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CULTURAL ASPECTS OF THE SEARCH
CONFERENCE METHOD
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ABSTRACT

CULTURAL ASPECTS OF THE SEARCH CONFERENCE METHOD.

The search conference is a method for dealing with complex multiparty issues in a constructive way. Although its primary objective is not framed as 'conflict handling', it can be useful as a mediation tool in situations that require an overall perspective and the participation of many different parties.

This paper examines the cultural assumptions that underlie this method, referring especially to the reactions and behaviors of non-Western participants. Although our analysis of cultural assumptions will be broader, the empirical part will focus on Chinese participants.

The first part of the paper discusses the search conference method from a cultural perspective. It describes the process as it is intended by the authors who developed the method, and elaborates its underlying assumptions. The second part of the paper consists of an empirical study of the reactions and behaviors of Chinese participants in two search conference simulations. Both observational and interview material will be used, as well as linguistic methods for the meaning of the concepts. The discussion focuses both on the assumptions regarding participating in the discussion, social norms and obligations, as on the different cultural meanings of concepts such as facilitating, consensus, collaboration and responsibility. Suggestions are made how the search conference may be made more culturally sensitive.

INTRODUCTION[*]

The search conference method (Emery & Purser, 1996) is designed
for dealing with complex multiparty issues. Typical characteristics of such
issues are the large number of parties involved, the complex relationships
and interdependencies within the domain[1], and the perspective on the future
which is problematic as well as open-ended. The search conference method
aims at building a network of trust amongst parties, exploring possibilities
for joint action, and stimulating shared responsibility for the domain.
Although the primary objective of the search conference method is not
framed as 'conflict handling', it can be useful as a mediation tool in
situations that require an overall perspective and the participation of many
different parties. Because its appreciative approach, it can serve to prevent
an escalation between some of the parties involved. In recent years the
application of the method has spread over different situations, contributing
to a growing number of large-scale network interventions (Weisbord, 1992;
Gray, 1989; Gray & Wood, 1991; Bunker & Alban, 1997).

In this paper we will discuss the search conference method from a
cultural perspective. This study originated from our experience in working
with participants from different cultures in a search conference simulation
that is part of an international MBA program. During these simulations,

reactions and behaviors of participants from China, Indonesia or the Philippines drew our attention to possible cultural biases of the search conference as a method. Some of the behavioral norms which underlie the method just did not seem to catch on with these participants, who were at one time baffled with what was happening, and at other times struggling to meet our expectations. This experience set us to examine the cultural foundation of the search conference method. Awareness of cultural biases could help to make the method more culturally sensitive, and more appropriate for use in an intercultural environment. At the same time, we hope this study will help us to become more aware of our own cultural assumptions in conduction such multiparty conferences. Since the search conference method has its roots in the same academic and professional traditions that have shaped much of our conflict handling practices, some of the cultural assumptions underlying the search conference method may also bias other forms of conflict handling.

The first part of this paper presents the search conference as a method for handling multiparty problems. It describes its main steps and the characteristics of the process as it is intended by Emery and Purser. We will also elaborate on the premises which the authors explicitly acknowledge as foundational to their method, and explain what we mean by adopting a "cultural perspective". The second part of the paper consists of the empirical study of the reactions and behaviors of Chinese participants in two search conference stimulations. We have chosen to focus the empirical part on the Chinese participants because the knowledge of Mandarin by

one of the authors facilitates culturally sensitive interviewing and observation, and allows us to draw from linguistic sources. The data from empirical part will lead us to a discussion of two types of cultural biases : on the one hand assumptions regarding how to participate in a discussion, social norms and obligations towards other parties in the conference, attitudes towards representatives and towards the role of facilitator; on the other hand different cultural meanings of basic concepts such as conflict, mediating, consensus, collaboration, and responsibility.

THE SEARCH CONFERENCE METHOD

Origins of the method.

