

Creativity in intercultural teams: Which indicators, facilitators and competencies?

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Abstract

This paper and the research project it is talking about are “work in progress”. We give an insight into the subject of creativity in intercultural teams looking for innovative products. Our project aims not only at the identification of creativity indicators and facilitators but also at a better understanding of the necessary – individual and collective – competencies. We set out by presenting the results of our literature review and our research methodology. Then, we pass on to an example out of our qualitative data where diversity and humor become explicit creativity indicators and facilitators. Finally, we give an outlook on the next research steps.

Keywords: Creativity, Innovation, Diversity, Humor, Intercultural, Management, Competence

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1. Introduction

In our rapidly changing world, creativity and innovation are key elements of the entrepreneurial success. The ongoing globalization process, growing mobility, digitalization and rapidly changing markets turn many – if not most – business contexts into “intercultural” systems where people need to be creative and negotiate new forms of collaboration and cohabitation. It is that environment we are interested in and looking at in the research project we are going to talk about.

It is important to state right at the outset that we have a broad understanding of the culture concept. Based on our readings of the publications by North American anthropologists (e. g. Sapir 1921, Kroeber & Kluckhohn 1952, Hall 1976), on the work by Cuche (1996), Wicker (1997), Rivera (2000), Giordano (2003 & 2008), Kilani (2009) or Pretceille (2012), we define cultures as forms of organization individuals and groups negotiate and co-construct in their daily interactions (Gohard-Radenkovic & Stalder 2013). Thus, in our view, the culture concept mustn't be reduced to artistic products or national allegiances. Cultures are dynamic systems; individuals and groups are active “culture engineers” (Stalder 2018, 2019). By *interculture* we understand the negotiation process of new forms of organization (see also Beneke 1995). People involved in that process are challenged by “in-between” situations and by the volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA) they bring along. Today, strong intercultural competencies are necessary to “navigate” in the challenging “VUCA” waters surrounding us.

In our paper we give an insight into a research project in progress. We are interested in the subject of creativity in intercultural teams. On the one hand, our goal is to identify indicators and facilitators of team creativity. On the other hand, we aim at developing new assessment and training tools for intercultural teams. In our project, we ask the following questions:

What is creativity?

What makes a team creative? More precisely, which are the indicators and facilitators of team members' creativity?

Does diversity play a role and, if so, how is it to handle or to manage?

And, in the end, which are the individual and collective key competencies for the collaboration in those specific and highly dynamic contexts?

Our research work is empirical and interdisciplinary (anthropology, psychology, linguistics and management). Our methodology is not only deductive and quantitative, but also inductive and qualitative: the first approach allows us to identify key dimensions for studying and assessing

creativity; the second gives us access to field observations, filmic data and “micrological” analysis of verbal and nonverbal team interactions.

In this paper we start by the literature review and the definition of three key concepts: creativity, innovation and humor. We present then our methodology and open afterwards the perspective on an example out of our qualitative data where creativity is indicated and facilitated by the team members’ diversity and emerging humor. We conclude our paper by the outlook on our next research steps.

2. Creativity in intercultural teams – dimensions and facilitators

2.1 Creativity and innovation

Creativity and innovation are interconnected concepts. They have to be considered as highly dynamic, emergent and multidimensional phenomena (Anderson, Potocnik & Zhou 2014), which need strong individual and collective competencies to contribute to the expected entrepreneurial – and social – benefits.

Creativity is often understood as the preliminary phase of innovation, as the idea generation phase, whereas innovation is considered as the implementation process of those ideas (cf. e. g. Hotz-Hart & Rohner 2014). Innovations can be seen as possible operationalizations of an individual’s or a group’s creativity. In a nutshell, creativity and innovation are integral parts of the same process. Accordingly, Anderson & al. (op. cit.: 1298) suggest an integrative definition of creativity and innovation:

Creativity and innovation at work are the process, outcome, and products of attempts to develop and introduce new and improved ways of doing things. The creativity stage of this process refers to idea generation, and innovation refers to the subsequent stage of implementing ideas toward better procedures, practices, or products. Creativity and innovation can occur at the level of the individual, work team, organization, or at more than one of these levels combined but will invariably result in identifiable benefits at one or more of these levels of analysis.

