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Knowledge Asymmetry in Action

Abstract

This article forges a connection between knowledge asymmetry and intercultural communication to challenge extant understandings of knowledge asymmetry as a static and stable condition that influences the processes and outcomes of interactive encounters that promote learning. The article draws its empirical material from ethnographic fieldwork at a training course on climate change that involved the participation of development practitioners, policy makers and civil servants working in broad professional arenas such as engineering, agriculture, water management and urban development in Sri Lanka, Kenya, Egypt, Bangladesh, Uganda, Tanzania, Vietnam and Denmark. The material is represented in the form of ethnographic vignettes to demonstrate knowledge asymmetry ‘in action’: how knowledge asymmetry is far from a static and stable condition, but rather how it emerges and disappears as participants summon, articulate, dismiss, ridicule, ignore or explore the rich pools of their culture/knowledge differences during the training course interaction. The article aligns itself to Barth’s (2002) conceptualization of culture as **knowledge** and to contemporary understandings of intercultural communication that privilege sensitivities to the webs of geo-historical relations and macro power and economic asymmetries that structure and inform intercultural relationships. The article also emphasizes the relevance of seeing knowledge asymmetry as a concept-metaphor (Moore 2004).

1. Introduction

The presence of ‘knowledge asymmetry’ – or knowledge difference – among individuals and groups communicating in situated interactions is often recognized as a critical condition that influences and affects the process and outcome of the interactive encounter. The presence of knowledge asymmetry can be viewed in terms of **measures** of difference, **types** of difference, or the **consequences** of difference. Knowledge asymmetry can appear small, great, disturbing, serious, irrelevant, constructive, or detrimental in moments of professional intercultural communication.

The lexical item ‘knowledge asymmetry’ is curious. It is employed to describe, clarify, justify and problematize a range of communication phenomena and challenges, and can be found in heterogeneous literatures concerned with the professions (Parsons 1975, Risku et al. 2011), management and business (Levitas/McFadyen 2009), education (Barker 2005, Tange/Kastberg 2011), knowledge communication (Eppler 2004), development (Stremmelaar 2009) and intercultural communication (Günthner/Luckmann 1995, Koch 2009). It can be employed as a term to denote knowledge differences, or as an analytic concept to understand knowledge differences. ‘Knowledge asymmetry’ is also used as an expression with an ability to provide an overwhelmingly powerful form of explanation for, or an answer to, the success or failure to achieve the specific goals and objectives of an interaction – be it to promote learning, understanding, consensus, enlightenment, empowerment or decision-making.

To add to these volatile usages, ‘knowledge asymmetry’ – or knowledge difference – is also a form of ‘common ground’ knowledge, which is “generally undisputed, uncontroversial and taken for granted” by people in general (van Dijk 2002: 218). Seen in this everyday and quotidian perspective, the recognitions of knowledge asymmetry are intuitive, known by all, and shared by academics and non-academics alike. This perspective leads me to refer to knowledge asymmetry

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as a ‘concept-metaphor’ in this article (Moore 2004). Concept-metaphors are ‘pre-theoretical’ by virtue of them being used and understood in both academic articulations as well as in everyday, social talk.

The concept-metaphor of knowledge asymmetry is perhaps the most important, yet often implicit, component of intercultural communication, which occurs through the frequent or sporadic interactions of people with differing cultural backgrounds in various social, economic, political or professional contexts. Such interactions yield various outcomes such as the forging of old and new relationships, the emergence of new understandings and insights of different cultural modes of thought and practice, or the creation of hybrid symbols and products developed on the basis of the merging of different cultural systems. The view that people learn something new, or rearrange their prior knowledge landscapes to understand phenomena afresh, or find solutions to contemporary problems **despite** their differences is often an implicit desire that lies within intercultural communication.

The tone of research in intercultural communication, previously emerging from organizational and management discourses (e.g. Hall 1990, Hofstede 1991) and restrained by descriptive, prescriptive and predictive approaches to cultural differences that focused on national belonging, has shifted substantially during the last decade. Contemporary understandings of intercultural communication have been fertilized by postcolonial studies, poststructuralist perspectives, feminist theory and anthropology that centralize the issue of ‘difference’ and privilege an understanding of culture as dynamic and fluid where cultural ‘roots’ are replaced by cultural ‘routes’ (Clifford 1997, Abu-Lughod 2006). Much current research in intercultural communication steers away from using the idea of culture as a “convenient and lazy explanation” to explain everything (Piller 2011: 172) and instead pays attention and shows sensitivity to the webs of geo-historical relations and macro power and economic asymmetries that structure and inform intercultural relationships (Nakayama/Halualani 2010). It pays attention to the workings of powerful global languages, such as English, that participate and interfere with the constructions of relations between culturally different people (Canagarajah 2013). New understandings of intercultural communication also embrace perspectives of social justice by viewing intercultural communication as a practice that can include or exclude people (Sorrells 2013) and as a practice that forms the basis of cosmopolitan learning that holds the potential to produce global connected citizens (Sobré-Denton/Bardhan 2013).