The search conference method was created in the sixties by Fred Emery, when he started to experiment with a new conference format together with Eric Trist (Trist & Emery, 1960). In a traditional conference participants would be exposed to a series of expert lectures and learned addresses. In the new format developed at Tavistock, each participant was considered an expert and was invited to engage in a "democratic" dialogue on the subject of the conference. The open communication and the personal involvement in the intellectual tasks of the conference created an immense energy and enthusiasm amongst the participants, and led to conference outcomes far exceeding the expectations of the sponsors. Since the conference was open-ended, not only examining possible future scenario's, but actually inventing them, it was called a 'search' conference (Emery &

Purser, 1996).

Over the years the method was further refined. Two major developments are worth mentioning here. The first is the approach of "rationalizing conflict" (cfr. infra), which was elaborated when Fred Emery used the search conference method as a mediating tool in a multiparty conflict (Emery, 1966). The second relates to Trist's work on social ecology and turbulent environments, shaping a systemic conception of the search conference's "domain" and of the nature of the interdependencies between the parties (Emery & Trist, 1972; Emery, 1996). Since the seventies the search conference has been widely applied in a large number of areas such as urban planning and community development, curriculum development in education, policy development, strategic planning, etcetera. Out of all these experiences, something like the "standard" search conference emerged, which was established through conferences of practitioners, training networks and writings by Merrelyn and Fred Emery on the underlying principles and guidelines.

Overview of the process.

We will now describe the flow of the search conference process, assuming not every reader is familiar with this method[2]. A search conference roughly consists of three phases : environmental appreciation, systems analysis and integration. Throughout the conference plenary sessions, caucuses, and other discussion formats are used. All discussion results are noted on flip-chart pads and posted so they are permanently

available for reference.

The conference begins with an environmental appreciation. The participants look outside their system for relevant changes in the environment, and discuss probable and desirable futures. By focusing on their common environment, different parties in the conference become aware of their interdependencies and shared responsibilities. The exchange of views on probable and desirable futures promotes the listening to the different perspectives and needs, without the pressure of agreements or decisions to make. This phase builds the conference community and establishes common ground at the outset of the conference.

The second phase consists of a systems analysis. Participants explore the unique character of their system and develop a shared understanding of it. They reflect on how the history of the domain has shaped its present functioning, and examine the workings of their current system. They identify gaps in the present system, features that need to be created, and they discuss what they want to keep and what they want to change. Finally, they envision again the most desirable future for their system and a set of strategic goals for making this desirable future a reality. In this phase, differences in perception and interests between parties may provoke conflict, but the attention of the participants is shifted towards the development of common ground, in the form of shared dreams and a sense of shared responsibility for the future of the domain.

In the third and final phase, the search conference community has to bring its dreams to earth. Participants will identify the major constraints

they will likely encounter in working towards their strategic goals, and devise strategies for overcoming them. Finally, intentions are translated into specific joint action plans, which constitute the tangible output of the conference (the intangible output being the insights, and the trusting relationships that have developed between the parties).

Underlying assumptions.

We will now turn to some of the conditions that are considered critical for the search conference process. Creating and guarding these conditions within the conference design, constitutes the main contribution of the conference conveners, who are not part of the domain and take a role of facilitation or process consultation (Schein, 1973). At this point in our discussion we want to restrict ourselves to highlighting some of these underlying principles in Emery and Purser's terms, without reference yet to any cultural bias.

A first essential characteristic of the search conference method is the democratic nature of its discussions and management. Participation is full and active, regardless of status or hierarchical position. Each participant is considered a valuable contributor. Learning is self-directed, not guided from above or outside. As a group, the conference community shares the responsibility for the quality of its own process. Thus the responsibility for the control and coordination of the process is located with those who are actually doing the work.

In this democratic and participatory approach we recognize the

traditions of open learning, self-management and change management that originated from the early work in Tavistock and NTL (Bennis & Benne, 1969; Schein & Bennis, 1967; Trist & Murray, 1990). It offers people respect and gives them a voice, which may be on itself a very powerful intervention in situations where decision-making is dominated by experts and power groups. Emery and Purser (1996) acknowledge that this democratic approach may lead to some resistance in the beginning of the conference, because people are used to being dependent and controlled by authority and hierarchy. However, this resistance quickly subsides as the participants become accustomed to the conference format. One of the intended outcomes of the search conference is that people take control over their own lives and future.

