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Dialogue as a source of positive emotions during cross-border post-acquisition socio-cultural integration

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study was to analyze how dialogue can be used to promote post-acquisition socio-cultural integration. Specifically, it addressed questions regarding when and how companies can utilize dialogue to generate positivity regarding socio-cultural integration.

Design/methodology/approach – A single case study approach was adopted owing to its suitability for creating in-depth understanding in the context of socio-cultural integration. Primary data were collected via interviews, an employee satisfaction survey, and participant observation. Secondary data were obtained from the case company's internal materials, such as strategies, integration workflows, and employee magazines. Analysis methods included descriptive statistics and thematic qualitative analysis.

Findings – The findings suggest that dialogue can be used to create positivity regarding socio-cultural integration throughout the stages of unfreezing, moving, and refreezing by actively engaging employees in voicing, listening, respecting, and suspending. It is proposed that (1) cultural conflict during post-acquisition socio-cultural integration can be overcome through the generation of positivity; (2) dialogue enables the collective management of emotions during post-acquisition integration by offering a platform for creating positivity and social cohesion; and (3) due to its collaborative and engaging nature, dialogue provides an especially effective means of communication for overcoming cross-cultural conflict.

Originality/value – To the authors' knowledge, this is the first attempt to showcase dialogue as a specific means of communication for creating positivity during cross-border socio-cultural integration. This study reached beyond comparative cultural research to offer views on positivity, emotion during socio-cultural integration, and dialogue as means for overcoming cross-cultural conflict.

Keywords Dialogue, Positivity, Socio-cultural Integration, Mergers and Acquisitions, Cross-cultural Conflict

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

While mergers and acquisitions (M&A)[1] have become increasingly popular as a method of achieving organizational growth and development (World Investment Report, 2016), the acquisition success rate has remained mediocre at best (e.g., Cartwright and Schoenberg, 2006; Schoenberg, 2006; Graebner et al., 2017). The growing body of literature on post-

acquisition integration focusing on the human side of M&A argues that failure is largely due to socio-cultural challenges, such as resistance to change and acculturation stress (e.g., Very et al., 1996; Birkinshaw et al., 2000; Stahl and Voigt, 2008; Sarala et al., 2016). Yet, despite cultural differences and clashes having been identified as major challenges to post-acquisition integration, the research results remain conflicting (e.g., Stahl et al., 2005; Stahl and Voigt, 2008; Weber et al., 2011). In fact, it has been argued that pre-acquisition cultural differences would have little value in predicting post-acquisition integration outcomes. Instead, they seem to present a "double-edged sword" or a "mixed blessing"; in other words, cultural differences may be positively or negatively associated with M&A performance (e.g., Stahl and Voigt, 2008).

Culture plays a key role especially during post-acquisition integration. Socio-cultural integration connotes changes made to the organizational structure and culture following an acquisition. It is the most complex and time-consuming aspect of integration (Shrivastava, 1986), yet it is critical for success (e.g., Birkinshaw et al., 2000). Due to the organizational changes involved, cross-border M&A may be extremely stressful (e.g., Ager, 2011), provoking a wide range of emotions. Current M&A research acknowledges the nuanced role that positive and negative emotions play in how organizational changes are perceived and experienced, as they help employees understand what is happening in the organization (Kiefer, 2002; Kusstatscher and Cooper, 2005). Thus, emotions should not simply be overcome but be understood to better comprehend changes such as M&A (Kiefer, 2002; Kusstatscher and Cooper, 2005; Clarke and Salleh, 2011).

Although much of the work on emotions during M&A has focused on negative emotions, it has been found that M&A also elicit positive emotions (e.g., Kusstatscher, 2006; Raitis et al., 2017). The recent interest in positive organizational scholarship among international business scholars has encouraged researchers to rethink previously taken-for-

granted views on cultural distance and foreignness (Stahl et al., 2016). Positivity has been found to lead to higher performance at the organizational and individual levels (Cameron, 2017). In fact, researchers claim that positivity regarding change is critical for successful socio-cultural integration (Birkinshaw et al., 2000). Here, positivity is defined as positive emotions regarding the socio-cultural integration process.

Communication can elicit (positive or negative) emotions during M&A. The present study explored the influence of one form of communication—namely, dialogue—during post-acquisition socio-cultural integration. Dialogue refers to interactive communication with a distinctly collaborative aim (Bavelas et al., 1997). The objective of dialogue is to create an atmosphere where thought, attention, and assumptions can be collectively explored, and where meaning flows freely. It differs from consensus building in that it allows individuals to create shared meanings rather than focus on finding a logical solution to a specific problem. The purpose of dialogue is to enable individuals to learn how to think together (Isaacs, 1993). Thus, dialogue is different from the more competitive modes of communication, such as discussion and debate, which center on advocating one's viewpoint to "win an argument" (Oliver and Jacobs, 2007). This paper suggests that the promotion of interactive communication—in this case, dialogue—may help in overcoming socio-cultural challenges during integration, due to the emotional comfort it can provide amid stressful organizational change.

The purpose of the present study was to analyze how dialogue can be used to promote post-acquisition socio-cultural integration by evoking positive emotions regarding change. More specifically, the study addressed questions regarding when and how companies can utilize dialogue to create positivity regarding socio-cultural integration. This paper presents the conceptual framework of the study and provides an illustrative example of how dialogue can be used to create positivity and thereby promote socio-cultural integration during a cross-

border acquisition. The empirical evidence used in the study was based on a single case study of a Finnish–German acquisition, which was followed in real time over two years.

This study took several steps to advance existing knowledge. Whereas cross-cultural research often focuses on comparing different cultural or geographical contexts, the world is becoming increasingly international, therefore highlighting the interconnected and dynamic nature or cross-cultural encounters. The literature review carried out by Tjosvold et al. (2014) suggests that open-minded communication and mutually beneficial relationships are critical for overcoming cross-cultural conflicts. However, at the same time, cultural differences can act as barriers to open-minded communication and relationship-building. Therefore, more research is necessary to uncover how to promote open-minded communication during conflict (Tjosvold et al., 2014). Cross-border M&A continue to provide a fruitful context for studying intercultural conflict and increasing the understanding of the great force of culture in human contact, as well as in terms of open-minded communication, such as dialogue.

Although cultural differences have been frequently studied in the socio-cultural integration context, the understanding of how companies can overcome difficulties related to differences remains limited (Rottig, 2011). Previous literature on emotions that arise during socio-cultural integration seems to conclude that emotions are primarily experienced in the acquired company, that they are triggered by personal circumstances, and are mainly negative, and thus, they are likely to cause poor organizational outcomes (Graebner et al., 2017). However, it has been suggested that a focus on positivity could be a very fruitful addition to the socio-cultural integration research (Stahl et al., 2013). Therefore, special attention is being paid to promoting positivity as a means to ease socio-cultural integration.

