

Three Types of Boundary Spanning Managers in Multinational Companies: A Classification Taking Constructive Intercultural Management into Account

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Abstract

Multinational companies (MNCs) face the challenge of overcoming cultural, language, and organizational boundaries to ensure effective communication, cooperation and coordination.

Boundary spanning managers (BSMs) play a key role in this process, acting as mediators between parent and subsidiary companies and facilitating the exchange of knowledge, the integration of organizational processes, and the constructive handling of intercultural tensions. Building on the *Constructive Intercultural Management* (CIM) approach and the three-level model, we develop a typology of three BSMs: the classic assigned expatriate (CAE), the hybrid manager (HM), and the third-country national (TCN).

The CAE is primarily focused on knowledge transfer and control but often exhibits cultural distance from the host country. The HM combines global strategic perspectives with local integration and possesses high intercultural skills, which make him a bridge builder between systems. Finally, the TCN brings in a “third perspective” that enables neutrality and flexibility but can also be associated with issues of loyalty and acceptance.

By comparing these three types in terms of the four central boundary-spanning functions – exchanging, linking, facilitating and intervening – as well as CIM, it is worth noting that HMs excel at leveraging cultural differences constructively and fostering synergies within international organizations. Connecting the types with the structural and processual concepts of the “stranger”, this article underscores the special role of BSMs as intercultural interfaces. It thus contributes to the further development of boundary spanning research by showing how different types of managers can be strategically deployed in international human resource management to promote intercultural complementarity and organizational innovation.

Keywords:

boundary spanning, constructive intercultural management, expatriates, hybrid managers, third-country nationals, foreignness, multinational companies

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1. Conceptual framework:

Constructive intercultural management and the three-level model

As key players in a globalized world economy, multinational companies (MNCs) are constantly confronted with the opportunities and risks of global mobility and being interconnected worldwide (Buckley et al., 2022; Geppert & Mayer, 2006; Heidenreich et al., 2012; Mayrhofer 2013). It is in this context of increasing internationalization, that the importance of international subsidiaries with a high degree of international business activities as well as the proportion of capital and management services provided abroad also increase. In turn, this results in a higher integration of the company into the respective social and institutional contexts (Barmeyer et al., 2021; Schlunze et al., 2014). Naturally, this is accompanied by a loss of control on the part of the parent company. More internationalization therefore also implies chances and risks, above all the dilemma between local adaptation requirements and the MNU's central coordination requirements. This conflict of interest has long been discussed in the global versus local debate (Sorge, 2005).

In this context managers at intersections play a particularly important key role. Interfaces arise in companies when there are interdependencies between organizational units, each with their own decision-making powers, resulting in a need for mutual coordination. The central function of creating links at interfaces or bridging various boundaries, as is often done by actors in intersection areas is referred to as *boundary spanning* (Aldrich & Herker, 1977; Schotter, 2021). Research uses the term of *boundary spanning* and *boundary bridging* in relation to the activities of actors who operate in and between multiple intra-organizational fields and social networks – and thus different institutional logics – and who demonstrate a keen awareness of the development of alternative solutions (Barmeyer et al., 2020).

To unlock this potential for cross-border communication, cooperation and coordination

multinational companies often employ expatriates (Au & Fukuda, 2002; Yang et al., 2022), also to establish a uniform strategy (Meyer et al., 2020). Ideally, expatriates have cultural and language skills (Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2014) and explicit and implicit knowledge that they can transfer between different areas (Bonache & Brewster, 2001; Harzing et al., 2016).

For this article's examination of the functions of boundary spanning managers (BSM) in multinational companies, intercultural management forms the basis. We rely primarily on constructive intercultural management (CIM), which is an approach that views research and practice in intercultural management from a resource-oriented perspective (Barmeyer, 2024): cultural differences are recognized, but not viewed one-sidedly as a problem and weakness; rather, they are constructively understood as a potential enrichment and strength for work processes and organizations in which those involved learn from their differences and, in the best case, combine them in a complementary way (Barmeyer & Franklin, 2016; Stahl & Tung, 2015).

CIM is based, among other things, on positive psychology, a marginalized field of research within social psychology that deals with the positive aspects of human life and assumes that people have a variety of resources at their disposal that they can use constructively and creatively (Seligman, 1998): "The field of positive psychology at the subjective level is about valued subjective experiences: well-being, contentment, and satisfaction (in the past); hope and optimism (for the future); and flow and happiness (in the present)." (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, 5). In this sense, it is assumed that cultural differences can have an enriching and complementary effect, leading, for example, to the joint negotiation of management and organizational practices, as demonstrated by a few empirical studies in multinational companies (Barmeyer & Mayrhofer, 2008; Barmeyer & Davoine, 2019; Brannen, 1998; Schlunze, 2012). This assumption is the central idea of this article. Concepts such as dilemma theory (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 2010), paradox theory (Smith & Lewis, 2011), intercultural complementarity (Barmeyer & Franklin, 2016), and intercultural synergy (Adler, 1980) are central approaches to understanding the complex, dynamic intercultural dynamics and giving them a constructive direction.