A second basic feature of the search conference process – open communication – relates to its reliance on spoken language as a medium for getting the work done. Where traditional planning methods heavily rely on written communication (reports, ..), participants in a search conference convey their thoughts, feelings and aspirations through the power of the spoken word. In order to establish this effective and influential communication, Emery and Purser (1996) identify four conditions : openness, shared field, basic psychological similarity, and trust. *Openness* refers to learning environment in which all perceptions are considered valid and worthy of further examination. The direct perceptions of factory workers e.g. are treated with the same respect as those of experts, managers or specialists. All data and information that are generated in the conference

are made permanently available through the use of flip-chart paper exhibits. A sense of *shared field* is created in the first phase of the conference. The brainstorming sessions on significant trends in the environment lead to the notion that "we all live in the same world". *Basic psychological similarity* implies that participants learn to see each other as equals, with similar hopes and values, able to learn from one another. The importance of *trust* does not need to be emphasized. Trust is strengthened by avoiding status differences, display of arrogance or talking down on some participants, and by helping the group to grow in assuming responsibility for managing its own process.

So far these process conditions seem to be very similar to those of other forms of conflict handling or mediation which focus on the interaction process between parties. In a way we may describe them as assumptions shared by a community of practice, expressed in a variety of specific methods and techniques. This is not the case for the third and last principle we want to mention – the rationalization of conflict. Emery and Purser (1996) defend a position here which is different, and which has stimulated a strong debate amongst practitioners.

When differences and disagreements arise in a search conference, the goal is not to negotiate some form of agreement, and "solve" the underlying conflict. Disagreement is acknowledged, but should not get in the way of the real task of the conference : establishing common ground in planning for the future. To rationalize conflict means to understand and clarify real differences, to identify as precisely as possible the line between

agreement and disagreement, and once the disagreement is clarified, to acknowledge the conflict and set it aside. Groups tend to overestimate the area of conflict, and the emotions associated with the conflict reinforce this tendency. This may blind them to their common interests. By not focusing on the conflict, and by examining differences in a rational way, energy is directed towards shared values and perceptions. Once some common ground is identified, the conference works to enlarge this area through collaborative work. From this discussion it should be clear that common ground is not the same as full consensus. Only through understanding and accepting existing differences collaboration may develop.

We hope that with this discussion the reader who is not experienced with the search conference method has enough information to follow our cultural analysis. Before we can propose our empirical findings we must first explain what we understand by a cultural perspective.

Towards a cultural perspective.

To state that the field of conflict handling has ignored culture so far, would be unfair to the numerous authors who have tried to develop a cultural perspective in recent years (Avruch, e.a. 1991; Lytle, 1999; Cohen,1991; Brett, 1998; Brett & Okumura, 1998; Tjosvold & Leung, 1998; Tinsley, 1998). However, especially in the prescriptive literature on different conflict handling methods, the cultural aspect is bluntly absent[3]. Fisher and Ury's "Getting to Yes" (Fisher & Ury, 1981) is a good example

in case. Although the authors do not explicitly claim that their method is universal, the absence of any reference to the cultural context and the many examples from international negotiations implicitly convey the message that people are the same everywhere, and that this basic humanity grants universality to the advice of the authors. This assumption is in sharp contrast to the conclusion of those who study conflict from a cultural perspective, i.e. that in intercultural conflict resolution a cultural analysis is an irreducible part (Avruch, 1998, p. 98).

Emery and Purser's book on the search conference suffers from a similar absence of culture as an essential element in shaping human cognition and social action. Although the search conference method has been applied "all over the world", examples are mostly drawn from American (US) or Australian cases, and the authors do not mention culture as an influencing variable in the conference process. In fact, the term "culture" does not occur in the index of the book. Far from accusing the authors for advocating a simplistic notion of universality ("in case of dealing with non-Americans, speak louder and slower"), our experience leads us to acknowledge the importance of a cultural analysis of the search conference process.