This paper offers a specific way for managers to promote socialization through interactive engagement. While, for example, Larson and Lubatkin (2001) highlight the importance of socialization rituals and social controls, their work does not particularly focus

on the forms of socialization that can occur during M&A. Yalablik (2013) suggests that during M&A, socialization—learning to perform one's task in a new organizational setting—can be achieved through communication and training. Here, the focus is on dialogue. As previous studies have also failed to suggest how collective emotions can be managed during M&A (Huy, 2012), by focusing on dialogue and positivity, this paper offers managers a perspective on how emotions can be managed and positivity fostered during socio-cultural integration.

Furthermore, although the literature highlights the importance of communication (e.g., Schweiger and DeNisi, 1991; Weber and Tarba, 2010; Angwin, 2016), less is known about how communication practices shape the dynamics of post-M&A integration. Indeed, rather little is known about the specific communication practices and tools, such as dialogue, used in post-acquisition integration (Graebner et al., 2017). Consequently, the effectiveness of communication in dealing with conflict during socio-cultural integration necessitates further research (Weber and Drori, 2011; Angwin et al., 2016). The present study focused on how the communication practice of dialogue influences employee experiences during socio-cultural integration.

Literature review

Dialogue: from communication to interaction

Communication is a key concern during socio-cultural integration (e.g., Schweiger and DeNisi, 1991; Kusstatscher and Cooper, 2005; Angwin et al., 2016). Moreover, the literature on organizational socialization suggests that social cohesion is achieved primarily through interaction (Morrison, 2002; Cooper-Thomas and Anderson, 2006). Accordingly, it has been found that communication that is participative, reflective, and positive best enhances socio-

cultural integration (Clayton, 2010). Thus, interaction, for example, in the form of dialogue, may be more beneficial than top-down communication for achieving social cohesion.

Dialogue is a unique form of communication that emphasizes interaction. The word originates from the Greek words dia and logos, signifying a flow of meaning (Senge, 1990; Isaacs, 1999; Bohm, 2003). Dialogue involves embracing diverse viewpoints and understanding that no viewpoint is more or less legitimate than any other (Oliver and Jacobs, 2007). If group members are willing to suspend their own judgments and embrace others' viewpoints, the group can advance from discussion to dialogue (Schein, 1993). When parties successfully engage in dialogue, they move toward the possibility of converging their beliefs and values (Oliver and Jacobs, 2007) and building a shared culture (Schein, 1993; Bohm, 2003). In practice, dialogue can be described as collaborative communication utilizing verbal and non-verbal means. To become dialogue, social interaction must, therefore, be a two-way activity. Alternating monologues have no place in dialogue. It is an interactive process; during dialogue, the speaker as well as the listener(s) perform an active role in being attentive and interested (Bavelas et al., 1997).

In general, effective communication in international business necessitates an understanding of the influence of the socio-cultural context (Adair et al., 2016). In cross-border acquisitions, sensitivity in communication is decisive, as integration is based on subjective, individual interpretations and experiences (Risberg, 2001). However, in intercultural situations, reaching a state of shared inquiry and understanding is more complex and time-consuming (Schein, 1993). Therefore, the quality of the interaction determines the effectiveness of the dialogue (Isaacs, 1999). Quality in this context is defined as the perception of clarity, responsiveness, and comfortability in the interaction (Liu et al., 2010), with emphasis on the emotional element of comfortability. Interaction that is perceived as

clear, engaging, and comfortable, such as dialogue, enables companies to improve the outcomes of the interaction (cf. Liu et al., 2010) and thereby ease socio-cultural integration.

Socio-cultural integration following cross-border M&A

According to recent research, the influence of cultural differences in cross-border M&A is mediated by socio-cultural integration. Arguably, interpersonal relationships that are experienced as positive, trust in the acquisition partner, and the successful creation of a shared identity can render cultural differences, if not insignificant, at least less damaging (cf. Stahl and Voigt, 2008; Stahl et al., 2011; Hajro, 2015). Thus, the effectiveness of human resource practices, like communication, in dealing with potential conflict situations provides a fruitful avenue for research (Weber and Drori, 2011). As there is no agreement on the causal linkages between cultural differences and M&A outcomes (e.g., Stahl and Voigt, 2008; Sarala, 2010; Weber et al., 2011), this paper suggests moving beyond this question of causality, important though it is, toward more pragmatic understanding. Therefore, in this study, cultural differences were considered as part of the socio-cultural integration context.

Ultimately, socio-cultural integration is aimed at creating a shared identity among acquisition partners following the acquisition. In this delicate process, even subtle cultural differences between seemingly compatible cultures can pose a threat (Hajro, 2015), because individuals are emotionally attached to the culture with which they identify (Bastien, 1987) and thus protect their culture as a part of their group identity. Whereas national cultures often include fundamental differences, more apparent and immediate differences are found at an organizational level (Sarala and Vaara, 2010). At the organizational level, integration problems often arise from differences in the norms and values of the acquisition partners (Stahl et al., 2013). Such differences may lead to cultural conflict, which increases misunderstandings and thus complicates integration (Rottig et al., 2013). Therefore, adaptation to others' cultural norms may be crucial for overcoming cross-cultural issues

(Adair et al., 2001). Accordingly, socio-cultural integration may take years to complete (e.g., Cartwright and Cooper, 1993; Birkinshaw et al., 2000; Kusstatscher and Cooper, 2005).

In their recent case study, Rottig et al. (2017) identify several success factors for effectively managing socio-cultural integration. Recognizing and announcing shared values, cultural compatibility, and common identity ease commitment and unification. Similarly, management's involvement, vision, and example can be used to form a joint identity and discourage "us versus them" thinking. In addition, personal interaction as well as constant internal communication can be used to form a positive future image to encourage integration.

Indeed, positive emotions during M&A have been found to emerge more often in connection with a focus on human- rather than task-related matters during the integration process (Bansal, 2015). This paper shows how deciding to focus on generating positivity and unity, instead of focusing on overcoming cultural differences, can provide a creative solution to the struggle to find intercultural harmony. Through this small but significant change in perspective, the escalation of cross-cultural conflict during socio-cultural integration can arguably be thwarted and a more mutually beneficial relationship can be created. Therefore, the key question during socio-cultural integration may not be how to neutralize negativity but how to create positivity.

