalized letters to convey emphasis or anger (cf. Conlon & Shapiro, 2002). Concern for all of these polycontextual conventions reflects the possibility that failure to interpret all of them as intended is likely to change the meaning people take from the situation. Similarly, Von Glinow et al. (2002) note that polycontextuality makes the possibility of "mixed signals" in MCTs quite likely.

The fact that polycontextuality underlies spoken language as well as unspoken actions is testimony to the fact that communication is sufficiently imprecise to cloud real meaning, even under the best of circumstances. When we add cultural variation, as would occur in a MCT, interpretive precision is virtually unachievable. Thus, we propose the relationships, illustrated by arrows E and F in Figure 2, respectively.

Proposition 4: The more embedded MCT members' contextualization conventions are, the more emotional conflict will occur in the team (the polycontextual effect).

SHOULD WE TALK?

Even if able to talk, will emotionally conflicted MCT members find talk desirable? Talk—as we have defined it—reflects a Western perspective on conflict management (cf. Brett, 2001; Cameron, 2000). People from non-Western cultures have different views about talk. New Guinea villagers, for example, express anger by engaging in a ritual termed *kros*. Cameron explains:

In a *kros*, participants shout abuse at one another (or indeed, past one another) for lengthy periods. The goal is to display grievances against others publicly, but it is not to resolve them by talking.

On the contrary, if the object of abuse tries to reason with the abuser or address the cause of conflict in the approved Western manner, the result is likely to be escalation and ultimately a brawl involving the whole village. . . . In this society verbal abuse is a communication skill (2000: 162).

In other non-Western cultures, such as in Asian countries, people tend to prefer expressing feelings of conflict in indirect ways—that is, by using words that are less explicit, blunt, and sender oriented (cf. Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988; Trubisky, Ting-Toomey, & Lin, 1991) and words that are more ambiguous and intended to "avoid leaving an assertive impression" (Okabe, 1983: 36). Cross-cultural researchers and others generally attribute Asians' preference, or cultural value, for an indirect communication style to the importance Asians generally place on harmony and face (cf. Brett, 2001). Recognizing MCT members' preferences for talk is important, since "forcing" talk where it is not welcome may escalate, rather than de-escalate, interpersonal tensions (cf. Duffey, 2000). As a result, we propose the following relationships, illustrated by arrows G and H, respectively, in Figure 2.

Proposition 5: The more diverse the cultural values in MCTs, the less consensus there will be regarding the appropriateness of talk as a conflict intervention.

Proposition 6: The weaker the consensus in MCTs regarding the appropriateness of talk, the less effective talk will be in restoring relationships.

ALTERNATIVES TO TALK

If MCT members embroiled in emotional conflict are unlikely to universally value engaging in talk, how else might they manage negative emotions when they occur? To help us think through this quandary, we return to the basic phenomenon of words and images coinciding, especially in circumstances marked by strong emotions (cf. Edwards, 1986). We suggest that MCT members enmeshed in emotional conflict integrate the language of visual, perceptual thought (R-mode) with the language of verbal, analytic thought (L-mode).

When we are highly emotional, drawing may help us articulate what we are feeling. If we supplement L-mode (verbal/analytical) thinking

with R-mode (sensation/visual-oriented) thinking, we can achieve a more complete sense of knowing (Edwards, 1986). Drawing is a way to do this. Edwards explains: "Drawings, like words, have *meaning*—often beyond the power of words to express, but nonetheless invaluable in making the chaos of our sensory impressions comprehensible" (1986: xiii). Edwards suggests that people often possess the language of visual, perceptual thought (including their ability to draw) more strongly than they realize and that the reason we are unaware of this "new language" is because it resides in the mode of the human brain that, unlike verbal language and analytic thought, often exists outside consciousness. Edwards suggests that integrating the language of R-mode and L-mode thought facilitates insight.