Of course, recording and analyzing problematic intercultural interaction situations is helpful to better understand the underlying divergent value systems that shape meaning and guide action, and thus to find cultural explanations for misunderstood behavior (Barmeyer & Franklin, 2016). However, this is only the *first* step of understanding analysis. This step seems to be particularly necessary in practice to enable changes in attitude and processes of

understanding to find new solutions. For the second step, however, the focus should then be on constructive design through cultural differences (Table 1). How can cultural differences be combined so that they have a positive effect on actors and organizations? Specifically for boundary spanning managers, this means how they can act effectively and interculturally competently at the interface between parent and subsidiary companies.

Tab. 1: From intercultural conflicts to intercultural complementarity (Barmeyer, 2020, p.41)

	1. Intercultural conflict	2. Intercultural complementarity
Assumption	Cultural differences as a challenge	Cultural differences as a complement
Aim	Analysis for understanding	Constructive handling
Focus	Addressing problem	Generating solutions

CIM is particularly suitable as an approach for the topic of boundary spanning discussed here, as it allows managers to consciously bring the strengths of the respective intersections into the organizational process between the headquarters and the subsidiary in a synergistic manner. Here, the fundamental question arises whether the cultural solution patterns of the managers involved are effective in the context of intercultural interactions or whether they need to be adapted to achieve the desired goals. Knowledge of cultural logics and modes of operation as a central – cognitive – component of intercultural competence contributes to more constructive cooperation (Barmeyer & Franklin, 2016; Stahl & Brannen, 2013). The central concern of constructive intercultural management is thus to (1) describe intercultural relationships in organizations in a value-free manner and (2) analyze them with the help of expert knowledge to (3) consciously shape them in a constructive way (Barmeyer et al., 2021). In this sense, the focus is on – intercultural – communication and interaction processes and their effect on the interaction partners. A central basis for CIM is a comprehensive knowledge of “culture” in general, i.e., the significance of values, norms, and behaviors in a historical and social context (Hall, 1981; Hofstede et al., 2010; Schlunze et al., 2014; Schlunze, 2021).

To contextualize the functions of boundary spanning managers, we use the systemic three-level model of CIM (Barmeyer et al., 2021). The three-level model assumes that actors – in this case, boundary spanning managers – and their actions are embedded in a complex social system. Although this system does not determine their actions, the actors cannot completely detach themselves from it. The macro level of society, in which individuals have been socialized, shapes and influences the meso level of organizations and the micro level of

individuals. At the same time, cultures and cultural identities can have a pluralistic effect on behavior in the workplace. Individuals can have multiple identities, for example, to a region, a profession, or a generation. Therefore, the micro, meso, and macro levels influence each other. They are systemically connected and intertwined. The three-level model (Table 2) defines the level of analysis when examining culture and highlights the interdependence of actors, organizations, and societies. In addition, it considers intercultural interactions at these three levels.

Tab. 2: Three-level model involving constructive interculturality (adapted from Barmeyer et al., 2021, p.54)

Level	Topics	Constructive interculturality
<i>Micro level: actors</i>	Communication and cooperation Leadership and management Identity Language	Personal development, satisfaction and fulfilment Appreciation of interculturality <i>Boundary spanning</i> and cultural mediation for constructive communication and exchange
<i>Meso level: organizations</i>	Organizational structures and cultures	Achievement of objectives, performance and value creation Community and identity building with professional fulfilment Creation of bicultural (leadership) dyads and cross-functional, intercultural teams
<i>Macro level: societies</i>	Social, political, economic and cultural institutions	Harmonious peaceful coexistence and mastering social challenges through institutional stability and cultural complementarity

The three-level model is also suitable for positioning managers at intersections in their respective contexts: At the micro level, it is their personality and intercultural and language skills that they apply at the meso level of the organization—usually for the foreign subsidiary. The subsidiary, in turn, is embedded in the institutional and cultural context of the host country at the macro level.

2. Boundary spanning in multinational companies

For some time now, the term “boundary spanner” has become established for the important interface work of communication and coordination performed by managers in multinational companies, encompassing various activities, functions, and roles (Mäkelä et al., 2019; Schotter et al., 2017): “Boundary spanners, go-betweens, interfacers: they are the people who establish

and maintain such organizational linkages. [...] The boundary spanner cuts across functional, geographic, and external boundaries to move ideas, information, decisions, talent, and resources where they are most needed” (Beechler et al., 2006, p.122).