Emotion in socio-cultural integration

In recent years, M&A researchers have studied emotions from diverse viewpoints, such as acquisition outcomes (Gunkel et al., 2015), culture (Clarke and Salleh, 2011; Reus, 2012), identity (Ager, 2011), employee behavior (Sinkovics et al., 2011), rationalization (Vince, 2006), change (Kiefer, 2002), and coping (Fugate et al., 2002). According to Fredrickson (2013, p. 3), "emotions are brief, multisystem responses to some change in the way people interpret—or appraise—their current circumstances." Emotions arise from an appraisal of the environment (Lazarus, 1993; Fredrickson, 2001) and are linked to personal values and goals;

in order to become emotional, a situation must be considered important for the self (Lazarus, 1991; Fredrickson, 2001). As a result of the appraisal, several responses arise. These include, but are not limited to, subjective experience, facial expressions, and physiological signs (Fredrickson, 2001). In the present student, the subjective experience was emphasized. It can be roughly categorized into positive (happiness, pride, relief, and love), negative (anger, anxiety, fright, guilt, shame, sadness, disgust, envy, and jealousy), and mixed (hope, gratitude, and compassion) emotions (Lazarus, 1993).

During M&A, emotions arise in response to perceived challenges in upholding certain values or pursuing certain objectives. Such challenges and consequent emotions may arise before the acquisition occurs, and usually peak during the announcement or formal integration. Emotional reactions can also significantly outlast formal integration (Sinkovics et al., 2011). Negative emotions can increase employee identification with the pre-acquisition organization, whereas positive emotions may lead to a stronger social identity in the new organization (Kusstatscher and Cooper, 2005). This is one reason why emotions are central to M&A: negative emotions are likely to hinder post-acquisition integration, whereas positive emotions may advance it.

So far, the focus has been on individual emotions. However, during socio-cultural integration, group emotions may be of even greater interest. Group emotions arise as a result of membership in a particular social group. They are the individual responses of group members triggered by events that have perceived relevance to the group. Group emotions may become collective emotions if many members of the group experience similar emotional responses to an event (Goldenberg et al., 2014). Group emotions can arise either in or from groups. Group-shared emotions necessitate co-presence (e.g., at a rock concert), whereas group-based emotions do not (e.g., national pride). If positivity regarding the deal has not been fostered, especially group-based emotions related to the pre-acquisition organizational

identity and culture can cause group members to exhibit protective behaviors during M&A (Menges and Kilduff, 2015).

In addition, employees tend to mirror the behaviors and emotions of top managers (Ashkanasy and Daus, 2002), and managers, whether they are staying or leaving following an acquisition, set the mood and the tone of the post-acquisition integration phase (Krug and Hegarty, 2001). Thus, the management of the socio-cultural integration may have a significant emotional impact. Inter-organizational learning and understanding are essential for successful socio-cultural integration (cf. Schweiger and Goulet, 2005). Such learning—and cross-cultural sensitivity—necessitates dialogue and is critical for organizational transformation. Dialogue fosters mutual trust and valid communication (i.e., a shared understanding of what is being said), which are the basic elements of all effective group actions (Schein, 1993). Thus, dialogue enables, and may facilitate, the formation of a shared understanding. Accordingly, dialogue can be used to achieve successful socio-cultural integration.

Dialogue as a source of positivity during cultural change

Dialogue during socio-cultural integration is essentially dialogue during cultural change. During socio-cultural integration, a shared understanding helps to create a cohesive organizational culture and enables a successful acquisition. Creating positive attitudes among employees from both the acquiring and acquired companies is essential for achieving organizational culture convergence. Thus, managers strive for employee satisfaction as an end in itself (Birkinshaw et al., 2000). This is why the comfort element of the quality of communication (Liu et al., 2010) is essential to dialogue. Interestingly, however, what is labelled as emotionally good or bad, positive or negative, is not straightforward. The level of arousal (Watson and Tellegen, 1985) and the cultural background of the individual (Scherer, 1997; Mesquita and Karasawa, 2002) affect what the individual experiences as pleasant or unpleasant.

What is referred to as dialogue here closely resembles what can otherwise be called constructive controversy (Tjosvold, 2008) or open-minded discussion (Tjosvold et al., 2014). Constructive controversy refers to situations where, due to aligned goals, differing opinions and views are used to create new solutions and commit to new positions. Four sets of skills are necessary for benefitting from controversy. Developing and expressing opinions is based on previous experience and available information. Questioning one's own opinions and hearing those of others enables an exchange of perspectives that motivates an active search for a better understanding of the problem at hand. Integrating such understanding allows for devising more useful solutions, which can be agreed upon and implemented more easily (Tjosvold, 2008). In utilizing interpersonal communication skills, individuals can fall into the open-minded discussion cycle of expressing, understanding, integrating, and agreeing (Tjosvold et al., 2014). This is what occurs in dialogue through voicing, listening, respecting, and suspending (Isaacs, 1999). Figure 1 displays how the dialogue process unfolds, influenced by three different information-processing motivations.

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In Figure 1, the core of dialogue is depicted as the interconnected actions of voicing, listening, respecting, and suspending. Through voicing, participants present their true selves and their true emotions. In listening, participants take an active role in trying to empathize with the speaker. Respecting refers to the awareness that everyone is entitled to their position and no one may be able to fully understand another's position. Thus, respecting creates space for everything that is voiced. In suspending, emphasis is placed on not forming judgments about others and their viewpoints (Isaacs, 1999).

Authentic dialogue is based on epistemic, social, and compassionate information-processing motivation. Thus, true dialogue considers both reason and emotions (Choi, 2014). Epistemic information processing refers to the inclination to exert oneself toward achieving a thorough understanding (DeDreu et al., 2008). This refers to the rationality of the group decision (Choi, 2014). Social information-processing motivation refers to the kind of information that is processed (Steinel et al., 2010) and how the individual wishes the group outcomes to be distributed between the self and the group (Choi, 2014). Pro-self motivation is related to increasing one's own benefits, whereas pro-social motivations encourage pursuing group goals (Steinel et al., 2010). Compassion refers to being moved by others' suffering and wanting to help (Lazarus, 1993). Compassionate motivation refers to the willingness to elicit empathic responses (Choi, 2014). The motivation for information processing highlights the connection between emotion and dialogue.

Dialogue must also must be managed. Facilitation refers to the enactment of authority in empowering or constraining participants during dialogue (Kristiansen, 2013). Facilitating dialogue entails a responsibility to encourage participants to balance their need to speak with a need to listen and understand. Successful facilitators are able to encourage participants to visualize their own thinking. Facilitators may also need to steer the dialogue if the group seems to be falling into debate (Burson, 2002). Facilitation is not always an easy task. For example, there is a fine line between dialogue becoming thwarted by emotion or depleted without it (Ballantyne, 2004).

Nevertheless, managing emotions during dialogue enables active participation and engagement. This necessitates an awareness of one's own as well as others' emotions (Clarke, 2010). Thus, facilitators also have the important task of promoting a compassionate information-processing motivation and helping participants become aware of their own and others' emotions. Creating an atmosphere where positive emotions arise is especially

important, since positivity increases receptiveness to new ideas (Fredrickson, 2000). Facilitating such an environment can occur, for example, through asking positive questions and portraying a positive future (Whitney and Fredrickson, 2015).

