Australasian Journal of Organisational Psychology, Volume 9, e3, 1–4
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Bridge Individuals in Multinational Organisations

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In multinational organisations, individuals who mediate or bridge between different national and cultural groups, such as headquarters (HQ) and foreign subsidiaries, play a critical role and are known as 'bridge individuals'. This perspective article reviews the recent literature on bridge individuals and offers future research directions in which organisational psychology can contribute to the deeper understanding of the individuals in this role. I propose the interdisciplinary approach, in which knowledge of organisational psychology and other academic fields, such as cognitive linguistics, cross-cultural communication, and social network theory, are integrated when studying bridge individuals.

■ **Keywords** Bridge individuals, boundary spanners, multinational organisations, language, multiculturalism

In today's globalising world, many organisations have become multinational, multicultural, and multilingual. Such organisations are geographically dispersed, internally differentiated, and culturally and linguistically diverse. Geographical distance, cultural differences, and language barriers may limit the personal interaction between organisational members and impede the effective functioning of multinational organisations (e.g., Kostova & Roth, 2003). Researchers in the field of organisational psychology could pay more attention to the types of individuals who now play important roles in multinational organisations. Those who mediate or bridge between different groups across nations and cultures are one such type; they are called 'bridge individuals'. This term began to be explicitly used in the field of international business in a series of studies by Harzing and her colleagues (e.g., Harzing et al. 2011; 2015) to refer to bilingual employees who facilitate communication between headquarters (HQ) and foreign subsidiaries as one of their work responsibilities. The purpose of this perspective article is to review the relevant literature on bridge individuals and discuss how organisational psychology can contribute to a deeper understanding of their characteristics.

Who are Bridge Individuals?

In their study of language barriers and their solutions in multinational organisations, Harzing et al. (2011) described bridge individuals as those with language skills that allow them to bridge between different language groups. Harzing et al. (2011) point out that the use of bridge individuals is a popular way of overcoming the language barrier within multinational organisations. Generally, these individuals perform their bridging function as a part of their normal job (e.g., managerial jobs). Harzing et al. (2011) indicate that those who act as bridge individuals include bilingual employees, expatriates and inpatriates, non-native local employees at foreign subsidiaries, and individuals who share the same native languages and informally mediate the communication between groups. Feely and Harzing (2003) point out that bridge individuals take on such roles as gatekeepers, liaisons, translators, and intermediaries for colleagues with more limited language skills. The initial conceptualisations of bridge individuals by Harzing and her colleagues focus on the language issues and indicate that bridge individuals need to be able to speak at least two languages to fulfil their role.

However, the role of bridge individuals is not limited to mediation for overcoming language barriers. In multicultural organisations and teams, divisions within them, called 'faultlines', often develop along cultural lines, and

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https://doi.org/10.1017/orp.2016.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

promote disharmony, dissatisfaction, and poor performance. In such situations, bicultural or multicultural individuals who have been fully immersed in and have internalised or integrated different cultural frameworks, can bridge the faultlines through language, cultural knowledge, or by explaining the opposing subgroup's behaviour (Dau, 2016; Fitzsimmons et al., 2011). Okamoto and Teo (2012) studied Japanese companies in Australia and found that employees who took the role of 'cultural mediators' helped to allay the role stress that exists between Japanese expatriates and non-Japanese host country staff.

Bridge individuals also play a critical role in transferring knowledge between different national or cultural groups. Harzing and Pudelko (2014) found that expatriates, as bridge individuals, can facilitate both communication and knowledge transfer between HQ and foreign subsidiaries. Harzing et al. (2015) found that both expatriates and former inpatriates play a bridging role in knowledge transfer in multinational organisations. Whilst both expatriates and former inpatriates are valuable in the transfer of knowledge from HQ to subsidiaries, only former inpatriates are useful in transferring knowledge from subsidiaries to HQ, suggesting that the bridging roles of expatriates and inpatriates are slightly different. Reiche et al. (2009) argue that international assignees in multinational organisations play the roles of knowledge brokers and knowledge transmitters. The former means linking their social networks at the home and the host units, thereby generating links between previously unconnected knowledge resources. The latter means sharing their home-unit knowledge with host-unit staff and transferring the knowledge they have acquired during the assignment to their home unit.

Bridge Individuals and Boundary Spanners

Numerous terms with similar meanings to 'bridge individuals' have been used in previous literature. These include linking-pins, language nodes, language mediators, go-betweens, bridge builders, cultural mediators, and cultural brokers (e.g., Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999; Okamoto & Teo, 2012). One of the widely used terms is 'boundary spanners', which describes those who connect diverse boundaries that may be defined by organisational structures, national borders, and/or a variety of cultures (Yagi & Kleinberg, 2011).

In a study of Japanese employees in a binational (Japan/US) firm, Yagi and Kleinberg (2011) found boundary spanning was performed by numerous organisational actors in a variety of positions and status levels. Their performance may involve activities not normally associated with their formal positions. Furusawa and Brewster (2015) found that Japanese immigrants and their descendants in Brazil are recognised sources of talent by Japanese multinational organisations for acting as international boundary spanners.

Several different roles of boundary spanners have been identified. Barner-Rasmussen et al. (2014) argue that boundary spanners have four functions; exchanging, linking, facilitating, and intervening across boundaries. Ancona and Caldwell (1992) state that, in research and development teams, the roles of boundary spanners include ambassadors, scouts, task coordinators, and guards. Johnson and Duxbury (2010) classified the roles of boundary spanners in multinational organisations into relationship building, shaping, intelligence gathering, delivering, coordinating/negotiating, guarding, information gathering, representing, and intermediary. Yagi and Kleinberg (2011) summarised the role of boundary spanners into information processing, representing the organisation externally, acquisition and disposition of resources, and acquiring and acting as an agent of influence for the organisation.