In our research project we are looking at creativity and innovation in the entrepreneurial context. We consider the three levels – individual, team, organization –, which are strongly interconnected. Nevertheless, in our paper we concentrate on team level creativity. We adopt an *interactionist* perspective on the process. Our theoretical framework, our methodology, data collection and analysis are basically built on the following definitions. For Plucker & al. (2004: 90):

Creativity is the interaction among aptitude, process, and environment by which an individual or group produces a perceptible product that is both novel and useful as defined within a social context.

Palmer (2016) has broadened that definition. She has not only studied and integrated Plucker & al.'s work, but also other experts' views (namely Barron 1955, Amabile 1988, Feist 1998, Simonton 1999 and Sternberg & Lubart 1999). In the conclusions of her book on work-related creativity diagnostics, she defines creativity as:

the interaction between intelligence, expertise, personality traits, and motivation as individual dispositions with process stage dependent demands and environmental conditions by which an individual or group produces a perceptible product that is both novel and useful as defined within a social context. (Palmer 2016: 366)

2.2 Creativity in intercultural teams

According to the *Socio-Cultural Manifesto* (Glaveanu & al. 2019: 2) "creative action is, at all times, relational". We share the signatories' view, that:

there is no form of human creativity that does not rely on direct, mediated, or implicit social interaction or exchanges. Even when working in solitude, we implicitly build on and respond to the views, knowledge, and expectations of other people. (*Ibid.*)

Nevertheless, people are not always more creative when working in teams. Creativity also needs individual cognitive work and the corresponding time, place and space to do it (Schuler & Görlich 2007, Glaveanu & al. 2019). Teamwork can even be counterproductive: according to the signatories of the *Socio-Cultural Manifesto* (op. cit.: 2) "the social element should not be romanticized; personal conflicts, incompatible styles, and other issues may decrease collaborative creative efforts".

Similar limitations apply to the diversity factor. Although the diversity of team membership has been shown to be generally positive for group creativity (see e. g. Amabile & Kurtzberg 2001 or Milliken, Bartel, & Kurtzberg 2003), there is still little scientific work on the nature of that impact (Folk 2019). More scientific knowledge is needed not only about the various dimensions, indicators and facilitators of team creativity but also on the influence of different diversity types. Folk (op. cit.) mentions that the diversity type addressed in this context is foremost diversity of thought. The hypothesis is that "different mindsets, attitudes, matrices of experience and culture will make it more likely that more diverse ideas will be created, than if the group would consist of people who share cultural, educational and professional touchstones" (Folk, op. cit.: 6).

For Page (2017) the "diversity bonus" not only depends on the type of diversity, on the individuals who form the team and on the culture of the latter – promoting or hindering the members' successful interaction –, but also on the task. The author observes that "diversity bonuses occur most often within teams of cognitive workers engaged in nonroutine tasks" (op. cit.: 7). Phillips (2017) and Page

share the fundamental assumption that every team has some level of “identity diversity” and “cognitive (or informational) diversity”, as no two individuals are exactly the same. In Phillips’ view, as groups work together, the goal should be to increase the presence of that cognitive diversity and the willingness to express those differences to capture the diversity bonus in groups that are facing complex, difficult, and uncertain problems. (Phillips 2017: 227)

In consequence, intercultural teams¹ in innovation contexts face two challenges of creativity: they not only need creativity for finding novel and useful products but also for managing their diversity and for succeeding the co-construction of their collaboration cultures, which demands strong willingness, ability and knowledge from all the actors involved. In order to work together and to implement novel ideas, strong intercultural competence is needed. We understand intercultural competence as:

the ability to negotiate cultural meanings and to execute appropriately effective communication behaviors that recognize the interactants’ multiple identities in a specific environment. (Chen & Starosta 1996: 358-359)

In the next subchapter we look at the question of creativity assessment. Which are the key dimensions to take into account for a better understanding of team creativity and, in the end, for developing tools and training methods contributing to the enhancement of it?