In order for dialogue to successfully create positivity, it must be linked to the process of cultural change. Such group change occurs in three steps: unfreezing the existing mode, moving toward the wished-for mode, and refreezing the achieved mode (Lewin, 1947). Unfreezing refers to letting go of past culture, for example, through accustomed norms of behavior. Moving refers to adopting and internalizing new cultural norms to replace the unfrozen ones. Finally, refreezing refers to anchoring the new norms as the existing cultural frame of mind. In a socio-cultural integration context, during unfreezing, the desired post-acquisition (i.e. integrated) cultural end state is visualized and the existing pre-acquisition cultural mindset being unfrozen to enable cultural change. This allows for moving toward the desired post-acquisition socio-cultural end state and then refreezing the desired post-acquisition culture as the new status quo (cf. Lewin, 1947; Marks and Mirvis, 2011). Dialogue can be used to ease post-M&A socio-cultural integration throughout the cultural change process (Figure 2).

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This can occur throughout the process, but dialogue plays a slightly different role in each step. In unfreezing, dialogue can be used to form a shared understanding of what the desired cultural end state should be. This stems from an agreement on what is desirable in each pre-M&A culture (Cartwright and Cooper, 1993). To arrive at a truly shared understanding, members from different levels or departments of both the acquiring and

acquired companies must be included in the process. However, as strategy is primarily a management concern (cf. Schweiger et al., 1993), employees are not heard in large numbers.

During a move, dialogue centers on bringing the desired cultural end state to fruition and achieving social cohesion. As individuals are highly attached to cultures (Bastien, 1987), and changes that are personally relevant create the strongest emotions (Lazarus, 1991; Fredrickson, 2001), dialogue regarding what the new culture means for employees personally and how they can take part in making it a reality helps to create positivity. During this step, it is suggested that all employees be allowed and encouraged to take part in the dialogue. This is in accordance with the importance of creating positive attitudes toward integration among all employees on both sides (Birkinshaw et al., 2000). This step may take years to complete (Cartwright and Cooper, 1993; Birkinshaw et al., 2000).

Although refreezing centers on stabilizing the achieved cohesion, dialogue can continue to ease the process by reminding employees of how the adopted culture can be seen in daily work. In addition, such dialogue can aid in detecting if the achieved end state is still desirable. Although organizational cultures are relatively stable, sometimes minor adjustments are appropriate (Schein, 2010). Furthermore, to truly ease the integration, dialogue necessitates managerial support. Thus, the managerial actions taken to incorporate and allow for dialogue at each stage are important. As suggested above, managers are the ultimate decision-makers regarding strategic choices. In addition, managers can actively promote dialogue to create positivity and thus further the cultural change process. It is also important that managers walk the talk—that they become examples of how the promised new culture will appear in practice (cf. Schweiger et al., 1993).

Figure 3 presents the analytical framework of the study. Based on the literature review, this paper argues that although the cultural change process itself can be used as an effective tool for socio-cultural integration (cf. Lewin, 1947; Evans and Pucik, 2005; Marks and

Mirvis, 2011), through adopting dialogue as a means of increasing positivity, the socio-cultural integration process can unfold more smoothly and swiftly, as some of the potential issues of cross-cultural conflict are overcome through the harmony of dialogue. In Figure 3, cultural change refers to the stages of unfreezing, moving, and refreezing (Lewin, 1947). Dialogue and positivity are placed within the frame of cultural change to highlight their occurrence during, and role in, smoothing the process. The outcome of cultural change is socio-cultural integration.

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In the following, the paper offers an illustration of how dialogue has played a role during socio-cultural integration in the case company. Dialogue emerged in the case company as a means for creating a unified organizational culture driven by an integration strategy focused on creating new, shared company values. Given the recognition that emotions play a significant role in socio-cultural integration, the analysis will devote special attention to employees' emotional responses. However, before presenting the case, the methodological choices that guided the study will be discussed.

Methodology

Research approach

The study concerned when and how companies can utilize dialogue to create positivity regarding socio-cultural integration. Addressing this question required a rich and contextualized description of the phenomenon, which a case study would provide (Eisenhardt, 1989; Stake, 1995). The case study approach is especially suitable in the M&A context, as it allows for the use of theory and conceptual insight in guiding the research and data analysis

(Meyer, 2001). Particularly in the field of socio-cultural integration, qualitative research methods, such as the case study, can be useful for uncovering the dynamics of the process (Rottig et al., 2017). Therefore, qualitative single case studies have been used to gain deeper insight into the subtleties of socio-cultural integration in cross-border settings (e.g., Rottig et al., 2017; Drori et al., 2011; Moore, 2013). Understanding the socio-cultural integration process requires hands-on examination, but the strategic nature of M&A makes them very sensitive, and only seldom are researchers able to follow them in real-time and at a close distance. This study benefited from unique contact with the top management and broad access to relevant data over two years.

According to Siggelkow (2007), case research may be used for illustration as well as for an additional, but not sole, justification for one's arguments. The case study method was employed in this study to illustrate and make sense of how dialogue can be used to promote post-acquisition socio-cultural integration. A single case was chosen to offer a rich description and strong contextualization that together would enable understanding (Dyer and Wilkins, 1991; cf. Stake, 1995; Siggelkow, 2007). Furthermore, case studies can be used to understand the particulars of a case rather than to generate universal explanations. This approach acknowledges the uniqueness of cases and emphasizes subjects' tendency to ascribe meaning to their own behaviors. The case study at hand was framed as interpretive sense-making, which does not emphasize causal explanations but focuses on strong contextualization (Welch et al., 2011).

Cases may be selected because they represent a critical, extreme, or unique case or because they are representative—that is, typical cases (Yin, 2003). In this study, a case that was particularly helpful, rather than statistically typical, was chosen to illustrate the interplay between the key concepts (cf. Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). Furthermore, the strategic selection of a particularly helpful, or critical, case would allow for making assertions and

naturalistic generalizations (Flyvbjerg, 2001; Ruddin, 2006). Besides being particularly helpful, to be considered suitable, the case also needed to be international and include socio-cultural integration. In addition, it was necessary for the case to be fairly recent in order to avoid retrospective bias during the data collection, but not too recent, as there needed to be sufficient data available. The selected case fulfilled all these criteria. The selected case was Finnish Alpha's friendly acquisition of German Beta—not the companies or the resulting Alpha Group themselves. These are pseudonyms intended to protect the anonymity of the companies.