In this article, I forge a connection between intercultural communication and knowledge asymmetry by looking at a training course on climate change that involved the participation of development practitioners, policy makers and civil servants working in diverse professional arenas such as engineering, agriculture, water management and urban development in African and Asian countries. In doing so, I follow a conceptualization of culture as ‘knowledge’ that was proposed by Fredrik Barth (2002) where he argues that both culture and knowledge provide people “with materials for reflection and premises for action” (Barth 2002: 1). According to Koch (2009: 3), this perspective allows a new way of looking at intercultural differences in interaction where differences “...are not primarily interpreted in terms of diverse cultural belongings. It is first and foremost a question of knowledge asymmetries between the interacting persons”. The article uses this conceptualization of culture/knowledge as a backdrop for demonstrating how ‘knowledge asymmetry’ is far from a static and stable condition influencing and affecting the process and outcome of the interactive encounter. Instead, this article focuses on how knowledge asymmetry is constantly ‘in action’; it emerges and vanishes as participants summon, articulate, dismiss, ridicule, ignore or explore the wide variety of their culture/knowledge differences during the training course.

In the next part of the article, I draw attention to diverse academic articulations of knowledge asymmetry and briefly explain how the term is a fine example of a concept-metaphor. To maintain a form of consistency, I use the term ‘knowledge asymmetry’ throughout the article, even though its grammatical construction may appear awkward at times. The third part describes the training

course as the ‘site’ of the study and the ‘sight’ of ethnographic method in generating and representing the empirical material. In part four, I represent my data in the form of six ethnographic vignettes that are woven from transcripts of taped verbal interaction with the multi-layered interpretations of my observations. The article concludes by discussing parts of the vignettes to highlight the importance of dialogic moments that occur when knowledge asymmetry is explored; the organizational prerogatives and the privileging of scientific knowledge that often dictate which types of knowledge asymmetry is relevant to explore; and how the recognition of knowledge asymmetry that is brought ‘into’ the interaction by participants may become a promoter of learning, empowerment and understanding for some participants, while becoming the keeper of well-established and accepted culture/knowledge differences for others.

2. Knowledge asymmetry

The first part of this section presents the different ways in which the term knowledge asymmetry appears in academic literature. The second part briefly explains how and why I consider the term as an example of a ‘concept-metaphor’ (Moore 2004).

2.1. Academic articulations

The term and concept ‘knowledge asymmetry’ has a long history to denote and understand knowledge differences in research on the professions. It has been used to describe a definite and precise recognition of differences that a priori exist between ‘experts’ and ‘laymen’ (Parsons 1975), or between ‘experts’ and ‘novices’ where expert knowledge “distinguishes outstanding individuals in a domain from less outstanding individuals in that domain, as well as from people in general” (Ericsson/Smith 1991:2). Similarly, knowledge asymmetry is used to recognize differences between ‘experts’ and ‘other experts’ located in fields with different scientific, organizational and political agendas (Alrøe/Noe 2011, Fløttum/Dahl 2011), or to recognize ‘domain experts’ from ‘decision makers’ (Eppler 2004, Kampf/Longo 2009).

Although ‘knowledge asymmetry’ is vibrantly employed to describe, clarify, justify and problematize a range of communication phenomena and challenges embedded in the mechanisms of professional interactions, it also circulates widely in other literatures concerned with management and business, education, development, knowledge communication and intercultural communication. Barker (2005: 276) describes knowledge asymmetry in the classroom as a condition where “one group member is more expert on a topic than another”, whilst Tange/Kastberg (2011: 6) describe knowledge asymmetry as a “potential barrier to successful teaching and learning”. In other research, the presences of knowledge asymmetry are shown to positively affect innovation, and they are considered constructive for product development in companies and organizations (Rönkkö/Mäkelä 2008, Risku et al. 2011). Cimon (2004) argues that the management of knowledge asymmetry is perceived to be vital to the effective growth of strategic alliances between organizational partners, while Corbett (2007) discusses how knowledge asymmetry plays a vital role in identifying entrepreneurial opportunities. Elsewhere, Pilnick (1998) describes how interactively achieved knowledge-based asymmetry between patient and doctor appears to diminish over time and holds the potential to change through the process of verbal interaction. Eppler (2004) argues that visual communication tools can be used as effective interventions to address the ‘problem’ of knowledge asymmetries that otherwise block the communication of insight and expertise from experts to management decision-makers. Levitas/McFadyen (2009) consider that in ever-changing technological environments that demand increasing levels of inventive activity, those who are best able to manage knowledge asymmetry are better positioned to obtain competitive advantage.

The condition of knowledge asymmetry, which manifests itself as forms of differences that members of different cultures have, is frequently attributed agency for causing misunderstandings in communication. Günthner/Luckmann (1995) discuss how asymmetries of knowledge,

concerning the elements and appropriate use of communicative genres, pose problems in intercultural situations. Here, knowledge asymmetry becomes a condition, and explanation, of cultural differences and intercultural misunderstanding articulated in terms of nationality. In an article describing the work of the Dutch NGO Hivos, Stremmelaar (2009) shows how knowledge sharing programmes are increasingly built into the operations of international development NGOs to “address the knowledge asymmetry in North-South relationships to broaden Southern participation in knowledge development” (2009: 83). In this article, Stremmelaar draws on debates on ‘macro’ knowledge asymmetry that emerged from Europe’s colonial project: a project that was largely responsible for the construction of social and cultural differences between peoples in the world that were neatly arranged in systems of evolutionary or hierarchical scales, and supported by ideologies of the nation state and the skilful articulation of what true, correct, and enlightened knowledge was (Said 1978, Spivak, 1988, Cohn 1996, Lal 2002). Postcolonial studies, and its related areas, have always spoken of the construction of knowledge asymmetry and its intimate relation with power, language and identity –without calling it that.

