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on the Development of a  
Dialectical Thinking**

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# **The Influence of Biculturalism on the Development of a Dialectical Thinking**

Chiara Marotta

## **Abstract**

The positive effects of biculturalism on individuals and on leadership have been reported by several studies. This paper further investigates this condition (biculturalism) and its benefits for leaders and professionals, by exploring its relationship with the development of dialectical thinking (the ability to tolerate contradictions).

According to numerous studies, the dialectical thinking ability has several positive effects for individuals and organizations. Professionals and leaders, who possess this ability, tend to manage organizational paradoxes in a more efficient way and to enhance their team performance.

This research is intended to illustrate how this valuable cognitive ability may be fostered by biculturalism.

## 1. Introduction

In order to reach a long-term sustainability, organizations deal daily with numerous tensions and contradictions, having to meet local and global needs, to enhance financial and social performance, to engage leaders who are autocratic and democratic, and to enable control and flexibility (Lewis & Smith, 2014). Thus, multiple paradoxes and contradictions constantly challenge and influence the organizational world. A paradox can be defined as “the simultaneous presence of contradictory, even mutually exclusive elements” (Cameron & Quinn, 1988). In the recent literature, several writers seem to agree to the fact that the most appropriate way to manage these paradoxes is to use a dialectical approach, in which thesis and antithesis (the two contradicting elements) are combined into a synthesis. The cognitive tendency to think paradoxically, tolerating contradictions and being able to synthesize them, can broadly be defined as *dialectical thinking* (Peng et al., 1999). This ability can be considered as a good-to-have skill for managers and leaders who constantly face these paradoxes.

Different studies have been conducted to explore this cognitive ability, for instance, investigating its relation to culture. The intention of this research is to go further on the study of this ability and particularly of its development, by connecting it to the topic of biculturalism.

The underlying assumption is that people with deep knowledge of two cultures can develop a sort of cognitive dialecticism that would allow them to think paradoxically: the conflict they experience among the values and beliefs of the two cultures leads to the development of a sort of cognitive tendency to accept contradictions and paradoxes.

This dissertation aims at detecting and exploring the relation between dialectical thinking and biculturalism. Particularly, trying to understand if and how the condition of biculturalism, in which the individual internalizes the aspects of two distinct cultures, may foster the development of this ability, the purpose of this study is to answer to the following research question: *What do professionals gain in terms of dialectical thinking from experiencing more than one culture? And how?*

To pursue this objective, an inductive qualitative research has been performed. Particularly, nineteen semi-structured interviews have been conducted correspondently to nineteen bicultural individuals, to explore their bicultural journey, understand their opinions, and detect the potential skills and abilities gained during this experience.

Following this introduction, in the second chapter, the literature, concerning, on one hand, the concept of dialecticism and its organizational implications, and, on the other hand, culture and biculturalism, will be reviewed. In the third chapter, the methodology applied to collect and analyze the data will be discussed. Subsequently, in the fourth chapter, the data collected will be presented and summarized. Finally, the discussion and conclusion will follow in the fifth and sixth chapters.

## 2. Literature Review

In this section, through a review of literature, the notion of dialectics will be broadly explored, followed by an analysis of the dialectical thinking ability, its influence on leadership and its potential for the resolution of organizational paradoxes. Subsequently, the literature concerning the concepts of national culture and cultural clusters, and the relation between culture and dialectics will be reviewed. Finally, the notion of biculturalism will be introduced.

### 2.1 The concept of Dialectics

The concept of dialectics has very ancient roots, deriving from the Greek verb *dialegesthai*, that could be translated as “discussing a question with another,” or “arguing with one against something” (Hoffman, 2005). This notion has been often adopted in the philosophical field. Benson (1977) was one of the first author to propose a dialectical view to organization: he argued that, by dealing with social processes, a dialectical approach provides a way to go beyond the limits of the existing theories. Subsequently, various authors applied the dialectical method to treat different organizational phenomena, and particularly discussed

the potential of the application of this method in resolving management paradoxes (Cunha & Clegg, 2000).

## **2.2 Dialectical thinking and Leadership**

Dialectical thinking can be defined as “the mental processes of compromising or synthesizing facts, view, and goals of opposing perspectives.” (Peng et al., 2001). According to Peng (1999), individuals can react to contradictions through dialectical thinking, which consists of retaining basic elements of two opposing perspectives. Dialectical thinkers have a cognitive tendency which allow them to tolerate contradictions, ambiguities, and inconsistencies (Chen et al., 2013). They are able to solve contradictions through compromise and integration (Bai et al., 2015). Dialectical oriented individuals have a unique perspective on changes and contradictions; this means that individuals, who possess this capability, are more able to adapt to changes and changing situations, in addition, they tend to accept contradictions, by allowing them to “coexist in a balanced and harmonious manner” (Cheng, 2009). Moreover, Cheng (2009) found a positive correlation between dialectical thinking and coping flexibility; therefore, dialectical individuals are more likely to have a stronger ability to formulate flexible strategies useful to handle various demands under changing conditions.