Visual Aids As Alternatives to Talk

We have already cited several examples illustrating the power of visualization to illuminate thoughts and feelings that initially may be too incoherent or difficult to express. These include the metaphor-guided discoveries made by history-making scientists such as Einstein and Mendeleev, and Cramton's observation that members of globally dispersed teams reach mutual understanding more easily when they have "a picture in their mind of the contexts within which distant partners work" (2002: 359; emphasis added).

Another example is Parker's (1990) description of how a managing director used a garden metaphor and pictures to gain employees' acceptance of a vision that involved both decentralizing and integrating employees' responsibilities—actions that at first seemed contradictory and, hence, paradoxical. Parker explains:

Letting imaginations roam, we shared the images we were seeing: trees . . . plants . . . fields . . . forests. . . . An image of a garden appeared and [the managing director] instantly recognized the analogy to the paradox. . . . Noteworthy is how the metaphor helped [the managing director] find new meaning in the paradox. [The managing director] had described himself as 'non-visual and non-imaginative,' but suddenly he was able to enthusiastically and vividly communicate his mental image of the company's past and present (1990: 17–18).

Management scholars provide examples of using visual images in a variety of settings. For instance, consistent with Barry (1994), Sims and

Doyle note how projective techniques that involve drawing or using physical objects to illustrate one's thinking, such as cognitive sculpting and cognitive mapping, "enable managers to explicate their views of the world" (1995: 117). Former CEO of General Electric, Jack Welch, made sure that the strategy process, operational planning process, and succession planning process all were "informal, around his conference table, with five to eight people wrestling with a problem, jumping up to the flipchart to sketch an idea" (Tichy, 2002: 65). Similarly, Kotter and Cohen observe:

Successful change leaders identify a problem in one part of the change process, or a solution to a problem. Then they show this to people in ways that are as concrete as possible. They show with a vehicle you can see, hear, or touch. This means a demonstration with gloves rather than a report on gloves. Change leaders make their points in ways that are as emotionally engaging and compelling as possible. This means a competition in Bali that has entertainment and tears rather than a cerebral event in a New York conference room. Change leaders show people the truth with a *variety of creative live presentations and events*. They use videotape of both angry and joyful customers. They rely on *vivid stories* (Kotter & Cohen 2002: 180; emphasis added).

Visual images facilitate cross-cultural understanding. Gibson and Zellmer-Bruhn (2001) asked people from various countries to provide metaphors they associated with "teamwork," which in our parlance is a contextual convention. By asking for metaphors, they engaged both visual and verbal thought processes (Draaisma, 2000) and found that the metaphors' graphic as well as conceptual nature helped people understand culturally different meanings of teamwork. Our understanding of concrete images is often intuitive and, thus, a way of knowing that precedes knowledge based on objective, verifiable data. The recollections of New York fireman and WTC survivor Richard Picciotto also illustrate this point. He recalls:

Right away, I knew [the WTC inferno] was no accident. I knew this in my gut, and I knew this in my heart, and I knew this in my head. Usually, I trust the first two when they're all I've got to go on, but when the head's involved, I tend to go that way first. And that way, right away, screamed terrorism (2002: 15).

The challenge in attempting to access people's sensory-based and intuitive-based ways of

knowing is that these reside in the R-mode of the brain, which is typically outside of our awareness until we attempt to verbalize what we are sensing (cf. Edwards, 1986). It is important to separate the reality of what people see *before they can articulate it verbally*. To borrow language from Boje (2001), Picciotto had a "story" (i.e., an account of incidents or events) in his head as he surmised that an act of terrorism had occurred. Similarly, the history-making scientists Einstein and Mendeleev each had a story before they put it into words. In this sense, then, the story exists prior to its narration.⁴

These examples of Picciotto, the history-making scientists, the multinational company's managing director, and the strategy-making executives at GE illustrate that, in the moments preceding their eureka, meaning was *fragmented, cognitive, visual, emotional, and intuitive* in nature. Importantly, these qualities of meaning characterize affectively charged situations in general—be they positive or negative. It is this insight that leads us to question the wisdom of using solely analytical, verbal-based methods (e.g., talk) for managing emotional workplace events, such as emotional conflict in MCTs.