Alpha is a Finnish family-owned company in the manufacturing industry. It was established in the mid-1900s and has since grown into a significant European provider. Alpha develops, manufactures, and markets user-friendly, energy-saving products, which are technological forerunners in their field. In 2013, Alpha acquired German Beta, a company in the same industry, thus forming Alpha Group. At the time of the acquisition, Alpha employed approximately 800 employees and Beta 600. The acquisition was a friendly deal, and due to their relatively similar size, Alpha adopted an integration approach that can be described as symbiotic (cf. Haspeslagh and Jemison, 1991) or collaborative (cf. Cartwright and Cooper, 1993). After the companies merged, Alpha wished to create a joint culture based on shared values. Its own organizational culture had been values-based for years, whereas the organizational culture at Beta had not previously emphasized values. Hence, Alpha Group decided to introduce new joint values as the basis of its socio-cultural integration, using the old Alpha values as a starting point.

Data collection and analysis

Primary data were collected from face-to-face interviews, a company-wide employee survey, and participant observation during a company workshop and company meetings. In addition, secondary data were obtained through company internal materials including the pre- and post-

acquisition strategies, integration workflows, workshop facilitator guide, and employee magazines. The case was followed retrospectively between late 2013 and 2014 and in real time during 2015 and 2016. Data triangulation and follow-ups over two years provided a holistic overview of the integration. Table 1 summarizes the different data used in this research.

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Altogether, 14 interviews were conducted for this research during 2015 and 2016. The interviewees were the top management of Alpha Group (10 members of the board of directors), two employee representatives (one in Finland and one in Germany), one HR director, and the integration manager (a member of the owning family). English is the new corporate language of Alpha Group, but the Finnish and German interviewees were given the opportunity to participate in their native language, if they wished. Altogether, two interviews were conducted in German, five interviews were conducted in Finnish, and seven interviews were conducted in English. Most of the interviews were conducted face-to-face in a conference room either in Finland or Germany, but due to busy schedules and travel commitments, three interviews were conducted via Skype. Each interview lasted for approximately one hour. The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed mainly by the research team, but a native German speaker was asked to transcribe the German interview tapes. The German transcriber also expressed his opinion regarding the interpretation of culturally embedded information within the interviews, thereby increasing the quality of the interpretation.

Data were also gathered through a company-wide survey, which Alpha Group conducts annually to evaluate employee satisfaction. The body of the survey cannot be revealed here,

as it was constructed with the help of an external consultant. However, three open-ended questions were added to this survey for the purpose of this research in 2015:

1. What emotions do the value workshops and the value process at Alpha Group evoke in you?

2. We kindly ask you to go back in time to when you first heard about the Alpha–Beta acquisition. What emotions did the news evoke when the deal was announced and what emotions does it evoke now?

3. The acquisition was followed by an integration phase. Now that nearly 1.5 years have elapsed since the deal was completed, what emotions does the Alpha–Beta post-acquisition integration phase evoke in you? And why?

The survey allowed unique access to the entire Alpha Group personnel. The response rate of the survey was over 80 percent, which is exceptional. However, the three additional questions were answered by some 700 employees, representing approximately 50 percent of Alpha Group employees. Surprisingly, most respondents replied to the questions with relatively lengthy answers, indicating that the respondents felt that the questions were relevant and important.

The survey was translated into the native language of all Alpha Group locations and the answers were subsequently translated into English. After producing the translation, the answers were manually coded by all four members of the research team separately. Then researcher triangulation was applied to improve the reliability of the findings (Denzin, 1970). The coding was based on emotions and followed the well-established classification of Lazarus (1993). The final coding into n/a (empty), neutral ("I don't know," no emotional content), positive, negative, and mixed (positive and negative content) was developed in a numeric form by converging the individual coding. The numeric coding allowed for the use of

elementary quantitative analysis, whose purpose was mainly to give the research team a rough overview of the employees' perceptions regarding the acquisition (Table 2).

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The role of the quantitative analysis was supportive, in that it allowed for a generic structure on which to build the more in-depth qualitative analysis. Following the quantitative overview, the data categorized as positive, negative, or mixed (i.e., the data with emotional content) were re-analyzed qualitatively to identify specific emotions and emotional triggers— issues about which many employees expressed (strong) emotions. This analysis was conducted with the help of NVivo10 software to improve trustworthiness (Sinkovics et al., 2008). Table 3 presents two examples of the qualitative analysis process, from the original response to question three to the first (valence), second (emotion), and third (trigger) order codes.

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The qualitative part was duplicated for the interview analysis, which was an iterative process where the interviews were coded according to both themes that arose from theory and from the data. In addition, Alpha Group offered locally organized value workshops for all employees in early 2015. Two members of the research team took part in one of the value workshops in Finland in February 2015. During the workshop, the researchers received printed materials related to the new values and the value workshop. Additionally, during the value workshop, employees considered different aspects of the new values in written form. The researchers received all such employee-made documents from the value workshop.

Furthermore, the development of this research project was discussed with Alpha Group on several occasions. During project meetings, the research team gained valuable insight into the socio-cultural integration process.

Findings

Socio-cultural integration at Alpha Group

When Alpha Group was formed in 2013, the integration plan was based on different projects, one of which was named Cultural Integration and HR. This project had two goals: one company and structure with two strong brands and common values within two-to-three years. In 2015, Alpha Group completed the planned integration and formed a new strategy focused on a set of tasks and goals designed to strengthen the company as an international player through the objectives of the cultural integration project. This strategic focus is planned to last until the end of 2017. The Cultural Integration and HR project and its continuance in the new strategy were the focus of this study.

Alpha Group's aim was to integrate the previously separate organizational cultures of Alpha and Beta through extensive work toward building new company values. During the integration, Alpha Group wished to unify the value mindsets of its employees while simultaneously maintaining the product brand names of the original companies. The value-renewal work that was to drive the socio-cultural integration began in 2014 with two separate intercultural teams consisting of members from both Alpha and Beta. One group included HR managers and employee representatives, the other the Alpha Group management team. These task forces drew up statements regarding personal and company values. These statements could be organized into four categories, through which four core values were identified. The values of valor, justice, efficacy, and honesty[2] were introduced to key personnel at a strategy kick-off meeting in December 2014.

Alpha Group stated that "values create the basis for our collective business culture." Thus, the new values had to be disseminated. Each value was given a brief description and value workshops were organized in early 2015 to introduce the values to every employee. Another purpose of the workshops was also to initiate discussion and find common ground as to what these values meant for employees and how the values could be incorporated into daily work. The value workshops were open to every employee of Alpha Group and attendance was high among both blue- and white-collar workers.

In addition to the workshops, Alpha Group pursued various other means of promoting the new company values. They were introduced as a recurring topic in the personnel magazine through a set of specifically designed comics showing the everyday application of the values. They also became a component of every company presentation, especially the company-wide presentations given by the CEO. The values would be taken up similarly during smaller internal meetings. In addition, the values became a part of recruitment as well as yearly personnel development discussions. Furthermore, the unification work was visible in the repeated wish to erase the names Alpha and Beta from usage in order to promote the existence of Alpha Group. In order to engage employees in the value-renewal process, Alpha Group (with the aid of the research team) added qualitative questions regarding the M&A to its annual employee satisfaction survey both in 2015 and 2016.