2.3 Assessment of team creativity

Traditionally, creativity research and assessment differentiate 4 dimensions – or 4 “Ps”. They are closely interrelated: Product, Person, Process, Press (Rhodes 1961, Mooney 1963, Kirton 1989, Sternberg & Lubart 1991, Anderson & West 1996, Amabile 1996, Amabile et al. 1999, Plucker & al. 2004, Schuler & Görlich 2007, Paschen & al. 2014, Stöwe & Wiederhake 2014, Wassmann 2014, Jiang & Zhang 2014, Palmer 2016, Borges Formiga Sobrinho 2019, cf. e. g. Palmer 2016: 24ff).

Product: What is assessed here is the creative *outcome* produced by an individual or a team.

Person: The analysis is focused on the *individual’s potential and competences*.

Process: The attention is paid to individuals’ and teams’ *ability to go through all the necessary stages* for achieving the goal (new and useful product/service).

¹ According to the definition of “interculture” introduced above (chapter 1), an intercultural team is a group of people with different – experiential, professional, disciplinary, national, linguistic, etc. – background whose collaboration history is still short; the team culture is not consolidated yet.

Press: The *environmental influences and impacts*, the *scope of action and freedom to act* are examined.

Today, depending on the researchers' – or practitioners' – views, concerns, centers of interest and goals, two or even three further Ps are added to the four classical core dimensions (cf. e. g. Paschen & al. 2014, Stöwe & Wiederhake 2014, Palmer 2016, Borges Formiga Sobrinho 2019):

Persuasion: Study of the capability to convince others of the new solution.

Potential: Assessment of the individuals' or teams' potential to solve the problem.

Purpose: The meaningfulness of the creativity's result – to the creator and to others – is examined.

According to Folk (2019) or to Chompunuch, Ribiere & Chanal (2019) numerous studies have been done to better understand individual creativity, but only few have been conducted to deeply understand what constitutes team creativity. Thus, little attention has been paid to creative collaboration or shared idea-generation for decades, except from the work by Amabile & Kurtzberg (2001) and later by Sawyer & al. (Sawyer 2003, 2008, 2011; Sawyer & DeZutter 2009). As Folk observes and shows in her article, the interest in teams' creativity has been growing since, both in academia (De Dreu, Nijstad, Bechtoldt & Baas 2011; Edmondson & Harvey 2018; Elisondo 2016; Gilley, Morris, Waite, Coates & Veliquette 2010; Hill 2014; Yoshida, Sendjaya, Hirst & Cooper 2014 – as quoted by Folk) and in business (Bahcall 2019; Catmull & Wallace 2014; Coyle 2018; Johnson 2010 – as quoted by Folk) – for the reason being that:

organizations are facing more and more complex challenges that can no longer be solved by creative individuals only. They need "Teams" with diverse skills, ideas and knowledge to creatively solve these challenging issues (Chompunuch & al. 2019: 1).

Until lately, researchers have above all underlined the importance of the following dimensions for team creativity assessment:

- demographic diversity (age, gender, origins) and functional diversity (educational background, knowledge, competencies), team modification (members who leave, new ones who arrive) (Reiter-Palmon, Wigert & de Vreede 2012);
- group structure and composition (Gupta & Banerjee 2016);
- group cohesion (Gupta & Banerjee 2016);
- psychological and participative security as well as trust and commitment to tasks (Paulus, Dzindolet & Kohn 2012).