A cultural analysis emanates from the assumption that the way people perceive and understand their social environment and the rules that govern their social (inter)action are fundamentally influenced by their cultural adherence. This cultural adherence is related to the membership of specific social groups, that serve as "containers" for a specific culture. Given the

diversity of groups and perspectives that can be found in today's human societies, it follows that we should be extremely careful with claims of universality. The purpose of a cultural analysis is to generate awareness of the cultural roots of a perspective. There is no a-cultural perspective (i.e. a perspective which is not rooted in a social context), but although culture is always present, it can best be seen when thrown in relief by the quality of a difference (Avruch,1998). As a cultural perspective therefor is always based on contrast, it is inevitably a *trans-cultural* perspective (Steyaert & Janssens, 1997).

Contrasting cultural perspectives, however, will arouse simplification through the use of general terms. As a consequence the described cultures will be presented as more homogeneous, timeless and uniformly distributed than it is in reality (Avruch, 1998). We should not forget that, especially in our complex industrialized society, cultural roots are dynamic, multiple and tend to be fragmented (Meyerson & Martin, 1987). Cultures are not homogeneously distributed over a population, and individual persons will possesses multiple cultures, in the same way as a speaker controls different "registers" of the same language or dialect.

A TRANSCULTURAL INQUIRY.

Method

To explore the cultural roots of the search conference method, and its possible biases, we studied the reactions and behavior of Chinese students

in two search conference simulations. The simulations were part of an international MBA program in Leuven. They were organized to let the students experience the importance and dynamics of collaborative processes in cross-sectional networks of organizations (Gray, 1989; Gray & Wood, 1991).

The organization of the conferences was largely in the hands of the faculty. However, students participated in choosing the domain and deciding on which stakeholders would be "invited". Students choose which stakeholder they wanted to represent. On average, stakeholder groups counted three to four representatives, and between seven and nine stakeholder groups were represented in the conference. The conference itself would take two full days, and strictly followed the method as described by Emery and Purser (1996).

The number of participants in each conference ranged from about 20 to 30. In each conference at least 10 different nationalities were represented, from Europe, Asia and both Americas. After the first conference (which occurred in 1997) we interviewed about 10 Asian participants on their experience in the conference. These interviews were conducted in English. When preparing for the 1999 conference, the opportunity arose to collaborate with a Sinologist, which allowed us to observe the Chinese participants during the conference and interview them in Mandarin. The choice to focus on the Chinese participants therefor was mainly a pragmatic one. In total 11 persons contributed to the study (6 men, 5 women). All of them were from different parts of mainland China.

Most of them had limited experience in working for mixed joint-ventures in China before coming to Belgium for their MBA study.

The methodology we used for this study is traditionally referred to as "grounded theory" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In this approach the researcher does not start with a preset theoretical framework or specific hypotheses he wants to test. He develops a theoretical model in a dialogue with his data, building from first level observations to an integrated framework (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Data were gathered through formal interviews (which were transcribed afterwards), participant observation (creating field notes) and numerous informal conversations before and after the conferences. Subjects were questioned on their experience in the conference, as well as on different aspects of conflict handling practices in China. In deciding who to interview and when, emphasis was on theoretical relevance, rather than statistical representativeness. For Glaser and Strauss (1967) this "theoretical sampling" constitutes an essential element of their methodology.

We are aware that our research has its limitations. First we may not forget that we did not observe a "real" search conference, but only a simulation. In the discussion of the results it will become clear that this has probably more relevance for people in a "high context" culture such as the Chinese (Hall, 1976), than for us. The fact that the conference is part of a course requirement also implies that the conference manager has a double role towards the participants/students, which will certainly influence their behavior towards him.

A second limitation refers to the scope of the sample. Although qualitative research is an ongoing process, which is never really "finished", we must acknowledge that we did not yet reach the stage in which "saturation" of the categories is evident. More observations, probably in different contexts, are necessary to refine and corroborate the findings we present here, which must be seen as "research in process". We will try to observe the required prudence in the next sections.