In general, boundary spanning in multinational companies refers to the activity of overcoming and connecting boundaries—whether geographical, functional, language, or cultural—to enable the flow of information and knowledge within the multinational company and between the company and its environment (Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2014; Liu et al., 2025. (Table 3). These activities concern both intra-organizational (e.g., between departments such as human resources or production, or between parent and subsidiary companies) and inter-organizational (e.g., between customers or suppliers and the organization) interactions (Aldrich & Herker, 1977):

Geographic boundary spanning refers to activities in which boundary spanners bridge temporal, physical, and location-related distances between business units (Asakawa et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2022). This includes the coordination and integration of globally distributed activities, the transfer of location-specific knowledge, and the establishment of cross-location networks to ensure knowledge exchange and organizational coherence despite physical separation.

Functional boundary spanning uses domain-specific knowledge and expertise to transfer subject-specific knowledge and core competencies between units, close knowledge gaps, and standardize management practices (Harzing et al., 2016; Davoine et al., 2019).

Language: Boundary spanning aims to address language-related issues beyond the functional realm (Harzing & Pudelko, 2014). This includes not only literal translation, semantics, or communication styles, but also language as an important means of conveying explicit and implicit knowledge (Welch & Welch, 2008).

Cultural boundary spanning encompasses activities in which the intercultural knowledge and understanding of interface actors is used to overcome cultural differences and establish connections between parent and subsidiary companies and the local environment (Barmeyer et al., 2021; Backmann et al., 2020).

Tab. 3: Boundaries and boundary-spanning functions (Asakawa et al., 2018; Barmeyer & Eberhardt, 2017; Liu et al., 2025)

Boundaries	Context	Boundary spanners ...
Geographical: Distances, contexts, institutions	Subsidiaries in different countries exchange information, knowledge, and other resources.	... translate between different markets, institutions, and environments.
Functional: Strategies, structures, processes	Knowledge silos often exist between departments, headquarters, and local subsidiaries.	... transfer specialist knowledge and reduce barriers to promote innovation and coordination.
Language: Meanings, sense, interpretation	Different languages in different locations make cooperation difficult.	... provide language translations and build trust through a common language
Cultural: Values, identities, work practices	Different languages, norms, and values in different locations make collaboration difficult.	... mediate between different cultural systems and create mutual understanding

Boundary spanning functions

Research on boundary spanning in MNEs shows that bridging the geographical, functional, language, and cultural boundaries described above is crucial for multinational companies. Barner-Rasmussen and colleagues (2014, p.888) describe four basic boundary-spanning functions, which can be performed by individuals with varying degrees of intensity (Table 4).

Tab. 4: Based on Barner-Rasmussen et al. (2014, p.893)

Functions	Exchanging	Personal engagement in the exchange of information, knowledge and other resources with actors across units and organizations
	Linking	Utilization of personal networks to enable other, previously unconnected actors to connect across unit and organizational boundaries
	Facilitating	Personal engagement in facilitating and assisting others' cross-boundary transactions
	Intervening	Personal active intervention in inter-unit and inter-organizational interactions to create positive outcomes

Exchanging: This role is particularly often performed by expatriates or repatriates. The exchange of information can take place at a formal level, for example in official meetings, or at an informal level, facilitated by the social network of a boundary spanner (Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2014).

Linking: Boundary spanners in MNEs can, for example, build bridges between individual internal groups and divisions within a company. These can serve as the foundation for future collaboration (Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2014).

Facilitating: Boundary spanners act as mediators between different groups: they gather

information, analyze and interpret it for the recipient group, and pass on the message, including latent narratives. Barner-Rasmussen and colleagues (2014) show that language skills and cultural knowledge are particularly important for this function.

Intervening: Boundary spanners can actively intervene in interactions between two groups and positively influence the outcome. In doing so, they resolve misunderstandings and mediate in conflicts. In addition, boundary spanners can have a coordinating and protective effect on interactions. This intervening function can be used between individuals or groups, divisions, or national cultures when boundary spanners exploit their outsider position and take a meta-position to find unconventional solutions. For example, they can act as representatives of headquarters or the branch office (Barmeyer et al., 2020).

3. Three types of boundary spanning managers: expatriate, hybrid manager, third-country manager

The high degree of complexity within multinational companies places a wide variety of demands on the players involved. The general strategic orientation of the headquarters is often directly reflected in the staffing strategy and thus in the personnel structure of its subsidiaries (Dowling et al., 2013). Generally, international human resources management has three options for filling positions for communication and coordination between parent and subsidiary companies: The first option is to send domestic employees, known as expatriates or *parent-country nationals* (PCN), to the foreign company. Alternatively, local personnel can be recruited at the foreign location, known as *host-country nationals* (HCN). A third option is to hire third-culture managers, or *third-country nationals* (TCNs), i.e., experts or managers who do not come from the country of either the headquarters or the subsidiary (Zeira & Harari, 1977). Naturally, every strategy has advantages and disadvantages as well as opportunities and risks – but what is undisputed is the high degree of intercultural complexity and dynamism that this creates in international subsidiaries.