Not only do these examples of academic articulation display the rhetorical creativity of researchers to find synonyms to refer to knowledge ‘difference’, they also, and more importantly, demonstrate the heterogeneous contexts and perspectives in which the term and concept of knowledge asymmetry appears. Firstly, ‘knowledge asymmetry’ has a substantial power to categorize people in terms of simplistic dichotomies between ‘expert’ and ‘lay’, the ‘knowing’ and the ‘unknowing’, which in effect consolidates the hegemonic and proverbial perspective that divides the ‘haves’ from the ‘have nots’ (Kastberg 2011). Secondly, ‘knowledge asymmetry’ holds substantial explanatory power; it becomes an explanation or an answer that unlocks the reasons for miscommunication and tension between people from different cultures. Thirdly, academic articulations of knowledge asymmetry are infused with contrasting attributes: In certain locations, asymmetry is attributed qualities of goodness and viewed as constructive and necessary that enable people to collaborate, solve problems, learn and gain insights. In the light of current discourses on knowledge economies and knowledge societies, ‘knowledge asymmetry’ is seen as a valuable resource of social, symbolic, moral, cultural and economic capital. However in other locations, ‘knowledge asymmetry’ is attributed qualities associated with nuisance and is seen as destructive and obstructing.

2.2. Knowledge asymmetry as a concept-metaphor

When ‘knowledge asymmetry’ is detached from academic articulations, moved into the realm of the everyday and concrete, and re-expressed as knowledge difference, then it appears as a form of ‘common ground’ knowledge, which is “generally undisputed, uncontroversial and taken for granted” by people in general (van Dijk 2002: 218). The recognition of differences in the knowledges of people is a kind of knowing and relating that is intuitive, quotidian, shared and mundane at the same time: a common ground knowledge that exists irrespective of academic speculation.

Moore (2004) suggests the use of the word ‘concept-metaphor’ to describe terms that are *pre-theoretical* in the sense that they are readily invoked, rarely addressed in empirical terms, and shared by academics and non-academics alike. Other examples of concept-metaphors include terms such as “global, gender, the self and the body”. Moore argues that concept-metaphors serve multiple purposes: they carry status as theoretical abstractions as well as describe sets of concrete processes, experiences and connections in the world. Furthermore, concept-metaphors are described as examples of catachresis: “they are metaphors that have no adequate referent. Their exact meaning can never be specified in advance – although they can be defined in practice and in context – and there is part of them that remains outside or exceeds representation” (Moore 2004: 73). In this article, I understand **knowledge asymmetry** as a concept-metaphor, because in the specific practice and context of the training course on climate change, the participants were keenly aware of their knowledge differences as I was. It was a knowledge we partially shared.

3. Methodology

The first part of this section describes the empirical ‘site’ where the study took place. The second part presents the ‘sight’ of the ethnographic method used to generate the material, analysis and representation of knowledge asymmetry in action.

3.1. The ‘site’: A training course on climate change

The empirical material used in this article was generated at a training course based on an exchange of knowledge on climate change. The course was held in Denmark and involved interactions among nineteen development practitioners, policy makers, and civil servants from Sri Lanka, Kenya, Egypt, Bangladesh, Uganda, Tanzania, Vietnam and Denmark with disciplinary and professional affiliations to engineering, agriculture, policy-making, water management and urban development. The training course was commissioned and funded by a national development agency, and it was designed and conducted by professionals in a consultancy company based in Denmark that had activities in more than 40 countries and in many fields such as agriculture, environment, energy and climate, building and industry. The training programme was divided into thematic sessions of climate change mitigation and adaptation that are emphasized in the Kyoto Protocol (1997), the international agreement tied to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

The training course covered a period of three weeks and was divided into modules where different designs and formats of communication and pedagogic practice zigzagged. These were described as class activities such as lectures and exercises that lay the foundation through an introduction to the newest knowledge. Excursions were designed to expose the participants to examples of climate change challenges and solutions, and case-based groupwork was worked into the programme to encourage participants to deal with real-life cases while drawing on their own experiences and the experiences of others. Time was also allotted to quiet moments of reflection – individual work – in which participants were encouraged to create action plans for their own organizational activities. In this way, the training course was designed to privilege both a *deficit model* of science communication, which involves the “one way communication from experts with knowledge to publics without it” (Trench 2008: 119) as well as a *dialogue model* of science communication, which “engages publics in two-way communication and draws on their own information and experience” (Trench 2008: 119).