For all these reasons, the recent literature has started to consider *dialectical thinking* to be a good quality to look for in managers and leaders. Bai et al. (2015) argue that managers with a high level of this new cognitive style (dialectical thinking), have a positive impact on team conflict and employees’ performance. Leaders with a dialectical thinking orientation tend to foster “a cooperative team environment”, through the usage of a cooperative conflict management approach: this leads to the enhancement of employees’ performance, particularly in terms of creativity (Bai et al., 2015). In fact, the authors suggest, to organizations caring about creative performance, to select individuals with a dialectical thinking orientation for leadership positions, and to incorporate dialectics in the corporate culture (Bai et al., 2015). According to Cunha et al. (2004), a dialectical approach, aimed at developing a dialectical thinking ability, is one of the approaches that should be used for educating management students, to ensure that they can learn to deal with uncertainty and ambiguity.

Dialectical thinking is also positively related to emotional complexity (Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2010), which can be defined as the simultaneous or sequential experience of positive and negative emotions (Grossman et al., 2015). Rothman and Melwani (2017) argued that emotional complexity can benefit leaders’ ability to lead change. Individuals, who possess emotional complexity, tend to have a higher cognitive flexibility, which allows them to take more adaptive decisions, to be more creative, and to stimulate creative thinking in followers (Rothman & Melwani, 2017).

## **2.3 Dialectical Thinking and the Managerial Paradox**

A paradox can be defined as a situation in which there are “elements that seem logical in isolation but absurd and irrational when appearing simultaneously” (Lewis, 2000). In management, this notion, in the last decades, has been increasingly used to describe opposing and contradicting forces in complex organizational environments (Putman et al., 2016; Clegg, 2002). This paradox could be an unintentional consequence of managerial decision; however, it derives also from the contradicting requests that market and stakeholders demand to the organization (Clegg et al., 2002).

For long, researchers have addressed the issue of organizational paradox applying the contingency theory (Lewis & Smith, 2014), in which the decision-maker role was to select the alternative that seemed more beneficial, between two contradicting poles. However, in recent years, various authors have argued that an approach, by which the two opposing poles should coexist, is more appropriate to solve paradoxes. Lewis (2014) claims that sustainable high performance arises from the ability to manage paradoxical situations, and “embracing multiple, opposing forces simultaneously”, employing a paradox approach. Another approach is the relational one, according to which the two extremes of a paradox have to be held intact, and the relation between the two opposites has to be taken seriously, by looking for a synthesis (Clegg et al., 2002). The idea, behind these theories, is that paradox can be beneficial for the organization, and the solution is not “eliminating” it, but accepting it. A

dialectical approach, to deal with the management paradox, allows this acceptance: the management role is to create a synthesis between the two opposing elements (Cunha, J., & Clegg, S. R., 2000). Dialectical perspectives recognize dilemmas as central features of leadership, rather than seek to avoid them (Collinson, 2014).

Dialectical reasoning, in which thesis and antithesis are combined into a synthesis, can help “managers tackle paradox without having to subdue any of the contradictory goals it often entails” (Cunha, J., & Clegg, S. R., 2000). Leadership effectiveness seem to be positively related with flexibility, and with the ability to face paradoxes and uncertainties (Goleman, 2000; Collinson, 2014). “Paradoxical thinking entails a both/and mind-set that is holistic and dynamic, exploring synergistic possibilities for coping with enduring tensions” (Lewis & Smith, 2014). Therefore, leaders with a dialectical thinking ability can be a precious resource for organizations, being able to deal with paradoxes, accept them and synthesize them.

## **2.4 The notion of culture, national culture and clusters**

“Culture is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one category of people from another” (Hofstede, 2010). Talking about mental programming, Hofstede (2010) refers to pattern of thinking, acting and feeling, that lies within the social environment in which each individual grows up, defining his behaviors, values and beliefs. Edward T. Hall, in *Beyond Cultures* (1989), has described culture as an iceberg, in which the behaviors and customs lay on the visible part, above the water, whereas, the attitudes, beliefs and values lay on the invisible part, below the water.

When talking about culture it is typical to refer to the national one. There are different theories which try to identify basic elements and values that distinguish each national culture from the others. The most accredited ones were developed by Geert Hofstede (2010), Edward T. Hall (1989), and Lewis (2006). An important aspect to notice in all these studies is that they prove that every nation has a different culture and that the elements and differences, which characterize each country’s culture, can be measured. However, even if some countries are culturally different, others are very similar to each other, and show just some differences in what Hall (1989) considers as the surface of the iceberg, thus, just on traditions but not on values and beliefs. For example, by looking at the scores to Hofstede’s dimensions, it is possible to notice that some countries scored very similar to the different dimensions.

Therefore, when focusing on the differences among cultures, the application of cultural clusters, groups of countries with similar cultural characteristics, could be more convenient than the usage of national cultures. These clusters are, in fact, a useful way to summarize intercultural differences and similarities (Gupta et al., 2002). The most recognized theory on clusters is the GLOBE study. This research has identified 10 cultural clusters (Appendix I), based on the values similarities and differences, defined through 9 dimensions (described in Appendix II), of 61 countries (Gupta et al., 2002).

## **2.5 Culture and Dialectics**

Different studies demonstrate that dialectical thinking not only depends on the individual personal development (Basseches, 2005), but also on his cultural background (Peng & Nisbett, 1999; Hamamura et al., 2008). Some cultures tend, in fact, to valorize dialectical thinking and to make it become part of the cultural mental programming which influences the way people think and act. Different studies demonstrate that for instance eastern cultures (particularly China) have a developed ability to think dialectically (Peng & Nisbett, 1999). Moreover, it has been demonstrated that the cultural differences in response styles can be influenced by dialectical thinking (Hamamura, 2008).