The emergence of dialogue at Alpha Group

At Alpha Group, top management chose the collaborative integration strategy (cf. Haspeslagh and Jemison, 1991; Cartwright and Cooper, 1993). Unfreezing the current culture was done through dialogue within workgroups whose purpose was to identify the new joint company values. After the shared values were identified, the implementation plan focusing on the value workshops was formed. This depicts the moving stage. During integration, the value workshops allowed the employees to engage in interactive dialogue with each other and with

company management. This enabled the employees to make the process their own and to consider what the changes meant for them personally. This step was considered essential in gaining employee trust and building positivity toward the integration. Based on the feedback from the value workshops and the employee satisfaction survey, Alpha Group management also continued to devise with new ways of promoting the shared values and culture.

Based on the above, Figure 2 was redrawn to portray the integration at Alpha Group (Figure 4).

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INSERT FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE

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This, however, was how far Alpha Group had progressed in 2016. The integration efforts continued and employee experiences of the integration were mixed. One crucial aspect in which Alpha Group seemed to be lagging was walking the talk—that is, managerial examples of embracing the values in everyday work. Whereas former Alpha managers ardently took on their integration-related responsibilities (including the integration manager's relocation to Germany, which was greatly appreciated), many line workers, especially from the former Beta, reported that the values were not apparent in the actions of their immediate supervisors. In addition, although the employees reported many positive emotions, most also recounted negative experiences. Thus, Alpha Group had not yet reached the refreezing stage.

Nevertheless, it is particularly noteworthy that the value workshops were especially well received by employees. This supports the argument that dialogue can be used to create positivity and enhance socio-cultural integration, as the value workshops are the best example of truly interactive communication in the data. Thus, Figure 1 was redrawn to portray the value workshops as an example of dialogue (Figure 5). Based on the employee responses, the rational motivation for information processing during the workshops was the understanding

that the new values would lead toward improving the company, for example, by increasing the quality of the work. Improvements in the work atmosphere and a pro-group attitude connote pro-social motivation. Based on the responses, most employees experienced pro-social motivation, although the pro-self motivation of improved career development opportunities, for example, was mentioned. Based on the employees' reported positive attitudes toward meeting different people and hearing different viewpoints during the workshops, compassionate motivation was also present.

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INSERT FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE

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The workshop dialogue was formally facilitated by a local in-group facilitator. Several facilitators were trained for this purpose by Alpha Group to ensure the smooth running of the workshops. Facilitators had the task of introducing the new values in a positive light, encouraging participants to voice their opinions and listen to others' perspectives, keep the dialogue focused on the topic, and offer aids for increasing awareness and understanding, such as group tasks aimed at discovering underlying thoughts regarding the values. Instead of one-to-one or one-to-many communication, the value workshops offered employees the chance to engage in many-to-many communication. Thus, despite the well-established importance of communication during M&A, this paper argues that communication that is interactive and engaging in nature—in this case, dialogue—can advance socio-cultural integration and bring about social cohesion.

Employee emotions

The integration raised several positive, negative and mixed emotions (Table 2), which are here considered based on the qualitative analysis in NVivo. In effect, this means that missing

and neutral responses (Table 2) are not presented here, as they contained no emotional information.

In general, the value workshops were very well received; 70 percent of respondents' emotions regarding the workshops were positive. The workshops created positive perceptions of the value-renewal process and of the company as a whole. They were seen as a step toward increased cooperation and unity, and as encouraging the practical application of the values. However, some respondents thought the value workshops offered no practical benefit: "The value workshops did not bring me anything. After all, I must already have certain values/ideas with which I can live and work; these cannot be communicated to someone in a one-day training session." Similarly, the organization of the workshops was criticized. This was mainly due to some dismissals that preceded the workshops: "To give notice is never simple, and there is never a right moment for it, but they really opted for the worst possible moment here."

Despite the great success of the value workshops, only 28 percent of the emotions regarding the value-renewal process as a whole were positive. A major dilemma was perceived lack of progress, openness, honesty, and cross-departmental appreciation of colleagues. Furthermore, many employees perceived their managers as either not clearly following the values or as downright violating them: "Unfortunately, I have not been able to recognize that these values are also being lived up to by our superiors" and "the superiors have to change—it seems as if everything has stayed as it was." The necessity of continuing with value renewal and living up to the values was evident.

Nevertheless, common values that gave the company direction were experienced as enhancing employee motivation to make the company a success together. In addition, employees felt more secure when the company showed appreciation for them. Employees were also proud to work for a company that had values. It was stated that "The launch and the

message that has come with the values were so good that I wanted to see and develop the company and its values with an open mind." In addition, "In the value process was a message that the personnel are cared about."

Employees experienced Alpha Group and belonging to the group as valuable. However, the overall deal also created negative emotions. Anxiety was caused by merging with an unknown partner and by the potential reallocation of resources. A major cause of insecurity was anxiety about one's job. Employees were not secure that their work would continue and were unable to detect the desired progress. The matrix organizational structure that had been adopted was difficult to understand; that is, employees sensed inequality and experienced jealousy. Perceived losses (the loss of colleagues and the old company) also created sadness. Nevertheless, the atmosphere at Alpha Group was considered to support work and the integration was considered to have been handled in an appropriate way. Security was also experienced due to the sense of direction and personal development fostered by the integration.

However, employees also felt that the integration had failed to completely unite the two companies; cultural and practical differences were still perceived and past and present problems had not been resolved. Furthermore, employees felt that their opinions and concerns had not been adequately heard. The acquisition was seen as having the potential to make the future brighter, but future success was still seen as depending on further integration. Some decisions during the integration were also judged as poor—most notably, dismissals and the new matrix organization structure. Likely as a consequence of the matrix structure and symbiosis-seeking integration, former Alpha employees also feared that Beta was gaining all the control.

This indicates mismatched leadership styles that influenced how well the value-renewal process was being received by employees. Alpha Group decided to pursue a matrix

organization structure, where internal teams could consist of employees from different countries. Many employees regarded this as problematic and unpleasant, as they felt that having an overseas manager lessened their ability to contact the manager as well as the manager's interest in listening to them. In addition, German Beta had previously been a somewhat hierarchical company, whereas everyone at Finnish Alpha was on first-name basis with the CEO. Therefore, some cultural adjustments to the new organizational structure were necessary and proved to be difficult to enact, especially for some Beta managers. Furthermore, the openness of communication, which had existed on a wide scale at Alpha, had to be learnt by those from Beta. In fact, some felt that the best-of-both-worlds integration approach was not being implemented in all areas and that Alpha exercised more control over certain matters. This, although natural in an acquisition, is in contrast with former Alpha employees' reports of fearing that Beta was gaining all the control.