The course objectives and statements of learning outcomes remained strictly focused on climate change challenges and solutions from a scientific perspective. Although there was an absence of the ‘intercultural’ in formal articulations of the training course, the ‘intercultural’ was constantly, yet **implicitly**, present. Firstly, participants made frequent references to their culture/knowledge differences either when articulating their own identity and practice or the identity and practice of fellow participants. Culture/knowledge differences were made salient on a number of axes that called forth differences in nationalities, types of professional expertise, length of experience, job status, and the belonging to developing or developed parts of the world. Secondly, participants were acutely aware that their intercultural encounters were also encounters of complicated entanglements of political and cultural histories where the differences amongst them continued to be hierarchically structured through articulations of dichotomies between the ‘rich’ and the ‘poor’, or the ‘developed’ or the ‘underdeveloped’. Most participants knew that contemporary climate change issues also reflected the injustices of global economic inequalities.

3.2. The ‘sight’: Ethnographic method

The empirical material used in this article was generated through ethnographic method at the training course site. Such a method is traditionally described as a research tradition that has disciplinary origins in anthropology and sociology with the aim of “understanding the social world of people being studied through immersion in their community to produce detailed description of

people, their culture and beliefs” (Snape/Spencer 2003: 12). Through employing methods of participant observation and **writing down** dense fieldnotes at specific ‘sites’, the ethnographer then produces an ethnographic account by the process of **writing up**.

The ethnographic ‘sight’ (Eichhorn 2001) however, is concerned with other details too. It encourages the creation of connections between ideas, practices and objects that are not concretely present in the sites, but instead are ‘placed’ there as an outcome of analysis and interpretations legitimized by the ‘ethnographic imagination’ (Willis, 2000). Furthermore, ethnography privileges multiplicity, variation and the quotidian, and this is expressed in the production and use of heterogeneous empirical material. Ethnography is keenly interested in ‘difference’ and very concerned with the politics and poetics of writing research representations (Richardson 2000). Contemporary ethnography is characterized by a move away from descriptions and analyses of the beliefs of particular ‘cultures’ and instead immerses itself in understanding and providing insights on contemporary phenomena which emerge in a world of blurring boundaries and intense fluidities in which traditional forms of organization, structures and identities are muddled and fall apart (Urry 2003, Ong/Collier 2005). This ‘rescaling’ of ethnography continues to embrace a diverse and rich pool of approaches and concerns that afford the situated exploration of ‘lived experience’. However, contemporary ethnography now offers entries into a post-cultural world to explore non-traditional sites that include organizations of all denominations, concept-metaphors and transnational flows and migrations of peoples and objects (Marcus 2009).

I was granted permission to attend the training course as a researcher participant. The other participants were informed of the reasons for my presence, and accepted that I observed, wrote of and recorded their interactions. My empirical material was generated within the formal sessions of the training course as well as from the informal spaces between, before and after the sessions. Although I had furnished the course organizers with a short description outlining my interest in knowledge asymmetry, I was interestingly introduced as a researcher looking at intercultural communication. This was perhaps more of an indication of their concern than mine.

My fieldwork generated a substantial empirical aggregate that included field notes detailing my observations, reflections and spontaneous thoughts; official course materials; and over 15 hours of audio-recordings of participant interactions. My analysis is presented as six ethnographic vignettes. Vignettes, closely associated with representations of ethnographically produced knowledge, comprise short narratives or compact sketches conveying the interpretation of the writer when viewing people, experiences or situations. Although the vignette makes the complicity of the researcher transparent in the text – and the transparency of the researcher in the construction of knowledge is central to ethnographic method – some readers may be discomforted if they cannot readily distinguish the contours of the fact and the contours of the interpretation.

However, vignettes are not anecdotes, because while anecdotes give a written representation of an event: “a vignette restructures the complex dimensions of its subject for the purpose of capturing, in a brief portrayal, what has been learned over a period of time” (Ely et al. 1997: 70). Vignettes are often understood using other terms such as ‘bricolage’ or ‘montage’ (Denzin/Lincoln 2008) or as an ‘ethnographic story’, which is designed to be ‘agential’ and ‘generative’ beyond the specific historicity of the case (Winthereik/Verran 2012). The vignettes that follow in the next part are not a descriptive report of what happened per se but rather brief portrayals crafted from weaving the multi-layered interpretations and reflections of my observations with statements drawn from taped and transcribed excerpts of participant interaction. My observations had led me to consider how knowledge asymmetry was constantly ‘in action’ and far from static and stable. I had observed how knowledge differences emerged and disappeared as participants summoned, articulated, dismissed, ridiculed, ignored or explored the wide variety of their culture/knowledge differences during the training course. Thus, the selection, ordering and augmentation of statements used in the vignettes were guided by a search for material to support a thematization of my observations. The participants’ statements are anonymized and given in italics.

4. Knowledge asymmetry ‘in action’

This section presents six vignettes to illustrate knowledge asymmetry ‘in action’. Each vignette thematically relates to a form of ‘action’ that allowed knowledge asymmetry to emerge, change, be resisted or disappear. The six actions described in no order of priority are: 1) Accepting and rejecting invitations to demonstrate knowledge asymmetry, 2) Articulating knowledge asymmetry without being invited, 3) Imposing knowledge asymmetry, 4) Exploring knowledge asymmetry, 5) Stopping the exploration of knowledge asymmetry, and 6) Non-exploring knowledge asymmetry.