## **2.6 Biculturalism**

Today, there is a high number of individuals who have multiple cultural and ethnic backgrounds, live in ethnically diverse environments, or have lived in more than one country (Benet-Martínez et al., 2002). It is typical for these individuals to experience different cultures and internalized more than one culture, meaning that they could be defined as *bicultural* or *multicultural* (Benet-Martínez et al., 2006).

Multiple studies have been done to explore the effects of this condition (biculturalism) on individuals (Benet-Martínez et al., 2006; Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2013; Tadmor & Tetlock, 2006). Bicultural individuals were proven to have a higher level of cognitive complexity, that is a variable that “measures the degree of differentiation, articulation and abstraction within a cognitive system” (Benet-Martínez et al., 2006). Moreover, during their learning process, they tend to develop different competencies and flexibility, which allow them to be more skillful in adjusting to different contexts, situations, and people, both in one of their cultures and in others (Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2013). Bicultural individuals also show higher integrative complexity (Tadmor & Tetlock, 2006). This ability is positively related to the successful performance in managerial tasks, particularly when the individual deals with complicated and contradictory information (Streufert & Swezey, 1986).

### **3. Methodology**

The scope of this study is to explore the relation between being bicultural and the development of a dialectical thinking ability. The aim is to find *whether* and *how* people with deep knowledge of two cultures can develop a sort of cognitive dialecticism that would allow them to think paradoxically through the exposure to two different cultures with contrasting and dissimilar values and beliefs.

In this section, the research method, the data sources and collections, and the data analysis for this study are presented.

#### **3.1 Research method**

To investigate the influence of biculturalism on the possibility to develop this cognitive ability, an inductive, qualitative approach has been used. This approach seemed to be more appropriate, since it allows to focus on people’s experiences, to understand their opinions, feelings and emotions, and comprehend the process that allows the development of this ability (Esterberg, 2002). In fact, “with qualitative data one can preserve chronological flow, see precisely which events lead to which consequences, and derive fruitful explanations” (Miles, & Huberman, 1994). Qualitative studies aim at identifying patterns among participants (Miles, & Huberman, 1994), providing “illumination and understanding of complex psychosocial issues and are most useful for answering humanistic ‘why’ and ‘how’ questions” (Marshall, 1996).

#### **3.2 Data sources and Collection**

##### *3.2.1 Sampling: criteria for participants selections*

In order to explore this relation, one-to-one interviews have been performed to a group of bicultural individuals. In this section, the criteria for the selection of respondents are listed and explained.

To analyze biculturalism and its possible effects on individuals, it is typical to take into consideration participants who have lived at least for 5 years in at least two different countries (Benet-Martínez et al., 2006). Thus, this criterion has been used for this research.

Another important aspect, taken into account for the selection of respondents, has been the countries in which they have lived. In fact, to ensure that an individual develops a sort of cognitive dialecticism, there has to be some conflicts among the values of the two cultures he has been exposed to. As mentioned in the literature review, by looking at the scores to Hofstede’s dimensions of national cultures (Hofstede, 2010), which are parameters to describe values, it is possible to see that some countries have very different and contrasting values, but at the same time other countries are very similar to each other. Therefore, to determine in which cases two cultures are different enough to allow a person to experience values contradiction, making this study relevant, the cultural clusters, identified by GLOBE study, have been employed. This means that having a bicultural experience in at least two different cultural clusters has been a parameter for the selection of respondents.

Another significant feature is leadership, in fact, as seen in the literature review, this complex behavior seems to have a positive impact on managerial skills and on decision

making. For this reason, in the research of participants, the focus has been firstly on managers and leaders, and secondly on common employees.

Moreover, for the scope of the study other two demographic parameters have been taken into consideration. The age range of the participants has been set between 30 and 64. Furthermore, participants should all have a higher education degree.

### *3.2.2 Participants*

The study involved 19 participants. Respondents are all employed in multinational organizations, they included 14 managers, and 5 younger employees with good possibilities to undertake a managerial position in the future. Nine of them had more than one experience abroad. The method used to contact respondents was the snowballing or word-of-mouth techniques, according to which participants recommend other individuals who may be eligible for the study (Luborsky & Rubinstein, 1995).

The respondent group was mixed in terms of experiences, in fact, the total number of countries taken into consideration, as home and host country, was 22, covering 8 out of the 10 clusters of the GLOBE study (see Appendix III). This aspect is important for the relevance of the study, since, if all the participants were exposed to the same cultures, the data collected (people's experience, opinions and process through which they went during their bicultural journey) could have been biased by the interested cultures. This is particularly true, since, as seen in the literature review, some countries tend to have dialectical thinking as part of the cultural mindset taught during childhood.

### *3.2.3 Semi-structured interviews*

The data has been collected through one-to-one, semi-structured interviews. This method has been chosen since "in semistructured interviews the goal is to explore a topic more openly and to allow interviewees to express their opinions and ideas in their own words" (Esterberg, 2002), and thus seemed to be in line with the aim of the research. This interview method is useful "to obtain both retrospective and real-time accounts by those people experiencing the phenomenon of theoretical interest" (Gioia et al., 2012). In this particular case, delving deeper into the journey and the experience through which biculturals are exposed to two or more cultures, this method allows the identification and analysis of the factors, which lead individuals to the development of this cognitive tendency to accept contradictions and paradoxes, thus to dialectical thinking.