Discussion

As predicted in the literature (Clayton, 2010), Alpha Group employees appreciated communication that was participative, reflective, and positive. Especially during the value workshops, employees were able to participate in dialogue, embrace diverse viewpoints and move toward creating shared beliefs and values (cf. Oliver and Jacobs, 2007). Although the employee responses reveal that integration is a highly subjective experience (cf. Risberg, 2001), the findings indicate that good-quality interaction (as defined by Liu et al., 2010) can indeed assist with the emergence of dialogue (cf. Isaacs, 1999).

During the value workshops, employees had the chance to work toward aligned goals and commit to new solutions, despite their potentially differing opinions (cf. Tjosvold, 2008). They sought to express their own views, to understand the views of others, and to find similarities upon which to build agreement (cf. Tjosvold et al., 2014). Through voicing their opinions, listening to and respecting others' opinions, and suspending judgment, they were

able to engage in dialogue (cf. Isaacs, 1999), where both reason and emotion were given room (cf. Choi, 2014). Trained facilitators were present to guide the group toward positivity, collaboration, and shared understanding (cf. Burson, 2002; Ballantyne, 2004; Whitney and Fredrickson, 2015).

Congruent with previous literature (Sarala and Vaara, 2010; Stahl et al., 2013; Hajro, 2015), although several similarities between the national and organizational cultures of Alpha and Beta could be found, it was the differences that the employees amplified. Cultural differences that made socio-cultural integration more difficult were found, for example, in the hierarchies and management styles of the pre-acquisition organizations. Adaptation to new cultural norms (Adair et al., 2001) was necessary, especially for Beta employees, for whom the new emphasis on honesty and openness was unfamiliar. As predicted in the literature (e.g., Cartwright and Cooper, 1993; Birkinshaw et al., 2000; Kusstatscher and Cooper, 2005), the socio-cultural integration was not complete when this research project ended in 2016.

Although cultural differences were reported, they were less pronounced than in studies on the effects of cultural differences during socio-cultural integration might assume (cf. Stahl and Voigt, 2008). Indeed, it seems that the socio-cultural integration process was successful in creating interpersonal relationships that were experienced as positive, trust in the acquisition partner, and shared identity (cf. Stahl and Voigt, 2008; Stahl et al., 2011; Hajro, 2015). Effectiveness of communication in dealing with potentially conflict-inducing changes (Weber and Drori, 2011) was recognized at Alpha Group. In particular, Alpha Group was successful at recognizing and announcing shared values that acted as the basis for unification. Management—especially Alpha management—was enthusiastically creating and promoting a compelling vision of joint future success and discouraging "us versus them" thinking. Interaction and internal communication were successfully used to paint a positive picture of the future (cf. Rottig et al., 2017).

As suggested by Bansal (2015), positivity was found mainly in relation to human-centric integration tasks. Happiness, pride, and relief were triggered by situations employees deemed as personally relevant and goal-congruent (cf. Lazarus, 1991, 1993; Fredrickson, 2001, 2013). Negative emotions, including anxiety, anger, sadness, and jealousy, were also triggered by events of perceived personal relevance. However, negative experiences stemmed from goal-incongruent appraisal (cf. Lazarus, 1991, 1993; Fredrickson, 2001). Hope was seen for a potentially beneficial joint future, if goal-incongruent events would subside (cf. Lazarus, 1991, 1993).

Congruent with Sinkovics et al. (2011), although the emotion triggers reflected the height of emotion around the time of the announcement and formal integration, it was clear that the emotions had outlasted formal integration. Employees reporting positive emotions were more prone to viewing the integrated company in a positive light than employees who reported negative emotions (cf. Kusstatscher and Cooper, 2005). This seems to confirm that positive emotions can greatly enhance socio-cultural integration (e.g., Birkinshaw et al., 2000; Kusstatscher and Cooper, 2005; Raitis et al., 2017).

Positivity could also be found at Alpha Group in what Menges and Kilduff (2015) termed group-based emotions. Belonging to Alpha Group triggered both happiness and pride in employees. However, protective behaviors (Menges and Kilduff, 2015) could be detected as well in the solidarity felt with those dismissed and the sadness over the loss of the pre-acquisition organization. Moreover, negativity was found in the managerial examples, especially among Beta employees. Yet the involvement of Alpha Group's top management was greatly appreciated. These findings seem to confirm that managers set the tone for integration (Krug and Hegarty, 2001).

During the research process, Alpha Group successfully progressed through the steps of unfreezing and moving, but did not reach the stage of refreezing (as described by Lewin,

1947; Marks and Mirvis, 2011). Dialogue aided this process by allowing top management to make successful integration plans, enabling employees to participate in creating social cohesion, and allowing Alpha Group to constantly remind employees of the positive joint future that could be built upon the new values. In this process, managers had an important role as both facilitators and examples (cf. Schweiger et al., 1993).

Propositions and conclusion

The challenge that cultural differences pose to M&A success has been of interest to M&A scholars for decades. However, research results remain conflicting (e.g., Stahl and Voigt, 2008; Weber et al., 2011), which suggests that the influence of cultural differences on post-acquisition socio-cultural integration is complex and possibly multi-faceted (cf. Stahl and Voigt, 2008). Therefore, in the increasingly international world, where cross-cultural encounters are dynamic and interconnected, highlighting the role of open-minded communication and mutually beneficial relationships may help in overcoming cross-cultural conflict (Tjosvold et al., 2014). Cross-border M&A provide an interesting and fruitful context to study how to overcome cultural differences.

Previous research has been limited in creating an understanding of how companies can overcome difficulties related to cultural differences (Rottig, 2011). Nevertheless, an interesting suggestion in the literature is to focus on emotions during socio-cultural integration. Whereas the literature largely focuses on the negative (e.g., Graebner et al., 2017), positivity has been found to be an important contributor to (e.g., Kusstatscher, 2006; Raitis et al., 2017), and therefore a fruitful topic of research on, socio-cultural integration. Based on the Alpha Group case, it seems that positivity can indeed facilitate overcoming cross-cultural differences. Although negative emotions also arise, positivity increases identification and engagement with the new, post-acquisition organization, thus also

mitigating the effects of negative emotions at least to some extent. Therefore, the following is proposed:

Proposition 1: Cultural conflict during post-acquisition socio-cultural integration can be overcome by creating positivity.

