

**Małgorzata Rozkwitalska**

Wyższa Szkoła Bankowa w Gdańsku

## **Organizational creativity and innovation as positive aspects of cross-cultural interactions\***

**Summary.** The purpose of the article is to explore the positive aspects of cross-cultural interactions (in accordance with a new stream, i.e. Positive Organizational Scholarship) such as organizational creativity and innovation. Its objective is to provide evidence that cross-cultural interactions may contribute to increase of creativity and innovation in multinational companies (MNCs) and multicultural teams (MTs). Since in the prior research authors generally studied the problems caused by cultural diversity which currently seem to be sufficiently well-explored, in the present paper the author tries to document the positive aspects of cross-cultural interactions, such as increased creativity and innovation. This approach appears to be the missing element in the previous studies. The paper includes the following sections: the literature review, the characteristics of the research method and the sample, the results of the pilot study and conclusions. The empirical findings of the research emphasize that creativity and innovation may be enhanced in MNCs and MTs due to their cultural diversity.

**Key words:** cross-cultural interactions, cultural diversity, innovations, organizational creativity, multinational companies, multicultural teams, multiculturalism

### **Introduction**

Multicultural organizations such as multinational companies (MNCs) and, frequently virtual, multicultural teams (MTs) have become a visible and inherent

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element of the economic landscape in the globalized world economy today. As very fascinating social creatures they have appeared as an interesting study object in international business (IB) field and the related disciplines such as international and intercultural management (IM). Numerous authors have studied how multiculturalism<sup>1</sup> affects various aspects of MNCs' and MTs' functioning so far. Traditionally, the IB and IM literature widely describes many problems faced in a cross-cultural setting, e.g. process losses, conflicts, difficulties with social integration, communication errors, obstacles to decision making and changes, or decline in the job content level<sup>2</sup>. Yet, some recent studies have also been looking for "the bright side" of cultural diversity (in accordance with the Positive Organizational Scholarship approach<sup>3</sup>) proving that it may bring about such positives like

<sup>1</sup> The terms 'multiculturalism', 'cultural diversity' and 'cultural differences' are used interchangeably in this paper. They are applied to various types of interactions among foreigners in MNCs and MTs that constitute cross-cultural interactions. Such type of relationships reflects "how representatives of various cultures affect one another and behave in a given situational context". See M. Rozkwitalska, *Negative and positive aspects of cross-cultural interactions: a case of multinational subsidiaries in Poland*, "Inżynieria Ekonomika – Engineering Economics" 2014, 25(2), pp. 231-240. Luna and Gupta define culture as blueprints of all human activities that direct them and the lens through which people view the surrounding reality. See D. Luna, P.F. Gupta, *An integrative framework for cross-cultural consumer behavior*, "International Marketing Review" 2001, 18(1), pp. 45-69.

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. D.W. White, R.K. Absher, K.A. Huggins, *The effects of hardiness and cultural distance on sociocultural adaptation in an expatriate sales manager population*, "Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management" 2011, 31(3), pp. 325-337; G.K. Stahl, *Synergy springs from cultural revolution*, "Financial Times" 2006, October 6; O. Shenkar, *Cultural distance revisited: towards a more rigorous conceptualization and measurement of cultural differences*, "Journal of International Business Studies" 2001, 23(3), pp. 519-535; M. Rozkwitalska, *Human Resource Management strategies for overcoming the barriers in cross-border acquisitions of multinational companies: the case of multinational subsidiaries in Poland*, "Social Sciences" 2012, 77(3), pp. 77-87; idem, *Bariery w zarządzaniu międzykulturowym. Perspektywa filii zagranicznych korporacji transnarodowych*, Wolters Kluwer, Warszawa 2011; T. Patel, *The Role of Dynamic Cultural Theories in Explaining the Viability of International Strategic Alliances*, "Management Decision" 2007, 45(10), pp. 1532-1559; L.L. Martins, F. Miliken, B.M. Wiesenfeld, P.R. Salgado, *Racioethnic diversity and group members' experiences*, "Group and Organization Management" 2003, 28, pp. 75-106; B.L. Kirkman, P.E. Tesluk, B. Rosen, *The impact of demographic heterogeneity and team leader-team member demographic fit on team empowerment and effectiveness*, "Group and Organization Management" 2004, 29, pp. 334-368; K. Yoshitake, *The advantage of active conformity as a communication strategy for compatibility between self-assertion and smooth interpersonal relationship*, "Japanese Journal of Psychology" 1992, 62, pp. 229-234; M. Sano, L.A. Di Martino, *"Japanization" of the employment relationship: three cases in Argentina*, "CEPAL Review" 2003, 80, pp. 177-186; E.A. Mannix, M.A. Neale, *What differences make a difference? The promise and reality of diverse teams in organizations*, "Psychological Science in the Public Interest" 2006, 6, pp. 32-55.