The construct of boundary spanners is broader than that of bridge individuals; the construct of boundary spanners is not limited to the context of multinational organisations, but can also apply to intra- and inter-organisational relationships in general (e.g., Tushman & Scanlan, 1981). In the following discussion, I include literature on boundary spanners where the studies have been carried out in multinational or cross-cultural settings and the roles are similar to those of bridge individuals.

Attributes of Successful Bridge Individuals

Given their roles in multinational organisations, language and cultural skills are considered to be the two major skills for successful bridge individuals and boundary spanners (Harzing et al., 2011). For example, employees with relevant language skills tend to have better-than-average access to information across different nations, which enables them to act as bridge individuals (Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2014). Barner-Rasmussen et al. (2014) show that cultural and language skills influence the extent to which individual boundary spanners in multinational organisations are able to exchange, link, facilitate, and intervene. They also show that boundary spanners with both cultural and language skills perform more functions than those with only cultural skills, and language skills are critical for performing the most demanding functions. Liu et al. (2015) studied Chinese migrants working in the UK, and found that highly skilled migrants who possess bilingual and bicultural competence play a vital role in inter-firm international knowledge transfer.

Abilities to build interpersonal networks and some specific knowledge and experience are also critical for bridge individuals and boundary spanners. Au and Fukuda (2002) found that local experience and the diversity of social networks were conducive to the boundary-spanning

https://doi.org/10.1017/orp.2016.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

activities of expatiates. Johnson and Duxbury (2010) found that interpersonal relationships are the cornerstones of the roles and the enablers of cross-boundary resource exchanges. Ancona and Caldwell (1988) suggest that individuals with greater experience of other functional groups are more likely to participate in boundary-spanning activities. Yagi and Kleinberg (2011) suggest that an effective boundary spanner can be anyone who possesses the necessary explicit and tacit knowledge of how to do things, what to do, who to build and maintain networks with, and why something is important.

Remaining Topics to Be Investigated

The research on bridge individuals is still in its infancy, and there are several ways that organisational psychology can contribute to this research topic. I suggest the use of an interdisciplinary approach, combining organisational psychology, and other academic fields, for studying bridge individuals.

Construct clarity. First, the construct clarity of bridge individuals should be established by differentiating it from similar constructs. For example, as we have seen, bridge individuals and boundary spanners are conceptually similar terms and were sometimes used interchangeably (e.g., when discussing the role of international assignees). However, I suggest that bridge individuals be used if the context is specific to multinational organisations and when the role focusses on 'bridging' between different cultural and national groups. Boundary spanners can be used with broader meanings and in broader contexts, and are not limited to the context of multinational organisations.

Identities and attitudes of bridge individuals. Because bridge individuals are usually involved in more than one culture, their cultural identities play a critical role in the bridging activities; the identity of the person — the sense of who I am — influences his or her attitudes and behaviours. Based on the ethnographic study of boundary spanners in a multinational organisation, Yagi and Kleinberg (2011) introduced a conceptual framework of the boundary spanners' cultural identity negotiation through their interaction with others. Focussing on multicultural employees, Fitzsimmons (2013) theorised the possible ways to organise more than one cultural identity amongst them, based on identity integration ranging from separated to integrated, and identity plurality ranging from single to multiple. In the future, knowledge on organisational and cross-cultural psychology can be combined to develop a better understanding of the identities of bridge individuals, which in turn will enable us to better understand their attitudes, such as commitment, satisfaction, and their intentions to stay in their current roles and with their current employer.

Cognitive and affective characteristics of bridge individuals. The cognitive and affective characteristics of bridge individuals might be different from those of other individuals. Bridge individuals process different languages and information on different cultures, and they understand and internalise affective characteristics, such as the ways people express emotions in different cultures. Research using knowledge of cognitive linguistics and cross-cultural communication, as well as organisational psychology, would contribute to the deeper understanding of the cognitive and affective processes of bridge individuals. For example, future research could investigate how language and cultural distance between the different groups influence the effectiveness of the bridging activities. Biculturalism and multiculturalism are also related to this topic. Lücke et al. (2014) proposed five different patterns of multiculturalism — compartmentalisation, integration, inclusion, convergence, and generalisation — and explain how they are developed through specific sociocultural experiences. These different patterns of multiculturalism may affect the cognitive and affective processes of bridge individuals differently.

Interaction with other individuals and its outcomes. How bridge individuals interact with other individuals when serving the bridging role is still not well understood. One of the fields that provide insights into bridging individuals' activities is social network theory. Social network theory describes a bridge as a direct tie between clusters that would otherwise be disconnected. Actors who bridge between different clusters have many advantages, such as access to valuable information and the ability to control the flow of information between clusters (Burt, 2000). Future research could investigate how bridge individuals will utilise the advantages stemming from their positions in the social network to conduct such interpersonal behaviours as leadership, negotiation, and conflict resolutions.

The outcomes of bridge individuals' interaction with other organisational members should also be investigated further. For example, future research could investigate how bridge individuals contribute to the effectiveness of groups and organisations through knowledge transfer, promotion of creativity and innovation, and the enhancement of control and coordination in multinational organisations.

Conclusion

There are abundant opportunities for the study of bridge individuals from the organisational psychology perspective. Understanding the characteristics of bridge individuals through the interdisciplinary approach proposed would contribute significantly to the theory and practice of multinational organisations, especially, regarding how to identify, develop, motivate, and retain bridge individuals to increase the effectiveness of multinational organisations.

https://doi.org/10.1017/orp.2016.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank Dr. Sugumar Mariappanadar for the opportunity to contribute to the journal with this perspective article.

Financial Support

This work was supported by a Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (Grant Number: 26590058) from the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science.

Conflicts of Interest

None.

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