To differentiate between the above-mentioned boundary-spanning functions, we distinguish between three types of boundary-spanning managers: the classic expatriate, the hybrid manager, and the third-country manager. Since the classic expatriate is widely known and researched, we will focus primarily on the other two types, the hybrid manager and the third-country manager.

The *classic assigned expatriate (CAE)* is a typical expatriate (Peltokorpi & Jintae Froese, 2009; Wang et al., 2022): he or she is a manager who is sent abroad by his or her home organization (headquarters) for a specific period – usually two to five years – to take on a strategic task there. Usual for this type of manager is the temporary assignment. The employment contract normally remains with the home company, the compensation package includes expatriate allowances (for housing, schooling, home travel, and foreign assignment allowance), and the return to the home organization is planned (repatriation). As part of their role, these managers essentially take on tasks of knowledge transfer, control, and building structures in the host country.

The second type is the *hybrid manager (HM)*. In Schlunze's research (2016; 2021), this term is used specifically for managers in Japan who are characterized by a special combination of cultural adaptation, local networking, and global management skills: They can integrate into Japanese work culture without losing their global perspective and performance orientation. Combining strategic thinking and global corporate strategies with local expertise and networks, they can act both strategically within the organization (between headquarters and subsidiary) as well as interculturally competently in the context of the host country. To achieve this combination of internationally oriented and culturally sensitive management approaches hybrid managers, are characterized by a high level of intercultural competence and flexibility. Unlike CAEs, the assignment is often not a classic one with the intention of returning but rather a longer-term or permanent international career. This allows for the establishment of a long-term global orientation. Further, these individuals no longer have clear ties to their home country but identify with both the home and host cultures ("hybridization"), and are adaptive, which lays the foundation for them to mediate between cultures. In contrast to (CAEs), who are often considered "culturally disconnected," the hybrid manager combines local and global management practices, thus creating synergies in the intercultural work environment. Their role is essentially intercultural mediation and global integration.

Schlunze (2016, pp.182-183) identifies key criteria that characterize a hybrid manager, such as:

- 1) *Language proficiency*: Hybrid managers are proficient in Japanese at least to the extent that they can communicate effectively with local employees and partners. This enables them to better understand the nuances of Japanese culture and working practices and avoid misunderstandings.

2) *Culturally savvy advisor or supporter*: Hybrid managers have a culturally savvy advisor or supporter (e.g., a Japanese colleague or mentor) who provides them with high-quality information and advice and gives them access to local knowledge. This supporter helps them avoid cultural pitfalls and build local networks.

3) *Active involvement in decision-making processes*: Hybrid managers are actively involved in the decision-making processes of the Japanese subsidiary. They do not just work “from above” according to global guidelines but proactively help shape local processes and implement global strategies in a way that fits the Japanese work culture.

Through their willingness to learn and adapt, hybrid managers can find their way in different cultural environments. By combining different cultural perspectives, hybrid managers can promote innovation and create an environment that stimulates creativity and collaboration.

The *third-country national (TCN)* is another type of boundary-spanning manager (Barmeyer et al., 2020; Reynolds, 1997; Zeira & Harari, 1977). This is a manager who comes from a *third* country (neither the home country nor the host country) and is employed in an international subsidiary (for example, a Japanese manager working for a German company in Brazil). TCNs are therefore neither an assignment from headquarters nor a “classic” repatriation. A TCN can have different statuses, for example as an expatriate (1) or self-initiated expatriate (2) or even as a migrant (3) in the country of the subsidiary. Even though TCNs are sometimes only hired by multinational companies because their nationality brings certain advantages for the company in terms of lower wages or freedom of movement in certain countries (Okuh, 2011), TCNs are gaining in importance because their multiple cultural roots enable them to contribute special skills in intercultural intersection functions. Thus, they are often employed as managers worldwide. However, they also face numerous challenges that arise primarily from the specific tri-cultural configuration. This is important because, in line with Mäkelä et al. (2019) and their study on boundary spanners, we believe that TCNs in management positions have a higher degree of freedom and decision-making power than regular employees and can therefore exert greater influence.