<sup>3</sup> Briefly, the Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) approach looks for beneficial outcomes of human behavior, assuming that people can and want to contribute to organizational success. More about POS can be found in: K.P. Cameron, J.E. Dutton, R.E. Quinn, *Positive Organizational Scholarship – Foundations of a New Discipline*, Berrett-Koehler Publishers Inc., San Francisco 2003; K. Kalinowska-Andrian, *Positive Organizational Scholarship – nowy trend w nauce*

more creativity and innovation, better productivity, increased adaptability, quality, vitality, knowledge sharing, learning opportunities, problem solving, effective communication, less prejudice, building social bonds and job satisfaction<sup>4</sup>.

Nevertheless, the research on the positives of cross-cultural interactions is less common and there is still a need for a better recognition of the benefits flowing from multiculturalism in MNCs and MTs. Therefore, this paper attempts to fill the gap by providing evidence that interactions with representatives of different cultures may contribute to more creativity and innovation in MNCs and MTs. To achieve this aim the paper is organized as follows: firstly the author conducts the literature review and provides the details on the research method and sample characteristics of the pilot study. Furthermore, the empirical findings are portrayed as well as conclusions with implications, contribution and limitation of the research. Additionally, the concluding section discusses the suggestions for future research.

## 1. Literature review

According to Woodman, Sawyer and Griffin “organizational creativity is the creation of a valuable, useful new product, service, idea, procedure, or process by individuals working together in a complex social system”<sup>5</sup> and is a subset of innovation, whereas innovation is a broader construct that refers to both some new outcomes (such as product, services, idea etc.) as well as the adaptation of those outcomes invented inside and/or outside of the organization. Furthermore, innovation leads to organizational change, yet it is worth mentioning that many changes defy classification as innovation<sup>6</sup>. The above definition emphasizes that social interactions between individuals at work are an essential element in organizational creativity supporting innovation and result in an organizational change. However, since innovation also includes adaptation, social interactions

zarządzania. Zaproszenie do świata pozytywów, ”e-mentor” 2006, 1 (13), [www.e-mentor.edu.pl/artukul/index/numer/13/id/235](http://www.e-mentor.edu.pl/artukul/index/numer/13/id/235) [30.09.2013].

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. F.G. Stevens, C.V. Plaut, J. Sanchez-Burks, *Unlocking the benefits of diversity. All-inclusive multiculturalism and positive organizational change*, “The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science” 2008, 44(1), pp. 116-133; G.K. Stahl, M. Maznevski, A. Voigt, K. Jonsen, *Unrevealing the effects of cultural diversity in teams: A meta-analysis of research on multicultural work groups*, “Journal of International Business Studies” 2010, 41(4), pp. 690-709; G.K. Stahl, K. Makela, L. Zander, M.L. Maznevski, *A look at the bright side of multicultural team diversity*, “Scandinavian Journal of Management” 2010, 26, pp. 439-447; M. Rozkwitalska, *Pozytywne aspekty interakcji międzykulturowych w środowisku wielokulturowym*, “Zeszyty Naukowe Wyższej Szkoły Bankowej we Wrocławiu” 2013, No. 36, pp. 201-212.