Aesthetic Activities As Alternatives to Talk

A moment of silence was observed across the globe on September 11, 2002, at 8:46 a.m. to commemorate the first anniversary of the 9/11 disaster. This commemoration was timed to match the moment the first plane struck New York's WTC. After the silence came not speeches but song, most frequently Mozart's Requiem, as a result of a group of U.S. singers in Seattle, Washington, organizing a series of worldwide performances of this. After receiving thousands of e-mails in support of the idea, Madeline Johnson, chairwoman of the Rolling Requiem Committee and a member of the Seattle Symphony Chorale, said, "The heartfelt nature of their responses is remarkable. . . . It shows there is a worldwide longing to give voice to healing, to hope, to love" (Murtaugh, 2002: 24W).

⁴ Boje (2001) uses the term *ante* to capture this state, or antenarrative. We have opted not to label this distinction because we argue that the feelings, values, ethereal states, intuitions, and cognitions people have previous to articulating these are not always articulated or narrated.

The intensity of grief felt by those remembering 9/11 one year later was not easily expressed by talk. Instead, people chose an "aesthetic" alternative to talk and, in doing so, awakened sensory and perceptive faculties that, in turn, aroused shared emotions for singers and participants alike. The choral singing that occurred worldwide on September 11, 2002, illustrates that there are alternatives to talk that people may prefer when they wish to express emotion and that such alternatives may have the additional benefit of generating a feeling of unification.

A related example is from Murnighan and Conlon's (1991) study of British string quartets. The more successful quartets tended not to talk about their differences but to place their energy in performing their music. Similarly, Hawes and Zelizer (2000) describe the cultural understanding and conflict transformation that often occurs between people of different ethnic backgrounds when they engage together in public art projects, such as the 2,435-foot-long mural entitled the "Great Wall of Los Angeles" or the numerous photographs that became public exhibitions in New York City in the year after 9/11.

In the business context, participation in aesthetic activities has been linked to an increase in positive feelings such as empathy, unity, and solidarity among employees. Thus, there is indirect evidence suggesting that employees who share in aesthetic activities may have reduced levels of negative feelings (e.g., emotional conflict) toward one another. For example, Nissley, Taylor, and Butler (2002a) describe how in the 1970s the Maytag Company had employees ritually sing Maytag songs at conventions, and how doing so helped them understand the company's values and to feel positive emotions, including unity and pride. The esprit de corps created by employees sharing in company cheers at Wal-Mart and in company-sponsored community service activities similarly illustrates how team solidarity can result from shared aesthetic experiences. Tichy explains:

I have seen it over and over again, where working in inner-city homeless shelters, or food programs, or mentoring programs gives people a renewed perspective on their own lives and the blessings that they have in life. This carries over into the workplace, putting some of the day-to-day problems and frictions of worklife in a new perspective (2002: 262).

Thus, whether it be singing, "stringing," drawing, or communing, there is increasing evidence that such "aesthetic" means of communicating transcend boundaries, including cultural ones, by allowing people nontalk ways to express emotions. These observations lead us to conclude that MCT members' emotional conflict can be eased by sharing *aesthetic*⁵—or R-mode—activities, including nondialogue forms of verbal expression, such as music (cf. Nissley, 2002; Nissey et al., 2002); events that are visually oriented, emotional, and "noncerebral" (cf. Kotter & Cohen, 2002); or events that are physically engaging and community service oriented (cf. Tichy, 2002). Thus, we propose the following, illustrated by arrow I in Figure 2.

Proposition 7: Expressing emotion aesthetically (R-mode) will reduce negative emotions in MCTs.