1: *Accepting and rejecting invitations to demonstrate knowledge asymmetry*

It is as if a switch is flicked. Buzz. Light. Bodily adjustments. Objects brought forth. Attention turn. Focus. Curiosity. Resolve. The moment *de facto* demands it. Knowledge asymmetry is being summoned and beckoned, and called forth into the moment in multiple ways. One of these ways is by a variety of invitations. There are diffuse invitations: “*What do you think?*” or “*Do you have any comments or reflections, or anything to add?*” Some invitations are more concrete: “*Do you know of any ‘indigenous practices’ that could be shared?*” Sometimes, interventions and interruptions are beckoned to secure that the discussion doesn’t hover around the things that everyone already knows: “*But tell me if you have seen all this before... we can skip it quickly – is it still alright?*”

One of the participants is referred to as “*the man in pyjamas*”. This man “*doesn’t get a thing*” and neither “*does he speak English*”. The quizzical looks from some of the participants show that they are trying to figure him out, to locate him, but he’s not giving any helpful clues. Speculations run amok whilst ‘the man in the pyjamas’ remains silent.

When actively invited to demonstrate and share their knowledge, the majority of participants were most often ready and willing. Furthermore, inviting knowledge asymmetry did not occur by words alone. Clapping to welcome people to speak, or gazing upon them with concentration and attention were equally encouraging forms of invitations. However, the sincerity of the invitations was often difficult to judge: was there a genuine desire to elicit and then negotiate the knowledge of others? Although a training course for the purpose of working with different knowledges would warrant this, it appeared to me that invitations were also made for the sake of politeness, the demands and prerogatives of the situation and the roles of the participants, or wanting to do togetherness. Furthermore, just because people invited one another to speak of the things they knew differently did not necessarily lead to the invitation being accepted. Instead, uneasy mantles of silence often descended. And silence becomes deeply problematic in a moment where communication is desirable.

2: *Articulating knowledge asymmetry without being invited*

There are countless instances where speakers show and tell of the things they know, their practices, their positions and their opinions without being prompted: “*In my country, we do it in different way*”, “*I do not agree, because...*”, “*why should we pay for your consumption?*”. They break into the discussion, some put up their hands while others do not care for such procedures. They show and tell in both tentative and assertive tones, sometimes with doubt and hesitation, other times with passionate messianic zeal. Whether one is invited and responds, or whether one remains uninvited and still responds, forms part of a dynamic tapestry of the communication moment.

Knowledge asymmetry also emerged as participants articulated the differences in what they knew and how it could be used irrespective of being invited to do so. The effects of these remarkable forms of showing and telling spread beyond making factual differences in knowledge explicit. These acts also became demonstrations of local knowledge, political statements and commentaries of historical relations between people and nations.

3: *Imposing knowledge asymmetry*

The participants are asked to conduct groupwork that should culminate in a group presentation to be made on the final training day. The two facilitators instruct the participants on the composition and

the tasks of the group. The facilitator has a loud, yet tired, voice, which is irritatingly assertive. Participants are informed that the facilitators have already divided the participants into sub-groups. The facilitators continue to explain their reasons of dividing the participants: *“We made two groups of four members and two groups of five members - we triiiieed to make them based on our understanding of your backgrounds and technical experience and interests and tried to divide out a little in terms of geographical and gender.”* They continue to explain that these reasons for performing division is not up for discussion: *“These groups cannot be changed. If you want – don’t come up and ask us “could I please be in another group” because this is – it’s too difficult for us to change around”.* Immediately, a series of protests storms through the room. All sorts of sounds emerge: *“aaah,huh? Why? Uhm”.* The whiteboard is used to fix the names of group members together, while comical – and disrespectful - mispronunciations of names emerge: *“Group 3 – Mrs. S..., uh – Mrs. M..., Mr. D..., – Mrs. T..., is that correct ? and Mr. N... – or (Mr. H?) whatever it was - you are group 3”.*

This releases a chaotic moment where group members frantically engage in understanding the logic of the division:

Participant: We are 3 – 3 – he’s also a group, you’re also 3 here – 4 – 4 – 4 is there – you don’t go with here... The facilitators drive a wedge through the chaos, urge the participants to move to respective group tables and continue with describing the cases and giving examples to what sort of perspectives the groups could take on biofuels, water management, agriculture, and capacity and responsibility issues. They describe them in turn – but the problem of the group division refuses to disappear and murmurs in the background. It is inserted back into the moment every time there is a pause:

Participant 1: Why didn’t you just specifically say group 1, one, Group 2, two, Group 3,

Facilitator 2: Because you may have different interests

Facilitator 1: So you want us to call you group ABCD

Participant 1: Yeah

Facilitator 1: Fine – Sorry, that was a misunderstanding from our side.

Facilitator 2: Ja

Participant 2: What if all of us...