<sup>5</sup> R.W. Woodman, J.E. Sawyer, R.W. Griffin, *Toward a theory of organizational creativity*, “The Academy of Management Review” 1993, 18(2), p. 293.

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem.

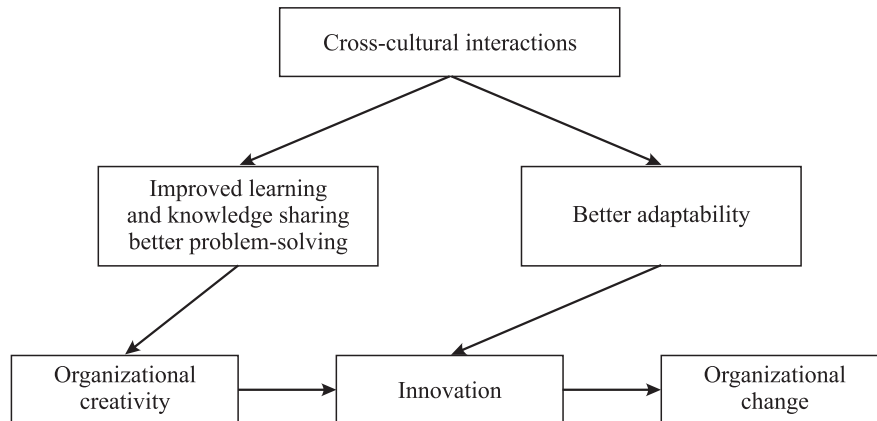


Fig. 1. Conceptual links among cross-cultural interactions, organizational creativity and innovations

Source: the author.

that enhance adaptation will also contribute to innovation and consequently changes (see also Fig. 1).

The elaborate model proposed by its authors divides all factors impacting on organizational creativity into three sets of elements (see Tab. 1). Therefore, a proposition can be formulated, namely if cross-cultural interactions affect these elements (at least some of them), they also influence organizational creativity and, as a result, innovation (see Fig. 1).

Noticeably, the determinants of organizational creativity encapsulate diversity, indicating that multiculturalism impact on creative processes within a group. The links between cross-cultural interactions and creativity can be directly inferred from the theory of information-processing. According to this theory, diversity in MTs brings about a broader access to information, networks, perspectives of individuals and their mental models, information processing and problem-solving methods that contribute to less group-thinking and consequently creativity and innovation, including adaptability<sup>7</sup>. A multicultural environment of MNCs and MTs abounds in manifold ideas and the learning opportunities fostering individual knowledge that, in return, may support creativity and innovation. In addition, innovation in MNCs may increase due to contacts with expatriates<sup>8</sup>. Moreover,

<sup>7</sup> T.H. Cox, *Cultural diversity in organizations: Theory, research, and practice*, Benett-Koehler Publishers, San Francisco 1994; G.K. Stahl, M. Maznevski, A. Voigt, K. Jonsen, *Unrevealing...*; G.K. Stahl, K. Makela, L. Zanderd, M.L. Maznevski, *A look...*

<sup>8</sup> S. Przytuła, *Ekspace w Polsce – silnym czy słabym ogniwem w zarządzaniu polską filią? Wyniki badań empirycznych*, in: *Wielokulturowość, ukierunkowanie na wartości i społeczna*

Table 1. Factors influencing organizational creativity

Individual characteristics	Group characteristics	Organizational characteristics
Cognitive abilities/style	Norms	Culture
Personality	Cohesiveness	Resources
Intrinsic motivation	Size	Rewards
Knowledge	Diversity	Strategy
	Roles	Structure
	Tasks	Technology
	Problem-solving approaches	

Source: adapted from R.W. Woodman, J.E. Sawyer, R.W. Griffin, *Toward a theory of organizational creativity*, "The Academy of Management Review" 1993, 18(2), pp. 309.

social interactions within MNCs and MTs encourage knowledge-sharing<sup>9</sup> further enhancing creative processes within a multicultural organization. However, as several authors pointed<sup>10</sup>, contextual factors associated with organizational characteristics may affect organizational creativity in a cross-cultural setting too. For instance, Stevens, Plaut and Sanchez-Burks claim that so-called all-inclusive multiculturalism is a matter of importance to establish effective interactions with foreigners that would generate the positive outcomes<sup>11</sup>.