Barmeyer, Stein, and Eberhardt (2020) examine the role of TCNs in multinational companies (MNCs) and their potential as “intercultural border crossers” and show that TCNs have specific advantages over parent-country nationals (PCNs) and host-country nationals (HCNs). On the one hand, their “neutral” background means they are considered less biased, making it

easier for them to gain the trust and acceptance of local workforces. On the other hand, they often have hybrid cultural identities, intercultural sensitivity, and multilingual skills. This enables them to overcome communication barriers and bridge different mentalities. This way, they contribute significantly to knowledge transfer, conflict resolution, and the promotion of collective learning in global teams.

A key finding of the empirical study is that TCNs themselves often hardly reflect on their role as boundary spanners but have acquired their skills through biographical experiences and professional mobility. On this basis, the authors develop a theoretical model with four role profiles: (1) “Disembedded Cosmopolitans,” who are characterized by openness and flexibility, (2) “Intermediaries,” who bridge language and cultural boundaries, (3) “Third Parties,” who contribute to conflict resolution through neutrality and mediation, and (4) “Team-Related Boundary Spanners,” who promote collective learning and cooperation. Overall, the authors argue that TCNs can take on valuable mediating roles in MNEs due to their special position between headquarters and subsidiaries and their multiple cultural identities. They not only contribute to reducing conflicts and misunderstandings, but also to the development of innovative and synergistic forms of cooperation. They thus represent a strategic potential for companies that has often been underestimated in the past.

Table 5 below summarizes the key characteristics of the three boundary spanning managers based on the literature:

Tab. 5: Three types of boundary spanning managers

Criterion	Classical expatriate (CAE)	Hybrid manager (HM)	Third-Country National (TCN)
Cultural orientation	Home country dominates, return planned	Hybridized, highly adaptable	Third-country perspective, neutral mediator
Role in the company	Implementation of global guidelines, often hierarchical, knowledge transfer, control, development	Active participation in local decision-making processes, bridge builder, intercultural mediation, global integration	Mediation, know-how transfer, conflict resolution between headquarters and branch office. Neutral intercultural
Language skills	Often only the language of the headquarters and English	Fluent in the local language (e.g., Japanese) and the language of the parent company.	Multilingual, often with knowledge of the local language and the language of the parent company.
Cultural adaptation	Less adaptation, often “cultural distance” to the host country	High adaptation to local values (e.g., collectivism), but retains a global perspective.	High adaptability, uses cultural diversity as a bridge between headquarters and branch office.
Building networks	Prefers contact with other expatriates or global colleagues	Strong local networks (Japanese colleagues, friends), but also global contacts.	Uses local and global networks, acts as a mediator between cultures.
Challenges	- Cultural distance to the host country - Low local acceptance	- High effort required for cultural integration - Role conflict between local and global expectations: “dual loyalty”	- Outsider status as a “stranger” can lead to insecurity - Loyalty conflicts between headquarters and subsidiary

In the following we comparatively categorize the three types into the reference frameworks presented: first, the three-level model according to Barmeyer et al. (2021), then the functions of boundary spanners according to Barner-Rasmussen et al. (2014), and finally into the field of constructive intercultural management.

At the micro level of the individual, the *classic assigned expatriate* (CAE) assumes the role of “cultural representative” of the home organization. A personal challenge is adapting to life abroad while maintaining strong ties to the home culture. At the meso level of the organization, they ensure anchoring in strategy, knowledge transfer, and control. In doing so, they are strongly connected to the headquarters in organizational terms. At the macro level (society),

they can bridge cultural differences. However, the strong introduction of the home culture into the host society can lead to potential tensions.

At the micro level, *hybrid managers* (HM) contribute their strong intercultural competence and identity and attempt to integrate both cultures (“hybridity”). This way, they act as a bridge builder. At the meso level, the ability to connect different logics in organizations is used. This can promote global cooperation, innovation, and synergies in multicultural teams. At the macro level, they can act as mediators between societies, promoting cultural dialogue and reducing tensions.

At the micro level, *third-country nationals* (TCNs) demonstrate career-oriented international mobility, which is often pragmatically motivated (e.g., better opportunities, cost factors). This develops into a strong, personal, flexible identity, which however is not necessarily hybrid. At the meso level, they can be a strategic human resources tool, as they not only save costs but are also often used as a source of expertise between HQ and subsidiaries and take on a neutral mediating role. At the macro level, TCNs are an example of the globalization of the labor market and strengthen transnational interdependence beyond the classic home/host country logic. Table 6 provides a summary.