First level interpretation.

In this paragraph we will describe the cultural observations which we have grouped in five categories. Since the mere observation of a person of a different culture already assumes a process of interpretation and translation, we refer to these findings as first level interpretations (Van Maanen, 1979)[4].

A first observation when talking to Chinese about conflict and conflict handling methods, is the strikingly different vocabulary they use. Our Chinese subjects did not spontaneously use terms such as negotiation, consensus, compromise, agreement, collaboration or mediation, which are standard within our community of practice of conflict handling. When asked for them, they would refer to these terms as "rather formal", "it is a big word", "only used [describing situations] between companies or in politics". Instead, they rather speak about respect and authority, trust, harmony and balance, and the importance of relationship (*guanxi*) and face (*mianzi*). This vocabulary is a first indicator that the perspective of our

Chinese participants is different, since the language people use reflects the social space they are living in.

A second observation relates to an in-group out-group phenomenon that appeared during the search conference. Although the Chinese participants were distributed over the different stakeholder groups, they tended to behave as one group, in a way separating themselves from the rest of the conference. During breaks or informal moments, they would cling together and start talking in Mandarin, and in small group work their participation was greatly enhanced when they outnumbered other nationalities. As such, this can be interpreted as a normal reaction of finding support with their own people, and taking a break from the continuous burden of having to speak a foreign language. However, one incident showed us that there was a more fundamental social process behind this grouping behavior. Towards the end of the conference, one Chinese participant representing Monsanto gave a very rude personal comment to one of the (non-Chinese) representatives of Greenpeace. This personal attack, which clearly went against the ground rules for the conference that had been determined beforehand, seemed to be partly tactical, and partly an expression of irritation with the person's behavior. As a reaction, several Chinese participants tried to disarm the attack by formulating an excuse ("Chinese men don't know how to joke") towards the rest of the participants, while at the same time strongly reprimanding the man's behavior in Chinese. Interestingly, the man was not chastised in defense of Greenpeace or the search conference ground rules, but *because*

he had defiled the reputation of the Chinese group (our emphasis). This incident showed us that, although they were expected to assume different roles within the context of the conference, our Chinese participants continued to use their in-group as primary reference for adjusting their social behavior, and had difficulty to behave as a part of the search conference community.

At several times during the conference and during the interviews, the notion of *hierarchy* popped up, even in settings we would consider inappropriate for such term. It was not the notion itself, but its consistent appearance that made it a distinctive category. In the interviews, the importance of respect and hierarchy in relationships showed in the implication that only high status people take initiative and make decisions : "lower levels can't make decisions"; "your superior tells you what to do"; "you have to let him [the boss] make the decision". Deference to authority was spontaneously associated to obedience to one's parents : "If you have a conflict with your parents, you are always wrong, you will always loose". Therefor it is no surprise that, in case of mediation, the third party that was proposed was always someone of higher status than the parties involved.

Also some behavioral examples illustrate the importance of hierarchy for our Chinese participants. Speaking about the conference facilitator, e.g. one respondent commented that he should be "old enough to be respected". Respect can be shown in different ways : one young female participant, who was very active and lively in general, did not find it appropriate to speak up in the presence of Chinese men who were her senior. When the

conference facilitator asked for a personal opinion on the conference process during a community meeting, Chinese participants would sometimes reply by a long citation from the course material. During the caucuses, when the participants were working together in groups of 8 to 10, Chinese immediately referred to the member who volunteered to write ideas on the flip-chart pads, as their "group leader", and behaved accordingly.

Our fourth observation relates to the search conference's ideal of open communication. It was clear that the Chinese participants were uncomfortable with this ideal. Overall, spontaneity of communication was low. They were the only ones to raise their hand e.g. during the plenary sessions and wait until one of the facilitators would give them the floor. Many Chinese took extensive personal notes, which is against the ground rule that all information should be made publicly available. In reporting out on subgroup work, Chinese were strikingly absent, or in some cases, started the presentation, but quickly managed to pass the task to someone else from the group. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, expressing personal opinions or experiences was often avoided by citing from known texts, or avoiding participation altogether. Although it may have played a role, it seemed to us that their discomfort went much further than trying to avoid losing face because of a poor mastering of English.