The above analysis substantiates that cultural diversity may be translated into organizational creativity and innovation in multicultural organizations such as MNC's and MT's. The subsequent section of the paper, preceded by the description of the research methodology, gives also some support to this hypothesis (see section 3).

## 2. Research method and sample characteristics

The empirical findings of the pilot study presented in the following part of the paper were collected in two stages.

The first stage of the research was carried out in foreign subsidiaries of MNCs operating in Poland at the beginning of the year 2013 and referred to the positives

*odpowiedzialność. Nowe wyzwania w zarządzaniu organizacją*, Prace Naukowe WSB w Gdańsku, vol. 19, ed. M. Rozkwitalska, CeDeWu, Warszawa 2013, pp. 49-79.

<sup>9</sup> N.G. Noorderhaven, A.W. Harzing, *Knowledge sharing and social interaction within MNCs*, "Journal of International Business Studies" 2009, 40, pp. 719-741.

<sup>10</sup> G.K. Stahl, M. Maznevski, A. Voigt, K. Jonsen, *Unrevealing...*; F.G. Stevens, C.V. Plaut, J. Sanchez-Burks, *Unlocking...*

<sup>11</sup> F.G. Stevens, C.V. Plaut, J. Sanchez-Burks, *Unlocking...*

of cross-cultural interactions. In this part of the pilot study an e-mail survey was applied as the research method. The respondents were asked: "Do you see any positive aspects (effects) of cross-cultural interactions (contacts with foreigners) at your work? If the answer is 'yes', please describe your experience/remarks concerning the issue"<sup>12</sup>. The mailing list, and consequently the sample, was obtained from the author's previous research that was conducted in foreign subsidiaries of MNC's at the beginning of the year 2009<sup>13</sup>. This study was concerned with cultural barriers affecting operations of multinational affiliates. The non-probabilistic sample in the author's prior study was selected via purposive and snowball sampling methods and consisted of 45 individuals, usually top and middle level managers, in the vast majority, Poles, men in their thirties. They represented various functional departments in their subsidiaries of diverse capital origin and sector belongingness and they worked there for at least 1,5 year (94% of the respondents had longer work experience in MNCs). The majority of them used to live abroad and work for a company with foreign capital. Many of them gained international experience through business trips to other countries or working outside Poland. These previous exposure to foreign environments could have impact on their notion of cross-cultural interactions they have been involved in<sup>14</sup>.

The second stage of the pilot study was conducted as a focus group interview in May 2013 in Lithuania. The group was composed of 12 master level students of Kaunas University of Technology (Faculty of Social Sciences), who completed x-culture project<sup>15</sup>. The discussion in English took place during Strategic Management lecture and a tutorial that were given by the author and which referred to the positive and negative aspects of cross-cultural interactions that the students

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<sup>12</sup> Details concerning the research method and sample can also be found in: M. Rozkwitalska, *Negative...*; idem, *Pozytywne...*

<sup>13</sup> Methodology of the previous research is depicted in detail in: M. Rozkwitalska, *Bariery...*, pp. 143-161.

<sup>14</sup> Previous exposure to a foreign environment may affect abilities of individuals to interact with representatives of different cultures since it influences their attitudes. See: B. Toyne, *Host managers of multinational firms: an evolution of variables affecting their managerial thinking patterns*, "Journal of International Business Studies" 1976, pp. 39-56.