The interview protocol contained questions covering different topics: the experience and the difficulties that the individual incurred when moving and adapting to the life in the other country; the divergences among the home and host cultures and the way the individual managed them; the ability and skills that the participant gained through this experience; the participants' opinion on the dialectical thinking ability, and its relation to their experience.

However, it is important to notice that the order and structure of the interviews was shaped by the interviewees' responses (Esterberg, 2002). In fact, in semi-structured interviews, the interview protocol can be used as a guide, but not rigidly, following the answers of the informant in a flexible way (Gioia et al., 2012), and formulating new questions according to them (Esterberg, 2002).

The interviews lasted from 15 to 40 minutes, depending on the availability of respondents. Some of them were conducted face-to-face, others via skype, and few by phone. All the interviews were taped and then transcribed.

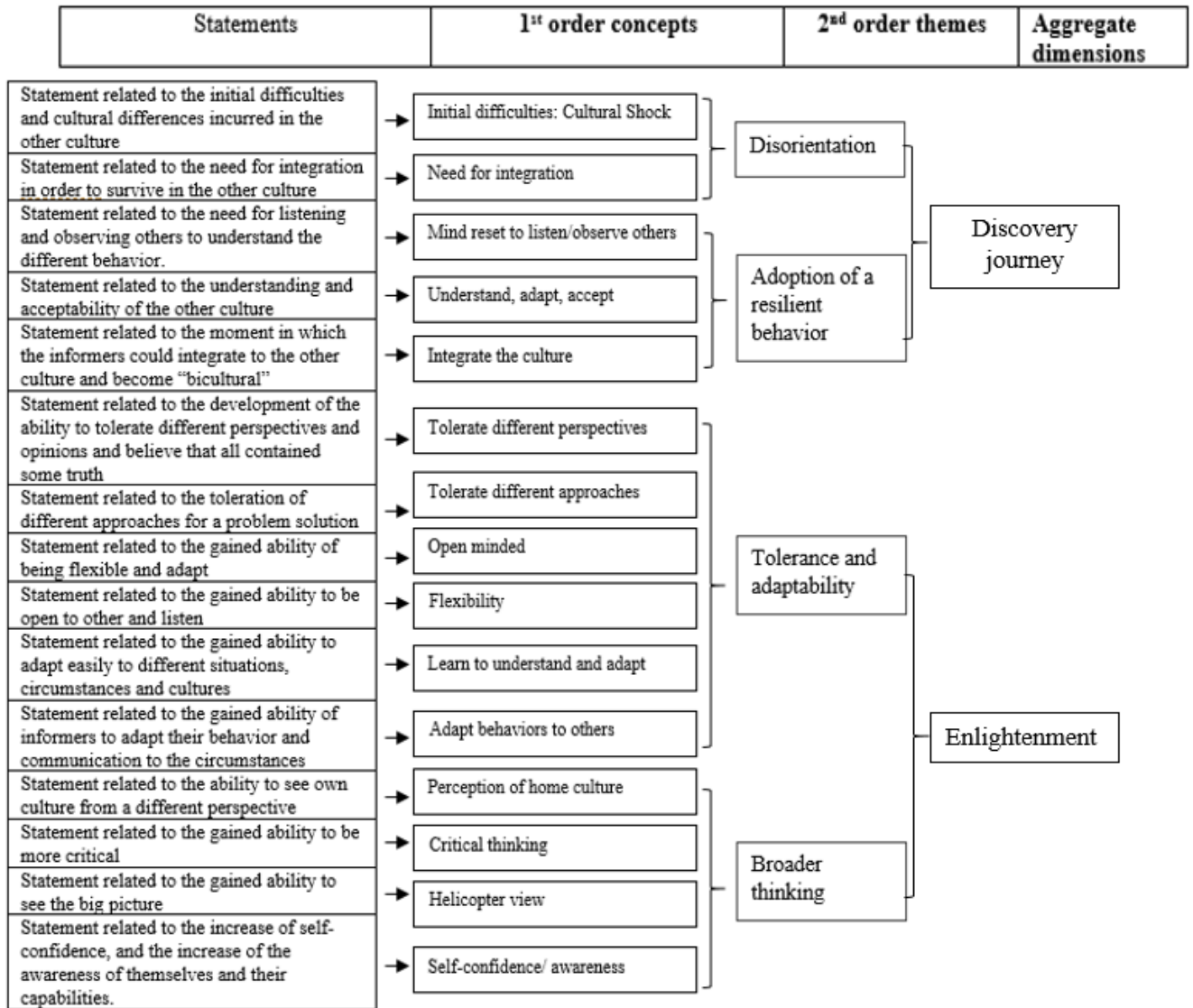
## **3.3 Data Analysis**

In order to analyze the data collected, an inductive approach has been used. This approach "involves analyzing data with little or no predetermined theory, structure or framework and uses the actual data itself to derive the structure of analysis" (Burnard et al., 2008). The methodology employed to structure the data has been the one proposed by Gioia et al. (2012). The first step has consisted in selecting representative quotations, relevant for the study, from the interviews transcripts. By seeking similarities and differences among those, it has been possible to identify 16 first-order concepts and give them a label (Appendix IV).