Chompunuch, Ribiere & Chanal (2019) have recently conducted a systematic literature review on the concept of team creativity and its related building dimensions. From the 77 relevant papers they have analyzed emerge 15 dimensions (summarized by the authors in the illustration below) that are important for team creativity:

Diversity (such as educational background, functional diversity, demographic diversity, personality)

Climate (psychological atmosphere in a team and its environment)

Leadership

Conflict Management

Task and Goal Interdependence

Reflexivity

Cohesion

Individual Creativity

Mental Models

Motivation

Creative Thinking and Problem-Solving Styles

Team Psychological Safety (the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking)

Team Creative Efficacy (members believe in the ability of the team to produce creative results)

Transactive Memory System (knowledge of “who knows what?” within the team) and, finally

Team Longevity (duration of the team’s collaboration)

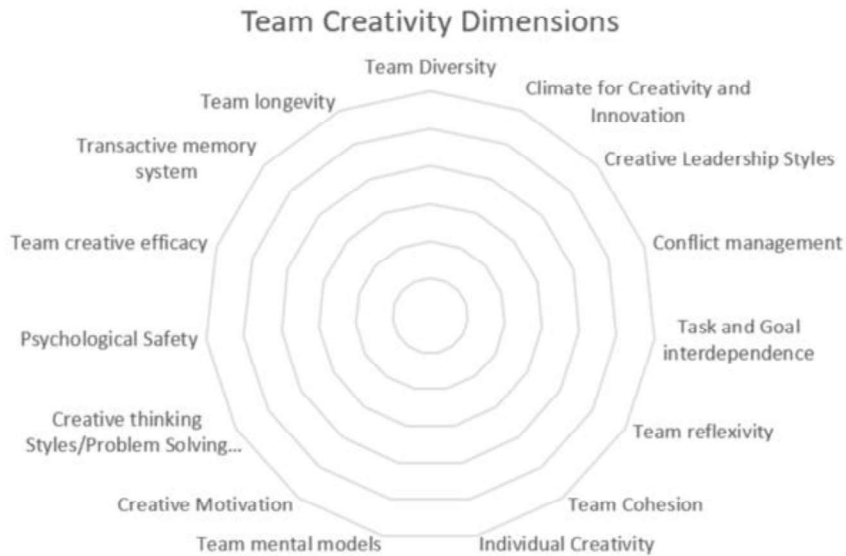


Figure by Chompunuch & al. 2019: 12

Chompunuch & al.'s review, figure and clear description of the 15 key dimensions for team creativity is the most complete synopsis we have found so far.

If we compare those 15 dimensions with the four original and classic ones – product, person, process and press – we observe that they are all (except from “individual creativity”) strongly related to the process and press dimensions. That fact stresses the unsurprising but crucial importance of team members’ – verbal and non-verbal – communication, interaction and collaboration competences for team creativity. According to Chompunuch & al.'s review, the consideration of the product dimension seems of lesser importance if it comes to team creativity assessment. Nevertheless, in our opinion, because of the strong interrelatedness of all the four classic core dimensions, it makes sense to keep an eye on the product dimension, too.

At this stage of our project, the outcome of our literature review is a fundamental milestone: we consider it as a result itself, which explains the important place we have decided to give it in our paper. It provides us with the theoretical basis for compiling the items of the questionnaire we are developing in order to assess teams’ creativity.

The next and last chapter of our review is focused on the subject of humor. Literature, our field observations and our interaction analysis across various projects (Stalder 2010, 2019 or Stalder & Agbogli 2019) show that positive humor is a powerful communication strategy in intercultural teams.

2.4 Creativity and humor in intercultural teams

According to extant literature, there is not only an interconnection between creativity and innovation, but also between creativity and humor (Ziv 1984 or Berger 1993, cf. Lang & Lee 2010). Humor is a universal communication mode (Apte 1985 or Lefcourt 2001). Martin (2007: 5) defines humor as:

anything that people say or do that is perceived as funny and tends to make others laugh, as well as the mental processes that go into both creating and perceiving such an amusing stimulus, and also the affective response involved in the enjoyment of it.