Tab. 6: Boundary spanning managers in the three-level model

Level	Classic Assigned Expatriate (CAE)	Hybrid Manager (HM)	Third-Country National (TCN)
Micro level (individual)	Representative of home organization; temporary experience abroad; return planned	Hybrid identity; high intercultural competence; “bridge builder” between cultures	International mobility, pragmatically motivated; flexible but not necessarily hybrid identity
Meso level (organization)	Instrument for control, knowledge transfer, and strategy anchoring; close ties to HQ	Promotes global cooperation, innovation, and integration in multicultural teams	Strategic HR tool: cost savings, know-how, neutral mediator role
Macro level (society)	Transfer of home culture to host society; potential tensions	Promotes cultural dialogue and social integration	Reflection of globalized labor markets; transnational interdependence beyond home/host country logic

Now that we have classified boundary spanning managers in the three-level model by Barmeyer

et al. (2021), we can position them in relation to the four boundary spanning functions according to Barner-Rasmussen et al. (2014, p.893): exchanging, linking, facilitating, and intervening.

Table 7 below shows how the three types fulfill these functions.

Tab 7: Boundary spanning functions

Boundary spanning function	Classic Assigned Expatriate (CAE)	Hybrid Manager (HM)	Third-Country National (TCN)
Exchanging (exchange of information, knowledge, resources)	Limited: • One-sided, formal exchange • Less local networking Ex: Guideline implementation without local adaptation	Active: • Mutual, nuanced exchange • local language skills Ex: Global strategy translation into local practices	Mediating: • Exchange facilitation between units and cultures • Multilingualism Ex: Clearing misunderstandings between cultural teams
Linking (connecting actors, teams, departments)	Hierarchical: • Connections within expat community/ parent company • Less local involvement Ex: Expat-networks, but little contact with local teams	Local & global: • Connector of local employees and global networks • Trust through cultural integration Ex: Involvement of Japanese colleagues in global decisions	Neutral link: • Link between HQ, branches and other cultures • Neutral third party Ex: Connects Brazilian and German teams in project
Facilitating (facilitating processes, learning, collaboration)	Limited: • Facilitation of processes within own cultural group • Less ability to motivate local teams Ex: Standardized training without cultural adaptation	Cultural synergy: • Facilitation of collaboration through cultural sensitivity and local acceptance • Teamwork and knowledge transfer promotion Ex: Coaching employees in intercultural competence	Intercultural moderation: • Facilitation of learning processes through neutral, culture-sensitive moderation • Usage of hybrid identity to defuse conflicts Ex: Moderating workshops between Asian and European teams
Intervening (intervening in conflicts, power imbalances, blockages)	Authoritarian: • Intervention through hierarchical instructions • Less ability to understand local conflicts Ex: Head office decisions without local consideration	Solution-oriented: • Intervention in cultural conflicts using local and global perspectives Ex: Dispute mediation between local teams and HQ through compromise	Neutral mediation: • Intervention as impartial third party using cultural distance for objectivity Ex: Resolve power conflicts between branches through diplomatic mediation

In summary, it becomes clear that the *classic expatriate (CAE)* often performs linking and intervening in a hierarchical and one-sided manner. Exchanging and facilitating, on the other hand, are limited by cultural distance. The CAE is more of a hierarchical implementer of global strategies who maintains the link to the headquarters but has weaknesses in terms of local acceptance. The *hybrid manager* can place a strong focus on exchanging and facilitating by promoting cultural integration and local networking. Intervening is solution-oriented and culturally sensitive. The *third-country national (TCN)* is particularly strong in linking and intervening due to their neutrality and intercultural competence. Exchanging and facilitating takes advantage of the diversity of cultural perspectives and multilingualism.

Finally, with reference to the research by Schlunze (2012; 2021) and Barmeyer et al. (2020), the question remains as to which of the three types (Classic Assigned Expatriate (CAE), Hybrid Manager, and Third-Country National (TCN)) is particularly suitable for implementing constructive intercultural management in multinational companies. The three types of expatriates—Classic Assigned Expatriates (CAE), Hybrid Managers (HM), and Third-Country Nationals (TCN)—each have different strengths and weaknesses in terms of constructive intercultural management (Table 8).

Tab. 8: Constructive intercultural management by boundary spanners

Criterion	Classic Assigned Expatriate (CAE)	Hybrid Manager (HM)	Third-Country National (TCN)
Cultural bridging function	Weak: mostly “one-way communication” (HQ → subsidiary)	Strong: understands and translates both cultures	Medium: often brings a “third perspective,” but can also be an outsider
Acceptance in the parent company	Very high: represents HQ interests	Medium: depends on perceived loyalty	Medium: often less integrated into HQ networks
Acceptance in the subsidiary	Rather low: risk of ethnocentric perception	High: often seen as an “insider bridge”	Variable: acceptance dependent on neutrality and personality
Intercultural complementarity and synergy	Low: focus on control & standardization (homogenizing)	Very high: uses cultural differences as resource and integrated differences to add value	High: often brings additional cultural diversity and mediates in conflict situations between HQ and subsidiary

To enable constructive intercultural management, we can conclude that CAEs tend to focus on

standardization and control rather than synergy through diversity. TCNs are particularly valuable in areas of tension where neutrality and a “third perspective” are important. Hybrid managers appear to be the most suitable, as they understand “both worlds,” can combine them productively, and use their intercultural translation skills to leverage differences as a resource.