Participant 3: Completely wrong

Participant 1: You know because

Facilitator 1: Group A

Participant 4: Is for

Facilitator 1: group B – group C and group D – we have four cases. Group ABC – D can choose case 1, if you want – or group ABCD can choose group – uh case 2, if they want – or A can choose case 3 – and B can choose case 4

Participant 1: Now, suppose all of us choose only 1?

Facilitator 2: We first decide to find out which case you would like to have

Participant 4: Everybody

Participant 3: Everyone wants case one, then there’s a big fight

Facilitator 2: That’s ok – that’s up to you

Facilitator 1: We're pretty sure you'll - each group will not make the same case even you choose the same case – you will not make

Participant 1: No it's not ok - you want all the cases discussed – don't you?

Participant 2: Not necessarily

Facilitator 1: It won't be an issue

Facilitator 2: It won't be an issue – you will sit on Monday and each group decides which case you want to work with – and you decide which question. I will bet a lot of money that none of you all the groups will not choose biofuels question 1 and 2. If you do I'll have to buy you cake, I guess... It is not about – this is not about finding the right answer, this is very important – we are not qualifying this as end result. This is about you trying to approach the subject – finding own information, discussing, using your own cases so you can transfer it back – you can discuss in between – maybe there's – liaison between Sri Lanka and Bangladesh – where you can say – oh we did this here, we did this here – maybe you can combine it – huh – so we're not testing you on this at all. So whatever you choose – it's up to you – it's up to you in each group to define.....”

Participant 1: It's ok – we have understood

Facilitator 2: Ok – we continue

Facilitator 2: Ssh! Now you'll get the water case.

In this moment of groupwork, knowledge asymmetry was summoned by imposition. It appeared that the core issue for the facilitators focused on the group members finding and discussing information on a particular topic in the group constellations that they had thought best suited to achieve this. For the participants, this issue had been secondary. They too, wanted to find information and discuss it, and co-produce new understandings, but they objected to the way the facilitators had already determined whose knowledges and experiences fitted together. They resisted to this method of division, but finally agreed to it. The statement “we have understood” was delivered with a distinct unimpressed glare; with a look of disempowerment and annoyance.

4: Exploring knowledge asymmetry

The ways participants and facilitators explore emerging knowledge asymmetry is visible in a number of explicit modes of verbal communication (describing, ordering, explaining, questioning, examining, and imagining). They zigzag across planes of experience, landscapes of local knowledge and statements of propositional knowledge. A world of gestures appears as the explorations of asymmetry occur: there are acts of note-taking, scribbling, staring in concentration, mouthing, yawning, tightening lips, sighing, fingertips touching keyboard keys, repeating, smiling, and knitting eyebrows.

Building nests within nests, exploring knowledge asymmetry constantly deviate from the scientific:

“The third approach is a little philosophic we can say... Taking on board the various stakeholder interests – reshaping the planning processes ... recognizing water quality and quantity linkages, exploring conjunctive views of surface and groundwater – and protecting and restoring natural systems. IWRM (integrated water resource management) can ensure inclusive decision-making and resolving conflicts between competing water users and therefore – can be a good tool to facilitate adaptation in the water sector.”

The methods of the training course were explicitly formulated as requiring the active involvement of participants to create variations and synergies. This involvement, demonstrated in bodily actions, showed how the participants engaged in processes of building layer upon layer in their understandings of climate change. In these ways, asymmetric knowledges were accepted and inspected, and they were felt and related to. If we could have heard intellectual labour working as individuals made sense and absorbed the novel linkages and insights that were being collectively generated, the sound would have be deafening. These forms of knowledge asymmetry explorati-

on, accompanied by a world of gestures, were especially vivid when the scientific was combined with the cultural and social.

5: Stopping the exploration of knowledge asymmetry

A practical exercise to link food consumption and CO2 emissions is conducted. Food – a prominent transcultural object – appears to be a reasonable and universal common ground knowledge entry point. *Facilitator: At least in Western Europe and the US, about 30% of our emission of green house gases comes from producing, consuming, throwing away the food that we eat. So food, food production, food consumption is an important issue. I have not found any international websites where you can calculate emissions that are caused by your meal, but I've added one Danish one just to show it, and it's actually almost done without words. So just try to look into a meal. The meal yesterday is a bit complicated because it was really a lot of different things – but I can try to calculate a meal I know that the people from Sri Lanka have prepared... so what are we having... In terms of food, are we ... would there be rice?"*

Many participants: Yeah

The cursor is moved and the pictures begin changing on the screen. Efforts have gone into removing potential language barriers by identifying websites that can be navigated “almost ... without words”. “Rice” is chosen and laughter emerges.

Facilitator: There would be rice – ok – so down here I will find some rice – here's a pile of rice (Moving the cursor) One portion... Anything else?

Many persons: Potato, potatoes

Participant 1: Potato, potatoes as well. OK, that sounds very good. OK, these are the potatoes.

Participant 2: Sausages (laughter from the group)

Participant 1: Sausage, Sausage? Made from what kind of meat?

Participant 3: Beef

Participant 4: No, pork (extended giggles)

At this point the extended giggles bring a sense of disturbance into the room. Histories of the symbolic construction of well-known cultural divisions of Muslims and non-Muslims, and the rivalries attached to this distinction fleetingly emerge. They are swept out of the way... for the time being.