A final observation was derived from the interviews and deals with the institutional aspects of an agreement. In China, the legal aspects of an agreement or contract doesn't seem to be very powerful. Several

interviewees claim that "the [Chinese] legal system is not very efficient",
and consequently "there is no legal protection", even when others indicate
that this situation is rapidly changing. The authority that guarantees
compliance of the parties seems to lie in the social relationship, and in the
fact that an agreement is always endorsed by a (group) leader. This
provides an institutional support for an agreement, which is different from
our impersonal legal structures.

Second order interpretation.

Our second order analysis groups the five first order observations into
two categories. One category refers to the different cultural meaning of
concepts such as conflict, agreement, consensus, collaboration, and
responsibility. The other category refers to the cultural assumptions
regulating participation in the discussion, social norms and other
obligations. The categories represent the dual influence of culture on
human behavior : how people perceive and interpret their environment,
and which set of rules they apply to determine appropriate behavior in a
given setting.

The relationship between first and second order categories is shown in
figure 1. The first order category "hierarchy" will be used for both second
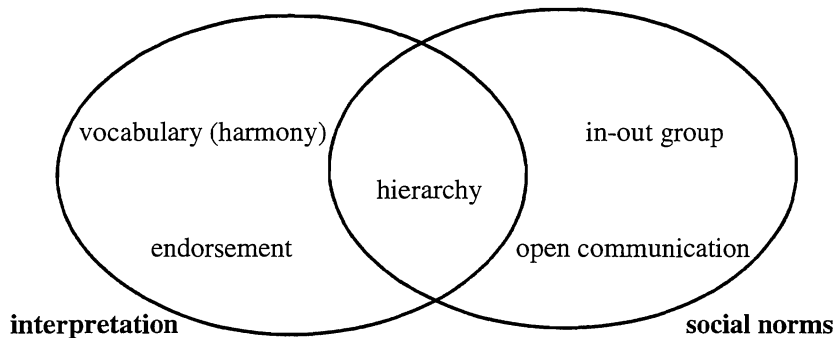order categories.

Figure 1 : relationship between first order and second order categories.

The reactions of our Chinese participants to the search conference

situation, is strongly influenced by their cultural conceptions of conflict

situations. Within this cultural conception, their primary concern is to build

and maintain good relationships (*guanxi*). To preserve the harmony in their

relational network is more important than the issue(s) at hand. Conflicts are

primarily defined in terms of relational consequences : you have a conflict

with someone, about something (instead of having a conflict about

something, with someone). During a search conference, however, the quest

for common ground is fueled by parties openly stating and defending their

position, standing up for their interests and demanding respect for their

positions. In such a context, their cultural conception makes it difficult for

the Chinese participants to speak up, since they will first look for ways of

improving their *guanxi*.

One of the basic assumptions of the search conference methodology is

that every person behaves on behalf of his own individual identity. This

concept differs fundamentally from that of a collectivist cultures such as the Chinese. In the conception of our Chinese participants, agreements are build within and enforced by the social network of the parties. Individuals are always part of a hierarchical society, and must respect their role within this structure. Therefor, the concept of an autonomous individual, engaging freely into volontary agreement, is something they cannot culturaly grasp.

From this first category we may conclude that our Chinese participants had difficulty in taking their role in the search conference because some of its basic building blocks (relationships serve issues, and individuals are free to engage in agreement) do not correspond to their own cultural categories. This difficulty is reinforced when we look at the social norms and obligations regarding participation in a group discussion. It is clear that such norms and obligations will strongly affect participants behavior in a search conference setting, especially when the behaviors that are demanded by the methodology appear to be culturally unfeasible.