However, there are no guidelines on how to manage collective emotions in the literature (Huy, 2012). Although socialization has been identified as an important facet of building social cohesion (e.g., Larsson and Lubatkin, 2001; Yalablik, 2013), the specific means through which such socialization can be promoted are less known. Nevertheless, creating social cohesion during socio-cultural integration necessitates interaction (Morrison, 2002; Cooper-Thomas and Anderson, 2006). Especially participative, reflective, and positive communication enhances socio-cultural integration (Clayton, 2010). Dialogue offers a means of combining interaction with positive, reflective engagement, where both reason and emotion have a place. Bridging these together, the following is proposed:

Proposition 2: Dialogue enables the collective management of emotions during post-acquisition integration by offering a platform for creating positivity and social cohesion.

Although previous studies have highlighted the importance of communication (e.g., Schweiger and DeNisi, 1991; Weber and Tarba, 2010; Angwin, 2016), the need for a deeper understanding of specific communication practices and tools used in socio-cultural integration persists (Graebner et al., 2017). The effectiveness of different communication means for dealing with conflict during socio-cultural integration, therefore, necessitates further research (Weber and Drori, 2011). Based on the findings, the following is proposed:

Proposition 3: Due to its collaborative and engaging nature, dialogue provides an especially effective means of communication for overcoming cross-cultural conflict.

Following the analytical framework (Figure 3), this research applied the theories of cultural change (Lewin, 1947) and dialogue (Isaacs, 1999) to examine socio-cultural integration following a cross-border acquisition. The study was a response to the call for more positive research on international business in general and on socio-cultural integration in particular (Stahl et al., 2013, 2016). This paper has argued that dialogue can be used to create positivity regarding socio-cultural integration throughout the stages of unfreezing, moving, and refreezing (Lewin, 1947) by actively engaging employees in voicing, listening, respecting, and suspending (Isaacs, 1999). This paper contributes to the three-stage theory of cultural change (Lewin, 1947; Evans and Pucik, 2005; Marks and Mirvis, 2011) by offering a new perspective on dialogue as a means to ease the integration process and focusing on building positivity rather than overcoming cultural conflict.

Through these findings and the aforementioned propositions, this paper also offers new insight into the ongoing debate regarding socio-cultural integration. First, this paper reaches beyond the conventional comparative cross-cultural setting in its examination of how to overcome cross-cultural issues during socio-cultural integration, rather than focusing on the issues themselves. Second, the paper follows the increasingly popular positive organizational scholarship school of thought in highlighting the importance and effects of positivity during socio-cultural integration. Third, the paper contributes to the discussion on emotions during socio-cultural integration in its identification of several key emotion triggers, enabling scholars to look past mere emotion labels. Finally, the paper contributes to the discussion on communication during socio-cultural integration by suggesting how dialogue can be used to overcome conflict, increase positivity, and thereby promote socio-cultural integration.

In offering such insight, the findings presented in this paper also have important managerial implications. First, the findings confirm previous arguments that interactive forms of communication are most beneficial for socio-cultural integration. This enables practitioners

to better plan and implement future integration processes. Second, the findings indicate that dialogue can be an especially functional means of achieving swift and smooth integration, as it not only entails interaction but also offers a way to manage collective emotions. This is important because the creation of positivity, which has been found to ease socio-cultural integration, seems to be most successful when employees are engaged in the integration process. Therefore, this paper suggests that constructive management during post-M&A socio-cultural integration centers on creating positivity rather than neutralizing negativity. Third, the findings indicate that positive engagement, for example, through dialogue, can overcome cross-cultural challenges, as it increases identification with the post-acquisition organizational culture.

Finally, the framework of dialogue during socio-cultural integration (Figure 2) enables practitioners to manage the whole integration process more efficiently. For example, workshops relating to key areas of integration, such as the value workshops in the case company, can be used to increase employees' understanding of, and positivity toward, socio-cultural integration—or, indeed, any change the organization may be undergoing. However, in order for dialogue to promote change throughout the organization, every employee must have the opportunity to engage in it. Nevertheless, dialogue can also be used on a smaller scale to facilitate other organizational functions, such as strategy building.

This research also has its limitations. First, the findings are based on a single case study. Hence, they are context-embedded and should, therefore, be interpreted with caution. On the one hand, the single case structure reduces the generalizability of the findings; on the other hand, it creates in-depth understanding of the focal case. Therefore, although the single case approach provided fertile ground for this study, future research involving more cases is encouraged to move past naturalistic generalizations. Moreover, although the research team had an exceptional opportunity to follow an ongoing integration and the creation of a new

joint culture in real time, this also represents a limitation, as the results are not yet conclusive. As Alpha Group has yet to reach the stage of refreezing, it is impossible to determine the final outcome of dialogue as a promoter of positivity during socio-cultural integration. Therefore, future research with a longitudinal design is necessary to understand the final stage of refreezing.

The research team tried to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings in many ways. The multilingual approach increased the reliability of the data considerably. The survey data were collected in the mother tongue of the respondents and every interviewee could choose either their native language or English—whichever language they were most comfortable with. The research was also carefully documented, and the data were always coded and analyzed by two-to-four members of the team. Hence, researcher triangulation is considered to be a major strength of this study. In addition, through detailing the data collection and analysis processes, the research team provided means for researchers to continue the work in the future.

The quality of this work stems from the third generation of qualitative research in international business. In this study, quality was ensured through intimate contact with the participants and the case context, capturing multiple perspectives, making sure the representations of the findings were factually correct, continuously discussing the emergent findings and next steps with the case company management to ensure understanding, and closely tying the discussion to state-of-the-art literature in the field. The findings are highly contextual, as they should be; after all, the single case study is valuable due to the depth of insight it offers (Welch and Piekkari, 2017).

The propositions made here point toward areas of special interest where future research could make a significant contribution. However, the myriad of experienced emotions indicates that there is still room for research that would deepen the overall understanding of emotions in the context of cross-border M&A. For example, earlier research focused mainly on negative

emotions, whereas this study promoted positivity, and identified a significant number of positive emotions among the employees both in the acquiring and acquired companies. Furthermore, as prior studies were primarily cross-sectional in nature, it would be very interesting to see how dialogue and emotions evolve over time. A longitudinal approach over the integration phase would allow for determining whether emotions develop from positive to negative or vice versa, and how the dialogue evolves over time. Such findings would also have clear managerial implications. A cross-border merger or acquisition is always a significant investment, and yet many of them fail to meet the objectives set for the deal. The top management of the acquiring firm would benefit significantly from knowing how to support the human side of the integration, to achieve the expected synergy effects. Supporting this can take multiple forms, including in-house training, mentoring of key employees, and dialogue, as presented here.

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[1] The literature on mergers and acquisitions often groups these concepts under the common term M&A, and in many studies, the words merger and acquisition are used interchangeably (e.g., Anderson et al., 2001; Child et al., 2001; Lees, 2003; Kusstatscher and Cooper, 2005). While this paper follows this convention, in this research, 'M&A' refers to acquisitions.

[2] In order to protect Alpha Group's anonymity, this paper offers a synonym for each of the four values.