Participant 1: Let's see, I suppose there that's a sausage there

Participant 4: Is there anything cheapest, (?) available in the market? (laughter)

Is it a classroom exercise or is it real? If calculations of CO2 emissions are to be made, then the issue of seasonal foods and availability in the market needs to enter the palette of consideration. This bringing back of attention to small details becomes important. But this too is swept out of the way.

Participant 1: Ok, so this is pork meat, even though it hasn't been turned into sausages

The tool has limitations, and cannot deal with the differences of pork. The machine doesn't care for the differences in pork chops, pork sausages, pork cutlets, pork bits and pork fat – it works best with singular representations.

Participant 4: And, uhm, something else, onion...

Participant 2: How about (similus..) our indigenous food, we call it (tim...), you know with the onion, garlic, then, we mean that everything is included...

Participant 1: Ok, let's see

There are cognitive efforts accompanied by rapid cursor movements searching for the right icons to click being made to deal with this indigenous food. Help is offered to align things again:

Participant 2: Say chutney? You say chutney, no?

Participant 4: Yeah, chutney

Participant 2: We call it (isimilsambal?), but you can call it chutney

Chutney rings a bell and the flow continues again:

Participant 1: It contains onions?

Many persons: Yeah

Participant 1: Ok. But let's see this

Participant 4: Ok, that's enough

Participant 1: Let's see this wheel, you can see this here was rising, it hasn't got red yet

Carbon emissions are calculated by ignoring the mess that the pork sausages and (*isimilsambal?*) caused. Chutney was not available, and it becomes “enough”, and instead – almost as an act of appeasement – an onion is dragged in as an act of equivalence. Whilst the garlic is ignored. But there is more.

5th person: Hot pickles

1st person: Hot pickles, yeah, these small things are not – uh – I can't find them here

The hot pickles were simply dropped; the exercise had veered into realms of complication, and as “small things” perhaps into realms of irrelevancy. People wanted to connect – but connection was elusive. There were too many things to connect to. But the perils of simplification and the removal of irregularities dismissed details, which held the potential of knowledge co-production.

6: Non-exploring knowledge asymmetry

A discussion forms around the mapping of areas at risk of climate change impacts. A person explains that according to their professional mapping practices, these maps are termed as “*hazard maps*”, as opposed to another person terming them as “*risk maps*”. Although such a brief intervention holds the potential for the exploration of differences and the co-production of further layers of understanding maps, an equally brief statement that describes the hazard map as “*not really detailed*”.

Participants ignore each other by falling asleep, especially after lunchtime that seems to summon a heaviness and feeling of disengagement. A switching off of concentration is also evident when a single person captures and monopolizes the interaction for a long period of time as their voice transforms itself from a staccato of knowledge items and sentences to a constant background hum only scantily registered. Having access to the Internet distracts some participants, and websites detailing carbon footprints are abandoned for Google and Yahoo. In the middle of an extremely long monologue, there is an eruption of Indian movie music.

The person breaks out into deep laughter, her words located at the nexus of surprise, disbelief and ridicule. It is a long story that she heard from someone else. Now she's telling me. It's a classic case of Chinese whispers. She tells me that there is a person amongst us who is distraught at the changes he has observed in the colour of his skin. It's turned patchy and dark. He thinks it's because of all the chalk in the water here. His explanation is overwhelmingly ridiculous to her. What sort of ridiculous knowledge is this?

The non-exploration of knowledge asymmetry took many forms such as dismissing, ignoring and ridiculing. Dismissing the hazard map stopped the potential of exploration, the knowledge of lo-

calized terminologies, or fine nuances in the contents of such maps. It failed to acknowledge the knowledge the other had of these maps. Knowledge asymmetry was often ignored or ridiculed, often when there seemed little space for knowledge absorption, knowledge retention, knowledge flight, knowledge resistance or knowledge denial. The sort of ignoring referred to in the vignette was probably different from active dismissals and instead connected to the notion of information overload or total disbelief.

5. Concluding discussion

The vignettes given in the previous section attempt to capture how the intercultural interactions of professionals do not follow clear lines with starts and stops: they are complex, layered and irregular. Conceptualizing culture as knowledge, the vignettes show how knowledge asymmetry is far from a static and stable condition present in interactive encounters such as the training course that aspired to promote learning, understanding, consensus, enlightenment, empowerment and decision-making. Instead, the vignettes show how knowledge asymmetry was constantly ‘in action’. It emerged and disappeared as participants summoned, articulated, dismissed, ridiculed, ignored or explored the rich pools of their culture/knowledge differences during the training sessions. These actions did not follow one another in strict sequences, and instead happened together continuously.

When knowledge asymmetry was actively elicited and called forth by invitation as shown in vignette 1, invitations were often accepted. However, the active elicitation of knowledge asymmetry did not necessarily lead to its appearance – but neither should we take for granted that knowledge invisibility is equated to an absence of knowledge. The lack of English proficiency may have greatly accounted for the silence in the case of the man in pyjamas, or it may have accounted for the fact that he “doesn’t get a thing”. In such cases, traditional ‘cultural’ explanations surfaced, his clothing providing ample explanation for him not to speak English – and not knowing the things that can only be known through having a proficient command of English. Access to specific languages of power such as English play a significant role in maintaining an ‘uneven world’ (Pennycook 2010), and this becomes a decisive factor in demonstrating and negotiating knowledge asymmetry.