Humor and laughter are not recent research subjects. Much work has been done on humor as a social practice in specific – also professional – contexts. Scientists have looked at its functions, effects, advantages and limits or risks (e. g. Martin 2003 ; Martin, Rich & Gayle 2004 ; Romero & Cruthirds 2006 ; Bottega 2008 ; Lang & Lee 2010 ; Wood & al. 2011 ; Autissier & Arnéguy 2012 ; Wisse & Rietzschel 2014 ; Chlopicki & Brzozowska 2017). Researchers have stated humor's positive impact on creativity and innovation (Csikszentmihalyi 1996, Brotherton 1996, Schlicksupp 2004 or Wood 2011). For Csikszentmihalyi (op. cit.) "liberating humor" (i. e. humor that facilitates the freeing of old mindsets, cf. Lang & Lee 2010: 47) can stimulate divergent, unconventional, creative, and innovative thinking. In Ziv's view (1983), humor instills a contagious "fun mood" in which original ideas are likely to emerge. According to Romero & Cruthirds (2006: 62) the lack of sharp criticism leads to a safe environment allowing people to act on creative thinking and implement new ideas more freely. Wood & al. (2011: 32) mention that both humor and creativity are associated with conditions that include:

incongruity that is resolved by the juxtaposition of different ideas, perspectives or frames;

a non-evaluative, playful attitude that is free from the usual constraints imposed by performance goals and rational analyses;

heightened attention and conscious processing of information with sudden shifts in the focus of attention to discover new connection or structures;

experiences of pleasurable, positive affect, such as surprise, satisfaction and stimulation.

Although the interest in the connectedness of creativity and humor is growing (cf. Lang & Lee op. cit.) there is still a lack of empirical studies on humor and creativity, above all in intercultural work settings. Therefore, we have integrated that subject into our research project.

3. Methodology

Our research is empirical. We gather quantitative as well as qualitative data. On the one hand, we proceed in a deductive way. Based on extant creativity literature, diagnostics' methods and tools we identify dimensions, indicators and factors of individual, team and organizational creativity. Then, we compare those findings with our field observations and our qualitative data. In a third step, we develop and test (together with another academic institution, the UAS Lucerne, and 7 business partners in Switzerland) an online tool for assessing creativity on the three different levels mentioned above (cf. also Kaudela-Baum, Gisin & Nussbaum 2019).

On the other hand, we collect filmic data. It comes from the "Innovation Game". The Innovation Game is a competitive activity we have been developing since 2014. We use it for training master students (MA and MBA) in intercultural communication and team management. During that game, the participants have to design, construct, name and pitch an innovative piece of office furniture. So far, more than 160 people have participated in this game and our data consists of 17 hours of videos. To better understand the creativity process and to identify the indicators and factors we are looking for, we adopt an anthropological perspective on our data. We watch the videos and, in a first step, look out for "Rich Points" (Agar 1994), this is to say: interaction sequences where team members' creativity is particularly explicit; e. g. where their collaborative efforts to produce a perceptible, novel product as well as their willingness, ability and knowledge to recognize, appreciate and combine all the members' "identity diversity" and "informational diversity" (Phillips 2017) become perceptible. In a second step we go more in depth: we transcribe the sequences and use filmic interaction analysis (e. g. Mondada 2005 or Stalder 2010).

The goal of this two-way approach is not only to compare and critically discuss the results of the qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. The closer, "micrological" look at teams' interactions aims at learning more about individual and collective key competencies for creativity in intercultural working groups. The ultimate objective of the project is to develop, together with business partners, a novel tool for creativity assessment – and promotion – at the individual, team and organizational levels.

The next chapter opens the perspective on the filmic data. We give a glimpse of an interaction sequence, where the link between diversity, humor and creativity becomes explicit.