<sup>15</sup> X-culture is a global project devised by V. Taras from University of North California in Greensboro in United States and first launched in 2010. It is aimed at enhancing learning in IB and related courses and providing a platform for high quality IB research. For students it gives an opportunity to experience challenges of working in global virtual teams on a business proposal during about 8 weeks. All efforts of students are coordinated by instructors who participate in the project. Business proposals submitted by the MTs are evaluated by the instructors. Moreover, the students provide anonymous feedback to their peers in MTs by multiple surveys. Data on participants' demographics, their previous international experiences, team diversity, MTs' group dynamic and performance are collected and can be used by the x-culture researchers. For more details see: [www.x-culture.org](http://www.x-culture.org).

had witnessed while working on the project in MTs<sup>16</sup>. A few students in the focus group had prior experience in MTs.

The following section portrays the results of the pilot study with regards to creativity and innovation as well as factors that were depicted as influencing organizational creativity (see Tab. 1 and Fig. 1).

### 3. Results

First and foremost, the empirical findings confirmed most of the observation from the prior research of the other authors regarding the positives of cross-cultural interactions<sup>17</sup>.

Direct references to creativity and innovation as a beneficial outcome that may be achieved through contacts with representatives of different cultures can be found in the following quotation obtained during the first stage of the pilot study: “I think that contacts with foreign suppliers and partners increase the level of innovation and creativity in a company, help to transfer to our home environment the latest technology and consequently to raise the competitiveness level. Cross-cultural interactions enable to overcome stereotypes as well as common thinking and acting patterns”<sup>18</sup>.

As stated by the respondent, cross-cultural contacts may contribute to a wider range of perspectives preventing group-thinking, which results in more creativity and innovation, as well as competitiveness for MNCs.

Both the respondents of the first stage of the pilot study as well as the students participating in the second one indicated indirectly that cross-cultural contacts foster creativity and innovation by referring to factors impacting on creativity or emphasizing adaptability as a possible outcome of cultural diversity. The quotations mentioned below reflect this observation:

1) with regards to problem-solving, individual perspectives and mental models:

– “someone ‘from outside’ helps to break a group ‘inertia’ – if anyone in a work environment comes from the same region, school, university, everyone

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<sup>16</sup> The students mentioned some problems in functioning of their MTs, such as e.g. communication difficulties, cultural distance or time zones. Nevertheless, any of the participants of the focus group interview did not complain about lack of creativity or innovation in their MTs.

<sup>17</sup> All empirical findings concerning the positive aspects of cross-cultural interactions are described in: M. Rozkwitalska, *Negative...*, and M. Rozkwitalska, *Pozytywne...* Due to the aim of this paper it includes only the author’s research results with regards to creativity, innovation and factors impacting on them.

<sup>18</sup> M. Rozkwitalska, *Negative...*



has the same interests, habits, etc.; work is simply boring and you can easily fall into stagnation and long-term (economically ineffective) status quo. A foreigner has a great chance of breaching such a construction, which is very often positive for an organization”<sup>19</sup>.

- “Persisting that only our perspective and worldview are legitimate makes us of marginal importance and excludes us from work in the world of various cultures”<sup>20</sup>.

- “[...] you can see different ways to the same things and different perspectives.”

- “I learnt much about different people and cultures, how to tolerate different attitudes, opinions, and so on. Also my team members had a different educational background and studied different disciplines before, which made me learn more other subjects and be able to work with a multidisciplinary environment.”

- “During the project I met interesting people with different “world seeing”, ideas from mine. So this experience broadened my way of thinking.”

- “You could compare your view of the world with different people’s views.”

2) with regards to knowledge sharing, experience broadening and learning opportunities:

- “In spite of over 20 years of market economy in our country, you can still notice a distance (more or less willful) in some areas of knowledge and corporate culture. [...] I am not saying that the only solution is gaining knowledge or using experience of different (usually western) business cultures, yet I am sure it is the positive of (cross-cultural) interactions”<sup>21</sup>.

- “Cooperation gives us a chance of learning, gaining experience [...]”<sup>22</sup>.