From our first order analysis, we know that Chinese participants have difficulties with "equal" relationships. They tend to categorize people as well in horizontal (in-out group) as in vertical (hierarchy) dimensions. Any relationship is dominated by positioning oneself against the other on this social grid. A relationship amongst equals is rare, since vertical differences dominate their social networks. Even within a family, siblings have their status ranks. Even neutral relationships, which could be considered a softer version of egalitarianism, do not exist, since that would demand a suspension or indetermination of the social comparison process.

This elaborated social structure is important for Chinese, since their interactive behavior is strongly regulated, i.e. there are strong behavioral norms to what kind of behavior is appropriate in what kind of relationships. Because of their adherence to face and network harmony, Chinese participants approach a social situation with a strong sense of obligation, and not showing the appropriate behavior may have more dramatic consequences than in our culture. In case of doubt, when they are not sure of the nature of the social relationships, they will prefer to withdraw from public interaction, trying to clarify the relationship first through informal contact. Their strong sense of obligation (related to the dynamics of *mianzi*) makes them risk-avoiding.

In contrast the search conference starts from an egalitarian view on participants. Each person has a voice in the discussion and there is no difference between the voice of an expert or a grassroot person. The idea of the conference is to create a temporal social vacuum, where people can experiment in their interaction without continuous reference to their positions in the outside world. It is clear from the description above, that Chinese participants have difficulties to participate without reservation in a situation without a clear social structure. One reaction may be to continue to work with the available social cues, even when the conference process tries to overcome such relational differences as barriers to full communication (e.g. treating the pen-holder as a leader). Another reaction may be to avoid public participation altogether. Both reactions will significantly reduce the level of contribution of the Chinese participants.

Discussion.

Although this paper does not intend to study or describe Chinese culture as such, the observations we made on the small sample of Chinese participants in our search conferences do fit existing descriptions of Chinese culture. Chinese culture is known to be collectivist, with a strong in-group out-group distinction, an individual identity mainly derived from the social network, and an emphasis on social obligations (Hu & Grove, 1991). It scores high on power distance (Hofstede, 1991), so that "in fact, [they] feel most comfortable in relationships where positions of superior and subordinate, leader and dependent, have been clearly established" (Solomon, 1995, p. 20). The combination of collectivism and high power distance is often cited as the main reason why Chinese prefer to avoid conflict, at least within the in-group network, and prefer to rely on supervisory solutions, i.e. solutions dictated by people in power (Brett; 1998). However, recent research has shown that conflict avoidance is more complex than we can think of in our cultural frame, and embraces different strategies, such as group oriented behavior, trying to improve *guanxi*, work around the problem ("outflanking"), and eliciting directive behavior from higher status people (Tjosvold & Leung, 1998; Lytle, 1999). Chinese culture is finally known to be very context-sensitive (Hall, 1976; Douglas, 1996), where communication rests on expressive and suggestive language, rather than instrumental and direct speech. The high-context nature of Chinese culture also explains the importance that is attached to subtle

social cues which may seem insubstantial and inconsequential to us.

Although the search conference methodology has some features which appeal to Chinese participants (such as the importance of building trust in the domain network), the difficulties clearly are major. Our cultural analysis explains why Chinese participants were uncomfortable with the process, and why their contribution was limited. In general, the concept of an unstructured community of individuals engaging freely in personal discussions on an equal basis, is alien to the Chinese participants. They don't understand the (social) situation, and seem unable to adapt to it in the short run. This affects their ability to enter the search conference as a transitional space where new ideas can be created and tested.

From these observations the conclusion inevitably follows that the search conference is not an a-cultural methodology, that can be applied in any setting for which it was developed, without more than cosmetic attention to cultural differences. We have observed that the specific cultural background (individualistic, egalitarian and low-context) of the method makes it difficult for people from strongly different cultures to participate as full members of the conference community[5]. This does not mean that a search conference as such must be discarded in an intercultural context, but rather that it needs to be adapted to the specific cultural environment.