4. Diversity and humor – creativity facilitators?

In our films of intercultural teams, humor and laughter are frequent. Unsurprisingly: the interactions take place in an educational setting and the participants are all MBA students of more or less the same age. They know each other well and take part in a game. The rules are transparent and the same for everybody. All these aspects contribute to an egalitarian, playful and comfortable atmosphere, which limits the risks of negative humor and exclusive laughter.

The interaction sequences we present and discuss hereafter come from a team of master students filmed in a Swiss university in 2017.

Illustration 1 – The Team



A

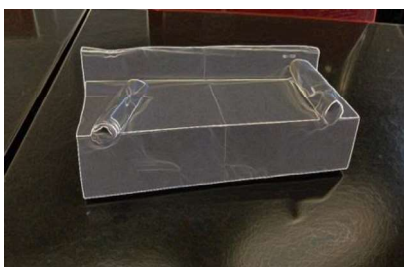
B

C

We have studied the three team members' interactions during one specific phase of the game, the phase during which they have to find the name for the piece of furniture they have invented, designed and constructed (with the only material made available, i. e. white paper sheets, a stapler and/or an adhesive tape, a pair of scissors). In the creativity and innovation process of this game, the prototype itself is not the only product. The name to be found can be interpreted as a "product", too.

The team – composed of people with diverse professional, cultural and linguistic backgrounds and with a considerable set of different experiences – has conceived and built a sofa bed. The product itself is not particularly innovative.

Illustration 2 – The Prototype



It is the name created during the interaction among the team members that turns the sofa bed into an innovation. During the interaction process, A has made a first suggestion for the name of the sofa-bed.

Sequence 1 – (0.00-0.22)

- (1) A : Sleep Biz ((laughing)).
- (2) B : Sleep Biz (...) ahm ...
- (3) A : Biz, like business.
- (4) B : Ahh/, Sleep Buiss!
- (5) A : Biz. B, I, Z.
- (6) B : B, I, Z, ja.
- (7) A : B, I, Z.
- (8) B : Sleep Biz ((while contemplating the prototype, B tilts his head from the left to the right)).

Yet, neither B nor C are convinced of this first idea. C takes the floor. He mitigates his face threatening act against B by welcoming and appreciating first her proposal. Only then he asks for the consideration of alternatives.

Sequence 2 – (0.23-1.05)

- (9) C : Only (...), yeah, it sounds good, but let's give it *another* name [xxx].
- (10)B : Which one ?
- (11)C : We could call it Funo.
- (12)B : Funo ?
- (13)C : Funo, what means, Funo is a very rare bed, you know, a bed ((he cannot find the verb « fly » in English and uses gesture (bird flying)), this [flies], yes ((continues))
- (14)English and uses gesture (bird flying)), this [flies], yes ((continues))
- (15) B: [yeah].
- (16)C : it is a very rare bed, if you find it, you will be very lucky. So, this kind of couch I mean, if you
- (17)live, if you buy it, you are a kind of a lucky person, you know. It is just, special.
- (18)B ((to A)): I know who is selling it at the end.
- (19)((the 3 of them are laughing))
- (20)B: Funo?
- (21)C: Yeah, so, we should call it [Funo]. How do you see?
- (22) B: [Funo]
- (23)B: It's a Funo.
- (24)A: How do you spell it? [F, U, ... O].
- (25) C: [F, U, N, O].
- (26)B: Yes, Funo, [Funo].
- (27)A: [Funo].
- (28)B: It's a Funo.
- (29)C: Yes, it's Funo, you know, it is a kind of, [something very special]
- (30) B: [Okay, what is the meaning/, again/?
- (31)C: Yeah, it is a bed, you know ((imitates once more the wings of a bird flying)), and this bed, to find
- (32)it, to see [it] is very rare, very rare to see it.
- (33) B: [Yeah].
- (34)C: And if you see it, like, you can, you know, according to our tradition, and you feel like, "oh, I
- (35)am very lucky".