Subsequently, by detecting relationship among the first-order concepts, it has been possible to develop 4 second-order themes. Finally, these second-order themes have been combined into 2 aggregate theoretical dimensions. The final data structure is presented in figure I.

Figure I. Data Structure



## 4. Findings

By analyzing the data, it has been possible not only to realize that there is a relation between biculturalism and the development of a dialectical thinking ability, but also to detect the process through which the individual develops such ability and identify the skills that he believes to have gained through his bicultural journey.

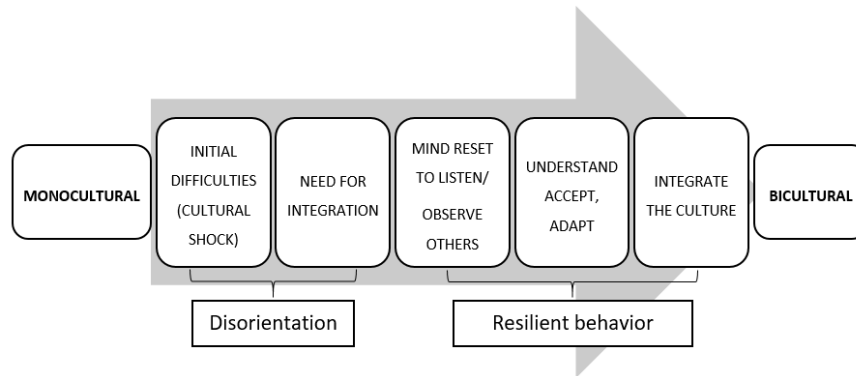
Moreover, through the identification of some patterns among participants, it has been possible to note that even if they have lived different experiences (in terms of countries and cultures), the process they have gone through has been quite standardized and similar among them, as well as the skills they have gained.

### 4.1 The discovery journey

In this section, the aggregate dimension, identified as *the discovery journey*, is analyzed, through the explanation of the different first-order categories.

Even describing it in different ways, using different words or different examples, most of the participants narrated their experience as a process (Figure II), through which from monocultural they have become bicultural. Firstly, the individual faces a disorientating period, in which he is exposed for the first time to another culture, confronts himself and his culture to different behaviors, values and approaches, and develops the need of integration but does not know how to address it. Later, the individual adopts a resilient behavior, being able to react positively to the initial shock. Indeed, through observation, he understands that he needs to comprehend the other culture, accept it and adapt to it, and finally integrates and assimilates the foreign culture.

**Figure II.** The Discovery Journey (as a process)



The first step of the process is to experience the so called “*cultural shock*”. Every single participant confessed to have had some difficulties as soon as they moved to the other country. “(They) didn’t understand the others and sometimes (they were) not understood”, as Rajnish, an Indian man moved to the Netherlands, told. “It was frustrating” as Warner, who moved from South Africa to Mauritius, said referring to his first period in Mauritius. As some of the informers explained, this initial difficulty was caused by the fact that they “kept the mindset of their culture” and “interpreted things using their background”, creating a fertile ground for cultural shocks, and incomprehension. For example, Hens, who from Mauritius moved to Switzerland, talked about having the perception of not being welcomed in Switzerland, because no neighbor went to welcome and meet him when he moved, as typical in Mauritius; in the same way, initially, the various respondents that moved to the Netherlands interpreted the directness, typical of the Dutch culture, as rude and offensive.

This first difficult step was followed by the *need for integration*. Some respondent talked about feeling alone and understanding that something had to change, they had to find a way to integrate and socialize, since it was the only way to “survive” and “be happy”. One of the interviewees confessed that he had to move back to his own country, because, differently from him, his wife could not integrate and became ill with depression.

The third step, *mind reset to observe and listen to others*, for most of them was determined by the ability to make a clean sweep, get rid of prejudices, suspend judgements, and start to listen and observe the behaviors of the people from the other culture.

Thanks to this, they can advance the process to the fourth step, *understand, accept and adapt* to the other culture. The individual starts realizing that the behaviors, which he could not understand, were due to cultural divergences. He comprehends these differences and understands that there is no other choice than to accept them, since it is impossible to change a culture and the people are brought “from childhood to that concept”, so they will never change.

The next step is the actual *integration* of the second culture. The majority of respondents explained that, after getting used to the culture and accepting it, they started to notice that some of the behaviors or of the values could actually *be better* or *better represent them* with respect to the ones they were taught in their home country. This allowed them to make a puzzle among their home country culture and the host country one. “I changed my habits, beliefs and values, you pick some of the behaviors from all the countries you lived in”, this is how Mihaela, who is from Rumania, lived in France and now lives in the UK, expressed this condition. Some of the respondents talked about making the different values of the different

cultures coexist, others talked about having different backgrounds that define their identity. What is clear is that they all changed, some just in terms of behaviors and habits, others also in terms of values.