IMPLICATIONS OF OUR PROPOSITIONS

The relationships we proposed and illustrated in Figure 2 lead us to several conclusions. First, emotional conflict is inevitable in MCTs; therefore, encouraging MCT members to avoid emotional conflict is *not* a useful prescription. Second, when emotional conflict occurs, talk may not be possible or, if it is possible, may be undesirable and therefore ineffective. Third, it may be more helpful to train MCT members and the leaders of such teams to use aesthetic means to deal with emotional conflict rather than encourage talk. Finally, it may be time to supplement the dominant rational, analytic, narrative-guided scientific paradigm in the organization sciences (L-mode) with the aesthetic approach to organization study (see Linstead & Hopfl, 2000, for a review). The theoretical and practical implications of our conclusions are discussed next, in turn.

Conclusion 1: Emotional Conflict May Be Inevitable in MCTs

Although we have explained why emotional conflict in MCTs seems to be inevitable, this is

ultimately an empirical question. Testing our propositions will require researchers to do two things that have not been done in previous studies. First, researchers will need to measure the intensity (in addition to the frequency) of emotional conflict and the effectiveness of talk in MCTs. Doing so will add to the relatively sparse emotion-related research in the field of organizational behavior (cf. Muchinsky, 2000). Second, researchers studying emotional conflict will need to study team members whose cultural differences include linguistic differences, which suggests that studies will need to be made in naturally occurring (rather than laboratory) situations. Given the lack of word equivalents for emotions across cultures, however, questionnaires and other verbally based research methods may be inappropriate (Greenberg, 2001).

Assuming that we are correct that emotional conflict in MCTs is inevitable, then the prescription to avoid this type of conflict is *not* useful. Actions designed to prevent emotional conflict in teams, such as norm-setting interventions—with the purpose of identifying undesirable as well as desirable team behaviors (e.g., Amason & Sapienza, 1997; Jehn & Mannix, 2001)—may therefore *not* be effective. This is because it may be unrealistic to expect MCT members to be able to identify (at least all) undesirable polycontextual conventions (Von Glinow et al., 2002), since these conventions generally operate outside our awareness (Gumperz & Gumperz, 1996). Indeed, it is for this reason that cross-cultural "blunders" are often not discovered until after they have been made (cf. Teagarden et al., 1995). Norm-setting interventions, thus, may fail to address the problem of polycontextualization that increases the likelihood of emotional conflict in teams.

It may be useful to train MCT members and leaders to expect emotional conflict to be high and helpful to sensitize them as to why. This might involve explaining the inseparability of the meaning of words from their context, as well as the low probability that there will be word equivalents across languages, especially for emotions (cf. Wierzbicka, 1992). Highlighting these dynamics may, in turn, encourage MCT members and leaders to prepare for team assignments by acquiring in-depth contextualized understanding not obtainable *solely* from language-immersion courses, dictionaries, lists of courtesy behaviors, or other "quick-culture-accommodation tools" typically given to employees sent abroad. Rather, MCT

⁵ Strati (2000) explains that aesthetic-based knowledge is the understanding, including empathy, derived from reliance on sensory and perceptive faculties (as opposed to objective, verifiable data sources, which are associated with scientific knowledge).

members' training should probably include sensitizing them to each other's (national and local) cultural history and local customs, including poly-contextual conventions in general and those for managing conflict in particular.

One possible training approach may be to build on the ideas underlying the emotion-regulating manuals that service-oriented companies typically provide employees (cf. Cameron, 2000), since these manuals sensitize employees to the effects of their communications with customers and instruct employees to *combine* their voice, eyes, smile, posture, or electronic text in ways that are expected to increase customer satisfaction. Also, questioning the cultural generalizability—*within* countries, even cities⁶—of some of the presumed ways to build rapport with others may help sensitize management scholars and practitioners to the discrepancies that may exist in the contextualization conventions that are presumed—in isolation and when embedded with other conventions—to be relationship enhancing.