- (36)B: Ok.
- (37)C: Yes, so...
- (38)B: Funo.
- (39)A: Funo.
- (40)C: Funo.

C suggests “Funo” for the sofa bed. C is originally from Tanzania. He explains that, according to the Tanzanian tradition, Funo means a very rare bed (line 31). A Funo flies, he explains, and also brings luck to those who get the chance to see it. C’s proposal surprises A and B. The name is unfamiliar to them. It contrasts with their knowledge, experience and imagination. Thus, Funo is new. The “product” Funo is the result of the team members’ interaction. In particular, it is their identity diversity that has favored their creativity and the originality of the outcome.

The proposal of “Funo” has an impact on the collaboration climate. There is a moment of surprise and astonishment which inspires humor: B is making fun of the situation. He turns to A and says “I know who is selling it in the end”, meaning: it will be up to C to take the responsibility and the lead to present the prototype in order to explain the name’s story and sense during the pitching session in plenary. B’s humor translates into common laughter: the three team members meet on the same “scene”. Their laughter expresses a moment of shared emotions.

Illustration 3 – Shared Laughter



In those interaction sequences diversity and humor indicate and facilitate the team’s creativity. The members and the team are creative in the sense that they produce novel outcomes (e. g. the name). They confront their identities and combine their ideas in a playful, constructive manner. The three of them succeed in going together through all the stages of the creativity process. While doing so, they use their diversity as a resource. In addition, by using positive humor, A, B & C co-construct a comfortable collaboration climate which makes them feel safe so as to dare taking the necessary risks for getting to their novel product, which is “Funo”.

In the specific context under study here, humor and laughter are strongly linked to positive emotions. Among other, they mitigate face-threatening acts, facilitate leadership delegation among peers and ease stress. They are important factors of the interaction climate. The empirical example thus supports theory. In theory, climate counts among the top dimensions for team creativity (Chompunuch & al. op. cit.). Team members show strong intercultural communication competences: they listen to each other well and negotiate their solutions while fully recognizing their multiple identities.

The example presented and discussed here is not representative of creativity in intercultural teams. Thus, at this stage of the project, diversity and humor cannot yet be considered as – empirically validated – facilitators of creativity; more research work has to be conducted on the subject in order to be able to do so. In addition, the observation and filming should be extended to other places, e. g. to innovation teams’ interactions in “real” entrepreneurial work settings.

5. Conclusions and outlook

Creativity is a multifactorial and complex process. Cultural heterogeneity (in the sense we have defined the concept of culture in the introduction to our paper) adds to that complexity. In the innovation context, intercultural teams not only face the challenge of creating and developing new products, but also of negotiating and creating their working culture.

In the end, we are only at the beginning... What we have succeeded so far is, on the one hand, building a theoretical framework for the development of our quantitative approach to the assessment of creativity in intercultural teams. On the other hand, we have identified interesting film sequences in our data which allow for “micrological” analysis of intercultural teams’ verbal and nonverbal interactions in the innovation context.

That two-way approach will now be continued, deepened, improved. It shall lead to the better understanding of the conditions and competences for creativity to emerge *in* and *from* the field, albeit the volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity characterizing today’s working environments.

6. Transcription conventions (cf. Mondada 2005 or Stalder 2010)

(.), (..), (...), (4s)	pauses from 1 to 3, or 4 and more seconds
...	hesitation
[...]	omission
((description))	interaction description
□	overlap S1 (his/her speech overlaps with S2)
□	overlap S2 (his/her speech overlaps with S1)
	overlap S3 (his/her speech overlaps with S1 and S2)
//	interruption between S1 and S2
/ and \	intonative increase or decrease
[xxx]	unintelligible segment
(<i>expression</i>)	uncertain segment

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