Probably depending on the cultural differences among the two countries, the circumstances and the frequency of exposure to the other culture, and the individual propensity and ability to adapt, for some respondents this process has been very fast, while for others it has been slow. This process can also be seen as circular, since the individual executes it for every different value or behavior, that he has to face. For this reason, in the first months abroad the individual tends to perform it very often, although he will find himself in executing it again and again, as learning a culture is a long-life journey. The idea is that not all the differences in cultures are so evident, since, as Hall (1976) suggests with the Iceberg model, some values may be hidden, and it could take more time to be discovered by the individual. Thus, for each new difference noted among the cultures, the individual tends to repeat the process.

An example of this process could be the one provided by Tatién, a man from Ruanda, who moved to Belgium 22 years ago. The Belgian value, with which he has struggled mostly, was the acceptance of homosexuals. Initially, he could not accept it, as it was contrasting to the strong value of family of his country, Ruanda. It was a shock for him to see a homosexual couple in his working environment accepted by everyone, and he was annoyed by it.

“The first time they invited me to a homosexual marriage in Belgium, I didn’t go because I couldn’t, it was against a strong value of my country and I couldn’t understand it, it looked abnormal. (...) The second time, I decided to go but just to the ceremony, and just to try to see and try to understand”.

As he describes, initially he could not accept it, however, at one point, he realized that everyone around him had a different behavior, and that his action was considered “disrespectful”, thus he decided to give it a try and he participated to a marriage ceremony. According to what he told during the interview, today he has a strong friendship with a homosexual couple, he completely understands that his prejudice, due to his culture, was not in line with his values of acceptance, and decided to modify his behavior and way of thinking. This is a case in which the individual exposed to a different culture completely changed his value.

Another example in which the individual exposed to two cultures has found a balance among some ways of doing things was provided by Fabio, an Italian man who lives in the Netherlands. He believes that, thanks to this experience, today he is capable of being both *multitasking* or *monotasking* according to the circumstance and the action he is performing. However, when he first moved to the Netherlands, he had some troubles at work because he could not understand the monotasking approach and he did not like it.

## 4.2 Enlightenment

As a result of the aforementioned process, most of respondents discussed about the fact that they had changed, “improved”, and gained new skills.

“The experience changes you in a substantial way. You tend to develop some abilities that before you didn’t have for sure.”

As Fabio, one of the respondents, mentioned, the bicultural journey can provide individuals with different skills and abilities.

In this section, each 1<sup>st</sup> order category, which has been incorporated in the *enlightenment* aggregate dimension, is analyzed. These categories represent what the individuals have described as the abilities and skills gained thanks to their bicultural experience.

Almost all the participants in the study mentioned the fact that something gained from the bicultural experience was the ability to *tolerate different perspectives*. Many of them talk about “right or wrong”, and the fact that these concepts are relative, and that it is just a matter of perspectives. The fact that different cultures have different conceptions about what is “right” and what is “wrong”, and that bicultural individuals have experienced these contradictions, have helped them understand that there are different perspectives for every issue. Luigi, an Italian man, who lived in the UK, moved to Mauritius, and now lives in Switzerland, expressed this concept saying that he does not believe anymore in “absolute

truths” and that everything is relative. Another important aspect of this ability is the fact that the individual tends to learn to tolerate and deal with paradoxical situations. According to Francesca, an Italian woman in the Netherlands, “depending from which angle we look at things, two opposite things can be true at the same time”. Most of the participants addressed the questions concerning the management of paradoxical situations, very positively and relating it to their experience, using Luigi’s words, the bicultural experience “helps you to learn how to deal with contradictions”. The main reason for it is that the individual has to accept values and behaviors which contradict the ones of his home culture. Savaas, a Greek man, who lives in the Netherlands, expressed this concept with the following words: “I found a way to make the values of my home country and the ones of my host country coexist, even if in some cases they could seem to contradict each other”.

*Tolerate different approaches* is another skill gained from a bicultural experience. Individuals tend to accept the usage of a different approach, for instance for a solution of a problem. Many of the participants expressed this feeling. An example could be Rajnish, the Indian moved to the Netherlands, who explained that before moving to another country, he could not accept that his collaborators used an approach different from his; today, he manages people in different countries and he changed his perspective, particularly he believes that “the reaction on a problem, and its solution, is usually depending on the situation: they are adjusted on culture, country, wheatear, what are the conditions of life. All depends on how, where and in which circumstances they are living, and even if they are different, they are all right”.

Moreover, bicultural individuals tend to adopt an objective *perception of their home country culture*. Elisabetta, an Italian, who lived in Germany and Switzerland, and now lives in Mauritius, explains this, using the following words: “when you live in another country, one thing that happens is that you live your own culture in a different way, you learn to see it objectively, understand its pros and cons, and try to get only the best from it”.

Other two learnings of the bicultural journey are *the understandability and adaptability*, and *the capacity to adapt the behaviors to others*. Something, noted in the data collected, is that the nine respondents, who lived more than one experience abroad, all mentioned that their first experience has been the most difficult one. The motivation they gave to it was that they have learned to adapt to a different context. Gerald, who is from Austria and has lived in Denmark and Italy, expressed the fact that “nothing shocks” him anymore, and that he has learned to adapt to other people and behaviors. Also, Carlo, who is Italian and lives in Germany, feels that he “gained self confidence in dealing with the unknown, with the diversity”. Moreover, many of them talked about having developed a skill in terms of adaptation of their behavior and communication to the people they are talking to, even if from countries different from the ones they used to live in.