4. Discussion: Boundary spanner managers as “strangers”

In the following, we would like to conclude by discussing the findings on boundary spanner managers to date with the sociological concept of foreignness, which we find particularly stimulating for constructive intercultural management.

To better understand and differentiate the intercultural roles of boundary spanning managers, we use the concept of “strangers”. Among others, interculturalist William Gudykunst, who has done extensive research on Japanese culture, has addressed the topic of being a stranger. In his work, he bases his definition of the stranger on Georg Simmel (1908): “Strangers [...] are people who are different because they are members of other groups” (Gudykunst, 1995, p. 10). In this context, it is insightful to refer to sociological classics such as Georg Simmel’s *“Exkurs über den Fremden”* (1908) and Alfred Schütz’s *“Der Fremde”* (“The stranger”) (1944). Both scholars had personal experiences as strangers abroad, which influenced their theoretical considerations. Simmel spent time in various European countries, while Schütz emigrated from Austria to the US due to the political circumstances of the 1930s. These biographical backgrounds influenced their work and lent additional depth to their analyses.

In his 1908 “Excursus on the Stranger,” Simmel coined the figure of the stranger as a structural type: a person who is simultaneously part of a group and yet maintains a certain distance from it, who is a member of a system but who is not strongly attached to the system, influenced.

“Here, then, the stranger is not meant in the sense often referred to, as the wanderer who comes today and leaves tomorrow, but as the one who comes today and stays tomorrow—the potential wanderer, so to speak, who, although he has not moved on, has not completely overcome the detachment of coming and going. [...] The unity of closeness and distance that exists in every relationship between people has here reached a constellation that can be formulated the shortest as follows: the distance within the relationship means that the one who is close is far away, but being a stranger means that the one who is

far away is close. [...] The stranger is an element of the group itself, [...], whose immanent and integral position simultaneously encompasses an outside and an opposite.” (Simmel, 1908, pp.509-512; own translation)

For Simmel, there is a peculiar simultaneity of physical proximity and distance that affects values and behaviors. Because strangers possess these two contradictory characteristics at the same time, being both close and distant, that is physically close but distant in terms of their values and ways of doing things, the management of fear and uncertainty is such a central process in intergroup conversation situations.

In his essay “Excursus on the Stranger,” Simmel emphasizes that although the stranger is part of the group, he did not emerge from it. Thus, although socially integrated to a limited extent, the stranger remains structurally distant. Precisely because the stranger is not fully integrated, he can make more differentiated judgments. Their perspective is often more critical and analytical than that of the locals. Simmel understands the stranger as a type and not as an individual. According to Simmel (1908), the stranger forms transpersonal social institutions and sociality. The typology of the third party includes the impartial arbitrator and mediator, the neutral observer, but also the “servant of two and the one left behind” (Simmel, 1908; Bedorf, 2003). For Simmel, the stranger is not a specific person, but a sociological figure with a structural role: “The wanderer who comes today and stays tomorrow.” This position opens mobility and innovative power in organizations because the stranger is not caught up in traditional routines. His role is therefore essentially that of neutral intercultural mediation and know-how transfer.

Alfred Schütz (1944) later took up Simmel’s ideas in his essay “The Stranger”, published in 1944, and supplemented them with a phenomenological perspective by focusing on the subjective experience and meaning constructions of the stranger. He analyzed how the stranger, confronted with a new social world, is forced to actively reconstruct and interpret its cultural patterns. “Strangeness” and the necessary rapprochement with a new group or culture that accompanies it form the preliminary stage of adaptation. In contrast to Georg Simmel’s “stranger,” Alfred Schütz’s “stranger” can assimilate (Berry, 2005). Once the individual has become a member of a group, which is referred to below as the in-group (Triandis, 1995), this organization of knowledge has sufficient coherence, comprehensibility,

and density that it appears sufficient for successful communication among members. Unlike Simmel, Schütz argues that the stranger is not an outsider, but moves between two cultural worlds: his culture of origin and the new culture he is entering. Schütz emphasizes that the stranger does not completely integrate into the new reality but must consciously reflect on it. While locals “know how things work”, the stranger does not experience the new society as a matter of course, but as something that must be interpreted and understood. This makes the stranger a conscious observer—which also makes him or her a potential bridge builder. This status makes the stranger an intercultural mediator of meaning: they can actively reconstruct the meaning constructs of the new culture, which makes interculturality visible as a cognitive and social negotiation process. Intercultural competence means not only adaptation, but also critical reflection and the ability to negotiate.