Since every cultural environment may be different, we will restrict ourselves to some suggestions which we think useful in a search conference with a significant number of Chinese participants. We assume that these participants are not homogeneously concentrated in one or two

stakeholder groups, but mixed with people from other backgrounds[6]. One adaptation would be to have a Chinese co-facilitator, who has sufficiently accommodated to western interaction patterns, so he or she can serve as a boundary spanner between the different cultural perspectives. During the conference itself, plenary sessions may be more structured, or abandoned altogether, in favor of other exchange platforms. Most important is to take time to understand the search conference as a culture producing event, by discussing within as well as between cultural groups the ground rules and their cultural meaning, the role of the facilitator, and the nature of the agreements, action plans or other forms of output. Such discussions should be started before the conference begins, and repeated throughout the process, during "cultural time-outs". In this way the cultural diversity amongst the participants will not become a barrier to the "normal" process of the conference, but will be the starting point of the development of an ideosyncratic intercultural search process.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have reported our study of the cultural assumptions of the search conference method. From interviews with and observations of 11 Chinese participants in two search conference simulations, we have tried to highlight some cultural issues that affect participation in a conference. In general, these can be divided into two categories : one related to the cultural meaning of conflicts, conflict handling, agreement, facilitation, etc., the other related to the norms and obligations that govern social

interactions. We have come to the conclusion that the idea of an unstructured community of individuals engaging freely in personal discussions on an equal basis, is alien to the Chinese participants. In the discussion section we identified individualism, egalitarianism and low-context communication as major cultural assumptions underlying the search conference method, as it is designed by Emery & Purser (1996). We also gave some suggestions as to how the search conference methodology can be adapted to a cultural context which is more hierarchical, collectivist and high-context.

We are aware of the limitations of this study. First of all, our sample was limited, not only in numbers, but also in cultural diversity, since we only studied Chinese participants (not other cultures) pursuing an MBA degree in a small Belgian university town. Because of the limited sample, we are not sure whether we have reached full saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in our results. Secondly, we did not study actual search conferences, but only simulations. Attitudes of participants in a real life search conference will probably differ from those of students who are only playing the role of a stakeholder. Because we restricted ourselves to simulations, we have no comparative data on the outcomes of the search conferences, and we can draw no conclusions on how cultural dynamics have affected such outcomes. More research is necessary to support and further develop the findings that are reported here.

Some preliminary conclusions however, can be drawn from this study. We believe that we have provided sufficient arguments in favor of a

development of a cultural approach to the search conference methodology and to other conflict handling methods. Such a cultural approach will be beneficial for the field, far beyond the application or adaptation of these methods in an international, i.e. intercultural, context. First we have a lot to learn from high-context and strong collectivist cultures, regarding how to build relational trust between parties. The management of "face" is one exemple in case, where our Western habits are considered particularly rude by e.g. Japanese. Secondly, our study shows that the basic concept of conflict handling itself could be enriched in order to capture approaches which are not based on our (culturally biased) concept of open communication. A cultural approach may help to make the distinction between what is essential to the search conference method, granting it claims of universal application, and what is mere cultural wrapping.

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Notes

1. In the search conference method, the general theme or issue is formulated in terms of a domain statement, which delimits the problem area which will be "searched" during the conference. The domain statement does not refer explicitly to specific parties or their concerns (Trist, 1983).

2. Those who would like to find out more about the process itself, or with other crucial aspects of the conference such as its preparation, should turn to Emery & Purser (1996). We apologize to those who are well acquainted with the method.

3. For a balanced discussion of the difficult relationship between conflict handling and culture, see Avruch (1998).

4. In this study the word "translation" must be taken literally, since most of the observations were in Mandarin.

5. Ironically, the basic concept of the search conference method — building trust and common ground in a network of stakeholders — does fit easy into e.g. a Chinese cultural frame, because its emphasis on relation building and its rationalization of conflict (Solomon, 1995).

6. If Chinese participants are concentrated in only one stakeholder group, it is clear that the in-group out-group phenomenon will dominate the interaction. In this case, intercultural dynamics will arise which are well described in e.g. Solomon (1995).