Some participants also talked about gaining a *helicopter view* and learning to see at the big picture instead of focusing directly on the particular.

Other important qualities are *the openness, the flexibility, and the critical thinking*. They see themselves as open-minded, flexible to modify their way of doing things, and more able to perform critical analysis of a situation.

*Self-confidence and self-awareness* are other two important things gained during the bicultural journey. This ability to see objectively and the critical thinking leads to a stronger ability to look at themselves and at their capacities.

## 5. Discussion

This project was aimed at detecting a relation between biculturalism and dialectical thinking, particularly it addresses the following research question: *What do professionals gain in terms of dialectical thinking from experiencing more than one culture? And how?*

This aim was achieved employing a qualitative research approach. Particularly, the data was collected through semi-structured interviews, to 19 bicultural professional individuals, and, subsequently, was analyzed through the methodology proposed by Gioia et al. (2012).

The data highlighted two issues, the existence of an involuntary and unconscious process through which the individual becomes bicultural, and the multiplicity of skills and abilities gained by the individual, thanks to this process. It is possible to notice that these skills are

somehow related to the dialectical thinking ability. In fact, individuals tend to gain and develop, on one hand, skills related to the openness and tolerance versus other people, opinions and approaches, and to the management of paradoxical situations; and on the other hand, skills associated to a broader way of thinking, looking more objectively at things, developing a stronger self-awareness, and a better understanding of their own culture.

As a matter of fact, the results of the study underline a relation between biculturalism and dialectical thinking. Through the process of integration in a different culture, the individual challenges his own beliefs and identity. This allows him to learn to tolerate different perspectives, sometimes contradicting, and to adapt himself in different circumstances.

By showing the relation between being bicultural and the development of a dialectical thinking ability, this study contributes to the existent research on dialectical thinking, which, related to culture, was limited to the analysis of the differences in dialectical thinking levels among different countries. Moreover, it enriches the biculturalism literature showing other implications that this condition can have on individuals.

This paper could also have some implications for organizations and managers. Particularly, as the existent researches suggest, dialectical thinking is a cognitive ability which can have important implication on management, on the performance of an organization, and on the ability to deal with the organizational paradoxes in a more efficient way, knowing how to deal with contradictions and to accept them.

Many authors suggest that this cognitive ability can be good for managers and that organizations should look for it in the employees' selection process, particularly for leadership positions. The relation between biculturalism and dialectical thinking, shown by this research, suggests that there might be a way to foster the development of this ability. Thus, it could be useful for organizations, which care about employing leaders with this ability, to take into consideration the bicultural aspect in the selection and/or in the training and development of employees. Seen all the skills and abilities that individuals might gain by undertaking a bicultural journey, multinational organizations should, for example, consider developing their future leaders and their high potential employees by allowing them to have a bicultural experience within the organization (as many already do).

## **5.1 Limitations**

The first limitation is the impossibility to generalize the results of this study. The usage of a qualitative research methodology, which has allowed the exploration of people's experiences, sensations and opinions, has, however, the disadvantage of not being generalizable. Particularly, the reliance on a limited number of people, which is typical in the researches of qualitative nature, does not allow to develop some generalizations.

Another limitation might be the interviewees' nationalities. In fact, even if the participants came from and moved to different countries, involving 22 countries in the research, it is important to notice that, the usage of a snowball methodology to find participants did not favor an even ampler variety among participants, in terms of their nationalities.

## **6. Conclusion**

The role of dialectical thinking for the management of organizational paradoxes and good leadership practices has been reported by several studies (Cunha, J., & Clegg, S. R., 2000; Collinson, 2014; Lewis & Smith, 2014; Bai et al., 2015; Cunha et al., 2004). The root of this cognitive ability has been often attributed to the background culture of the individual (Peng & Nisbett, 1999; Hamamura et al., 2008). However, the present research shows an alternative way in which this cognitive ability may be gathered, by exploring its link to biculturalism.

In fact, the condition of biculturalism, in which the individual internalizes more than one culture even if contradicting, seem to require a dialectical way of thinking, which can be defined as the ability to tolerate contradictions and paradoxes. Starting from this hypothesis, through the employment of a qualitative research methodology, this study aimed at understanding if and how the conflict of values, experienced by bicultural individuals, could allow them to develop a dialectical thinking ability.

The results of the study detected a strong relation between biculturalism and the development of dialectical thinking, showing, on one hand, the process through which the individual goes, when he moves to a different country (discovery journey), and, on the other hand, the variety of skills and abilities, gained thanks to this experience (enlightenment).

The bicultural process and its implications on individuals are particularly relevant in the organizational field. Leaders and professionals with this experience tend to acquire skills and abilities that can be very beneficial for their organization. This is particularly considerable today, since organizations are becoming more and more international and deal daily with an increasing number of paradoxes and contradictions. The skills acquired by a bicultural professional may increase his ability to manage organizational paradoxes, to deal with uncertainty, to operate in an intercultural situation, and to enhance the performance of his team.