Brief interludes of dialogic moments, accompanied by a world of gestures, transpired when knowledge asymmetry was actively explored, accepted and inspected, and where differences were felt and related to. Participants entered the interaction when they recognized the distances between their different types of culture/knowledge as being connectable. However, such an entrance required a topic that was familiar – a form of ‘common ground’ knowledge, such as ‘rice’ (vignette 5). The explorations of asymmetry intensified when the scientific topic became entangled with cultural and social meanings (vignette 4). During those moments, the exploration of and dwelling upon knowledge asymmetry bore fruit: dialogic moments emerged. Cissna and Andersen (1998: 74, quoted in Black 2008: 98) describe such moments eloquently:

The basic character of such a dialogic moment, therefore, is the experience of inventive surprise shared by the dialogic partners as each “turns toward” the other and both mutually perceive the impact of each other’s turning. It is a brief interlude of focused awareness and acceptance of otherness and difference that somehow simultaneously transcends the perception of difference itself.

When this occurred, knowledge asymmetry became constructive deep reservoirs for gaining insight and understandings of different cultural modes of thought and practice, which could perhaps become relevant and useful in other contexts.

However, vignette 5 also exemplifies the risks associated with the exploration of differences. Exploration stopped abruptly when food consumption and CO₂ emissions were connected. The facilitator chose a simple meal to explore the connection in a simplified way, perhaps for fear that complicated meals would stand in the way of efficient explanation. However, complexity refused to go away and “*small things*” continued to interfere in the discussion compelling the facilitator

to abruptly stop all exploration as it veered into realms of insignificance. In such moments, knowledge asymmetry became disturbing and detrimental to the objectives of the training course because it lacked a meaningful direction.

Similarly, at the moment of knowledge asymmetry imposition (vignette 3) when participants were forcefully divided – despite their protests – into groups according to their “backgrounds and technical experience and interests and... a little in terms of geographical and gender”, the facilitators stood firmly by their positions, not allowing participants’ understanding of their knowledge differences to interfere with the formal goals and objectives of the training course that were closely tied up with the demands of specific funding agencies. The facilitators explained that the topics chosen were not only limited to the knowledge and experience of the participants because the goals of the course demanded a holistic understanding the complex issue of climate change, and because of organizational expectations: “*we have some – goals you can say – some agreements that we have made this course based on – and in terms of [name of funding agency], and in terms of overall [no subject follows]... – and that’s why we have decided to do it like this.*”

Although the explanation appeared fairly vague, the terms were accepted because the participants were as knowledgeable about organizational prerogatives regarding time schedules, goals, funding and relevance as the facilitators were.

Knowledge differences also emerged as political statements and commentaries of historical relations (vignette 2), and many of these statements served to assemble, shift and sort people into monolithic categories as the interaction continued. As they learned more about each other, as they chased cues and clues about what the others knew (or did not), some cultural stereotypes were challenged and some were reinforced. One of the facilitators presented their logic of dividing participants into four categories in the following way: 1) *those who can’t and are passive*, 2) *the good ones, they demonstrate what they know*, 3) *those who disturb the process, they interfere, and are a nuisance* and 4) *those who are lazy*. Those who were uninvited to speak, but still did so offering ideological insights and political positions, often fell into category three.

It comes as no surprise that specific contexts privilege specific forms of knowing. The discussion above illustrates how the context of a training course on climate change would privilege science-centric forms of knowledge, which emerge from modernity. Throughout the course, knowledge asymmetry was appreciated and valued – unless it clashed with the arguments given by science. Thus, those participants who were unable to contribute with such an angle were often measured in terms of old hierarchies of culture/knowledge that continue to structure intercultural relationships: they became the ‘unknowing’ or *those who can’t and are passive*. The dismissing, ignoring and ridiculing of certain knowledges (vignette 6), and the equating of silence and non-interaction of some participants as an indication of the absence of knowledge, made the training course far from culturally neutral. Although participants and facilitators were keen to veer away from using ‘root’ definitions of culture (Clifford 1997) by recognizing that the asymmetry amongst them was more complex and layered by different experiential and professional culture/knowledge domains, they continued to wrestle with old dichotomies of ‘us and them’ such as in the case of the beef and pork sausages that recalled the antagonism between Hindu and Muslim cultural practices, or the hesitant acceptance of their group divisions, which they did not care much for, or the hot pickles that had to be dropped as an irregular example because it could not fit into a scientific calculation instrument.

Instances of the intercultural interaction of professionals are not tabula rasa; participants carry their culture/knowledge histories, logics, connections and hierarchies into them. They carry their recognitions of knowledge asymmetry into them. But this does not mean that these recognitions remain static within and after the interaction. Instead, knowledge asymmetry - constantly ‘in action’ – becomes the promoter of learning, empowerment and understanding for some participants, while becoming the keeper of well-established and accepted culture/knowledge differences for others.

6. References

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