Acting on our latter suggestions promises to increase understanding of other people's contexts and, therefore, to strengthen people's ability to engage in perspective taking and empathy—skills that have been identified as helping people adopt multiple perspectives (cf. Parker & Axtell, 2001). The goal is that knowledge and understanding of differences will calm emotions in the workplace (cf. Dutton, Frost, Worline, Lilius, & Kanov, 2002). Engaging in such training is surely time consuming, even daunting, but ignoring this training option may mean that global teams cannot manage their emotional conflict.

Conclusion 2: Talk May Not Be an Effective Conflict Management Strategy

One of the most important implications of our theorizing is that management scholars may need to rethink what are more versus less effective conflict management strategies *in situations that are multicultural and/or emotional*. Our theorizing that some cultures may be more able and/or willing to talk suggests that theories

and practices regarding conflict management need to be "context sensitive."

The need for context sensitivity when implementing management initiatives in various countries has been noted by several cross-cultural researchers (e.g., Brockner et al., 2001; Kirkman & Shapiro, 2001; Scandura, Von Glinow, & Lowe, 1999), who have concluded that the success of any management initiative (e.g., participative decision making, self-managing teams) is likely to be greater if there is consistency, rather than discrepancy, between the characteristics of the initiative or its implementation and the values generally held in the country context in which the initiative is occurring. Our point is that this prescription of consistency may not be sufficient in situations involving *multiple* cultures. Instead, we argue that management initiatives in MCTs need to exhibit "polycontextual sensitivity" with regard to contextual variables that are locally sensitive, not nationally aggregated, as is typically done in cultural value research (cf. Hofstede, 1980; Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, 1961).

Recognizing that behavior occurs and is influenced by multiple contexts poses a challenge for future research (see Pettigrew, Woodman, & Cameron, 2001, for an elaboration), but avoiding these research problems by continuing to rely primarily on singular contextual studies risks studying the wrong things well. Von Glinow et al. (2002) suggest that we can ill afford to mimic past research by imposing our world view on participants or phenomena. One way researchers can avoid the "imposed emic approach" (cf. Berry, 1990) is to be extra aware of the multiple embedded polycontextualizations in their own culture, as well as in the culture(s) they are studying. Further, by acting on some of our training suggestions in the previous section, researchers can identify shared and non-shared polycontextualizations and determine which of these discrepancies are most likely to cause emotional conflict.

Conclusion 3: Alternatives to Talk May Include Aesthetic Approaches

All of the conflict management strategies identified by negotiation and dispute resolution scholars tend to involve talk—with the exception of the "avoiding" strategy (cf. Montoya-Weiss et al., 2001). The protalk view that dominates this literature makes avoiding an unattractive option. One of our aims in this pa-

⁶ Cultural strife in cities within Israel, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Canada, the United States (e.g., Miami, Florida), and elsewhere illustrates the importance of localizing the poly-contextual sensitivity we are saying is needed in future research.

per has been to highlight that avoiding is but one of several possible alternatives to talk. We have described an array of visual and aesthetic outlets by which people can express their emotions. Future research is needed to test the efficacy of these approaches in managing emotional conflict. Doing so will help to supplement the verbal, analytic approaches with approaches that are more sensory guided or R-mode in nature—a point we elaborate on next.

Conclusion 4: Ought Management Scholars Supplement L-Mode and R-Mode?

The question we are asking now pertains to the broader issue of how we, as management scholars, may consider communicating with each other in the future in order to advance thinking in our field. We ask this question because, as Pickstone notes, “Science, technology, and medicine *are and have always been* much more *plural* than most people know; at any time there have been lots of different ways of knowing and of making” (2001: 25). Yet, despite this plurality, the dominant paradigm in the organization sciences—indeed, in all sciences—is the rational, analytic, narrative-guided scientific method (L-mode).