- “The working style of different nations can surprise you as well as contribute to changes in your own approach to work”<sup>23</sup>.

- “The pluses [...] are: increased knowledge, new experience, new people, a different perspective on working styles, and above all, self-development”<sup>24</sup>.

- “some students had more competences in international business so I could say that during the project I received more knowledge about it.”

3) with regards to adaptation: “In MNCs an interaction with people from different cultural circles is crucial. The reason is very simple – if you prepare any product or service for a global market you need the ‘local’ approach. It means your product must be adjusted to the customers’ needs regardless of their cultural

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>21</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>23</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem.



background. A contact with a foreigner lets you understand how different needs of clients in various parts of the world are”<sup>25</sup>.

The collected observations allow for positing that cross-cultural interactions have an enormous potential, they may turn into an intangible asset of MNCs and their MTs. Organizational creativity and innovation can boost due to the effects generated by both diverse individuals, who benefit from a cross-cultural setting and become more creative and innovative, as well as their interactions within multicultural groups<sup>26</sup>.

## **Conclusions**

The positives of cross-cultural interactions such as organizational creativity and innovation that are analyzed in this paper suggest that MNCs may use cultural diversity as their advantage. Organizational creativity in MNCs and MTs can be strengthened among other factors by improved learning, knowledge gaining and sharing and better problem-solving, while innovation may be also an outcome of a better adaptation.

The paper contributes to the existing knowledge by offering additional evidence on the positives of cross-cultural interactions, specifically creativity and innovation. It also links the theory of organizational creativity with cultural diversity effects in MNCs.

The research is limited mainly due to the fact that the empirical findings come from a pilot study with a relatively small number of observations and applied non-probabilistic sampling methods to collect them, which reduces the possibility of generalization. Future research should therefore respond to this limitation by obtaining more cases along with additional quantitative studies. Furthermore, the results of the second stage of the pilot study, while referring to MTs, cannot be directly related to organizational creativity in MNCs (yet, they still reveal cultural diversity impact on creativity in groups). Future research ought to validate whether understanding of creative processes in MTs provides a useful explanation of organizational creativity in MNCs. Additionally, the paper puts rather scant attention to the relationship between multiculturalism and innovation. Thus, further research should explore it in more detail both theoretically and empirically.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>26</sup> Facing challenges caused by a cultural distance in MNCs and MTs on a nearly daily basis requires from individuals to be creative and innovative to surmount barriers inherent in such a multicultural environment.

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### Kreatywność organizacyjna i innowacje jako pozytywne aspekty interakcji międzykulturowych

**Streszczenie.** W artykule podjęto próbę zbadania pozytywnych aspektów interakcji międzykulturowych (w zgodzie z nowym nurtem w naukach społecznych, zwanym Pozytywnym Potencjałem Organizacji), takich jak kreatywność organizacyjna i innowacje. Celem rozważań jest wykazanie, że interakcje międzykulturowe mogą przyczyniać się do większej kreatywności i innowacji w przedsiębiorstwach wielonarodowych (MNCs) i zespołach wielokulturowych (MTs). Tradycyjnie autorzy skupiali się jak dotąd głównie na problemach generowanych przez różnorodność kulturową. Ten obszar badań wydaje się już dobrze opisany. Natomiast studia nad pozytywnymi aspektami interakcji międzykulturowych, takimi jak kreatywność i innowacje, są zdecydowanie rzadsze. Artykuł składa się z następujących części: przegląd literatury, opis metody badawczej i próby, wyniki badań pilotażowych oraz wnioski. Wyniki badań wskazują, że kreatywność i innowacje mogą ulec wzmocnieniu w MNCs i MTs ze względu na ich różnorodność kulturową.

**Słowa kluczowe:** interakcje międzykulturowe, różnorodność kulturowa, innowacje, kreatywność organizacyjna, korporacje wielonarodowe, zespoły wielokulturowe, wielokulturowość