What is special about Alfred Schütz in the context of interculturality is his phenomenological analysis of foreignness as a social and cultural limit condition. This contribution remains groundbreaking for intercultural research to this day. The concept of the stranger and being a stranger is also highly relevant in today’s intercultural management: migrants, expats, or diverse management teams often act in the status of the “stranger,” who not only lives the culture but also analyzes, compares, and communicates it. This “being in between,” this “inter,” is not a weakness but an advantage in terms of insight.

Table 9 compares the concepts of George Simmel and Alfred Schütz regarding the stranger and their relevance for constructive intercultural management.

Tab. 9: The stranger and relevance for constructive intercultural management

Aspect	Georg Simmel (1908)	Alfred Schütz (1944)
Theoretical approach	Sociological-typological	Phenomenological-hermeneutic
Stranger as	Structural type in social relationships	Individual in transition between cultural worlds of meaning
Position	Close and distant at the same time – part of the group, but not rooted	Between two worlds – “cultural border crosser”
Function/role	Objective observer, bearer of the new	Mediator of meaning, translator between cultures
Access to knowledge	Distance creates objectivity	Change of perspective leads to reflection and negotiation of cultural knowledge
Interculturality	Diversity as a structural factor for innovation through perception and reflection	Interculturality as an active process of understanding and negotiation through negotiation and translation
Relevance for organizations	Promotion of diversity of perspectives through positioning	Competence in communicating meaning and managing cultural ambiguities

Regarding the three types of boundary spanners, there are different degrees of foreignness. The classic expat, who does not belong to the in-group, cannot fully relate their previous intercultural experiences to their current experiences. This is because they do not have access to fundamental cultural knowledge. Among other things, this results from their limited experience with the foreign culture, meaning that certain important basic assumptions have not become part of their identity. For them, the unquestioned frame of reference of their country of origin remains the reference point for their actions. The other two types, the hybrid manager and the third-country manager, correspond more closely to Simmel’s and, above all, Schütz’s concept of the stranger. This is illustrated by the combination of Simmel’s structural and Schütz’s processual perspectives. Both concepts show the “stranger” as a “boundary spanner,” a bridge figure who can contribute to both organizational culture and innovation. Due to positional reflexivity of the stranger in Simmel’s approach is structurally located differently and thus brings new perspectives to the table. Through cultural translation, Schütz’s stranger acts as a mediator of meaning between different worlds of norms and meanings. Finally, the “boundary spanner” can challenge organizational routines and initiate cultural innovations in the organization through his hybrid position. The interaction of Simmel’s and Schütz’s concepts illustrates the role of the boundary-spanner manager as a valuable

resource in intercultural management: the combination of structural and subjective perspectives makes it clear that the boundary-spanner manager brings not only challenges but also opportunities for innovation and cultural mediation.

5. Research desiderata and intercultural practice

The present analysis has shown that boundary spanning managers (BSMs) play a central role in multinational companies by shaping communication and coordination processes across cultural, language, geographical, and functional boundaries. Nevertheless, numerous questions remain open that could be addressed by future research.

First, there is a need for *empirical comparative studies* that systematically examine how the three types identified here—classic assigned expatriates (CAE), hybrid managers (HM), and third-country nationals (TCN)—differ in their effectiveness. In particular, the question arises as to which functions (exchanging, linking, facilitating, intervening) are most strongly fulfilled by which type and how these roles develop over time.

Second, future research on *a conceptual level* could focus on further refining the concept of the hybrid manager. At an application-oriented level, it could be investigated to what extent the characteristics of the hybrid manager are transferable to other country contexts. Are they different there? Are they just as important in their “hybrid form” there?

Third, *contextual factors* have not yet been thoroughly researched: the effectiveness of the three types could vary considerably depending on the cultural environment, industry, or organizational structure. The influence of new forms of work, such as *virtual* and *digital boundary-spanning processes*, also offers a relevant field for future studies.

Fourthly, future research could focus specifically on the types of knowledge possessed by boundary-spanning managers and differentiate between them more precisely: What are their specific characteristics? How and when are they used at interfaces in MNU? How can they be promoted, developed, and applied effectively? The aspect of raising awareness, applying, and passing on implicit intercultural knowledge also seems worthy of research.

Last but not least, the integration of *Simmel and Schütz’s concept of foreignness* opens up an

exciting theoretical avenue for further research. It would be worthwhile to operationalize this concept empirically to better understand the special role of BSMs as “intercultural bridge figures.”

Finally, questions arise in practice as to how international human resource management can specifically deploy and develop the different types. *Recommendations for action regarding the selection, training, and career planning* of BSMs thus represent another important field of research.

Overall, boundary spanning managers not only present challenges, but also offer considerable opportunities for constructive intercultural management and organizational innovation—a finding that should be further explored in future research.

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