Consistent with this, Boje (1995, 2001) has observed that much of management science is guided by narratives; thus, we learn about the emphasis placed on data (even surprise findings) by a single-voiced author/narrator or set of narrators. Apparently, the need for *empirical* findings is why the *metaphors* that preceded history-making scientists’ theories are often excluded from the publications that ultimately reflect their thinking (cf. Draaisma, 2000). Renowned psychiatrist Jerome Bruner (1979), himself a confessed metaphor user when generating testable hypotheses, explains that the inclusion of visual images, including metaphors, or other sensory-based ways of knowing in the publications (narratives) that ultimately get produced in the science community would threaten the publications’ perceived scientific basis. Thus, Bruner joins Edwards (1986), Draaisma (2000), Boje (2001), and others as proponents of aesthetics- or experientially based ways of knowing (e.g., Heron & Reason, 2001; Palus & Horus, 1996) and in encouraging us to supplement L-mode with R-mode thinking. We concur, and believe that the importance of *not* disre-

garding “stories” or “images” or “feelings” as overly subjective has been demonstrated by leaders who recognize that words alone are often insufficient to motivate employees to change (Kotter & Cohen, 2002), and by management scholars who have noted that management research may benefit by more nonlinear thinking, especially in contexts that are global (cf. Hitt, Keats, & DeMarie, 1998) or pluralistic (Eisenhardt, 2000).

There is a nascent movement toward this thinking in our field. Importantly, Eisenhardt concludes that management scholars seem to be favoring “conceptions of change and pluralism that are more consistent with nonlinear notions like chaos and complexity, as opposed to a more Newtonian view of the world” (2000: 703). Indeed, such requisite variety, diversity, differing perspectives, different world views, and differing contextualization conventions make for rich and productive team interactions. But such teams, including academically oriented ones, are also prone to intensely emotional conflict (Milliman & Von Glinow, 1998) and, in turn, the need to manage this.

Practically speaking, the propensity toward protalk prescriptions has foiled MCT activities (Kanter & Corn, 1994), as well as mergers and acquisitions and joint venture performance (Schnepp, Von Glinow, & Bhambri, 1990). Managers perhaps even more than academicians struggle with this issue in real time. Hopefully, our article will encourage experimentation with nontalk alternatives in place of (or supplemental to) the protalk ways with which we tend to address conflict.

CONCLUSION

We hope this article will raise questions in the minds of managers and management scholars regarding what language they have been speaking to date and how this may (or may not) enable the internationally diverse environment in which they increasingly work to be emotionally satisfying to all. The urgency in reflecting on what may generally be “culturally blind” to us (i.e., the language and polycontextualizations we use to express ourselves) is due to the fact that the conversations we have in our work are increasingly global (cf. Monge & Fulk, 1999). Although we have learned much from cross-cultural scholars, much of their theorizing and measures are at levels of analysis that have

prevented them from observing the multitudinous context-specific factors (including linguistic dynamics) that influence the ease or tensions in cross-cultural interactions. It is our hope that this article will help management researchers all over the globe think twice about how essential it is, given its inevitability, to study how to manage (rather than merely avoid) emotional conflict in teams, and how language (including our own academic-speak) affects what we know about dynamics in cross-cultural exchanges.

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Mary Ann Von Glinow is research professor at the Chapman Graduate School, Florida International University, as well as CIBER director. She is a fellow and past president of the Academy of Management and currently vice-president of the Academy of International Business and department editor of JIBS. She received her Ph.D. from The Ohio State University. Her research interests include international HRM—in particular, globally distributed work.

Debra L. Shapiro, formerly the Willard Graham Distinguished Professor of Management at UNC-Chapel Hill, is professor of management and organization at the Robert H. Smith School of Business, University of Maryland. She is a member of the Academy of Management's Board of Governors. She received her Ph.D. from Northwestern University. Her research regards managing conflict and the challenges of doing so across cultures.

Jeanne M. Brett is the DeWitt W. Buchanan, Jr. Distinguished Professor of Dispute Resolution and Organizations at the Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University. She received her Ph.D. from the University of Illinois. Her book, *Negotiating Globally*, won the IACM book award in 2002, and she received the Academy of Management's Outstanding Educator Award in 2003. She studies transaction, team-based, and work-family conflicts.

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