## Appendix

**Appendix I.** The cultural clusters proposed by the GLOBE study

<b>Anglo Cultures</b>	<b>Latin Europe</b>	<b>Nordic Europe</b>	<b>Germanic Europe</b>	<b>Eastern Europe</b>
England, Australia, South Africa (white sample), Canada, Ireland, USA, New Zealand	Israel, Italy, Portugal, Spain, France, Switzerland (France speaking)	Finland, Sweden, Denmark	Austria, Switzerland, The Netherlands, Germany	Hungary, Russia, Kazakhstan, Albania, Poland, Greece, Slovenia, Georgia
<b>Latin America</b>	<b>Sub-Sahara Africa</b>	<b>Arab Cultures</b>	<b>Southern Asia</b>	<b>Confucian Asia</b>
Costa Rica, Venezuela, Ecuador, Mexico, El Salvador, Colombia, Guatemala, Bolivia, Brazil, Argentina	Namibia, Zambia, Zimbabwe, South Africa (Black Sample), Nigeria	Qatar, Morocco, Turkey, Egypt, Kuwait	India, Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand, Iran	Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong, South Korea, China, Japan

**Appendix II.** The dimensions adopted by the GLOBE study

<b>Dimensions</b>	<b>Descriptions</b>
<b>Power Distance</b>	Degree to which a culture's people are (should be) separated by power, authority, and prestige
<b>In-Group Collectivism</b>	Degree to which a culture's people (should) take pride in and (should) feel loyalty toward their families, organizations, and employers
<b>Institutional Collectivism</b>	Degree to which individuals are (should be) encouraged by institutions to be integrated into broader entities with harmony and cooperation as paramount principles at the expense of autonomy and individual freedom
<b>Uncertainty Avoidance</b>	Degree to which a culture's people (should) seek orderliness, consistency, and structure
<b>Future Orientation Degree</b>	Degree to which a culture's people are (should be) separated by power, authority, and prestige to which a culture's people are (should be) willing to defer immediate gratification for future benefits
<b>Gender Egalitarianism</b>	Degree to which a culture's people (should) support gender equality
<b>Assertiveness</b>	Degree to which a culture's people are (should be) assertive, confrontational, and aggressive
<b>Humane Orientation</b>	Degree to which a culture's people are (should be) fair, altruistic, generous, caring, and kind toward others
<b>Performance Orientation</b>	Degree to which a culture's people (should) encourage and reward people for performance

\* Table retrieved from: Javidan, M., Stahl, G. K., Brodbeck, F., & Wilderom, C. P. (2005). Cross-border transfer of knowledge: Cultural lessons from Project GLOBE. *The Academy of Management Executive*, 19(2), 59-76.

**Appendix III.** Countries involved in the study

<b>Home and host countries involved in the study</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Austria</li> <li>• Belgium</li> <li>• China</li> <li>• Denmark</li> <li>• France</li> <li>• Germany</li> <li>• Greece</li> <li>• India</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Italy</li> <li>• Kazakhstan</li> <li>• Mauritius</li> <li>• Netherlands</li> <li>• Polonia</li> <li>• Portugal</li> <li>• Romania</li> <li>• Ruanda</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Russia</li> <li>• South Africa</li> <li>• Spain</li> <li>• Switzerland</li> <li>• UK</li> <li>• USA</li> </ul>

**Appendix IV.** The construction of the first-order categories from data

<b>First-order categories</b>	<b>Quotes from interviews</b>
<b>Initial difficulties: “cultural shock”</b>	<p>“You think that the "others" are very strange in their behaviors and you may even get annoyed by them.”</p> <p>“Initially, the main difficulty was the contrast with my home country’s culture.”</p> <p>“You take it personally because you don’t understand.”</p> <p>“You keep the mindset of your culture and think: “what’s the problem with these people?”.”</p> <p>“You tend to interpret things with your background and your culture, and everything shocks you.”</p> <p>“Also, your way of seeing social relationships, with family and friends, is lived in contexts which are completely different from yours.”</p> <p>“It was very tough. I was used to my own environment where everything was under control, and then I moved and everything was so different and new. “</p> <p>“Sometimes, I was not understood, and other times I didn’t understand others, so it is not very easy.”</p> <p>“It was frustrating, the language, the way things are done, everything seemed different.”</p> <p>“Initially it was tough for the difference in culture with respect of how you perceive certain things, and how you look at different issues.”</p>
<b>Need for integration</b>	<p>“But if you want to be happy, you have to find a way to integrate to the other culture.”</p> <p>“At one point, you understand that to have a normal social life in the other country, you have to integrate.”</p> <p>“I understood that if I didn’t change, I couldn’t survive.”</p>
<b>Mind reset to observe/ listen to others</b>	<p>“To survive in another country, you have to make all your prejudices fall, and listen to others.”</p> <p>“You are obliged to listen to others and understand them. The best technique for this is to stop listening to your preconceptions and to be open to the differences.”</p> <p>“Then, you try to suspend judgment.”</p> <p>“When you live in a different context, you have to simplify yourself, to be open to the others.”</p> <p>“You have to do an effort to integrate to the other society, try things, and behave in ways, not typical for you.”</p> <p>“Initially you should start to observe and to open your eyes, it’s the only way to understand.”</p>
<b>Understand and accept the other culture</b>	<p>“The challenge was to understand, accept and adapt to others.”</p> <p>“After a little bit in the other country, you realize that those “strange” behaviors are due to the cultural differences, and that there is nothing wrong with that.”</p> <p>“But then I realized, it is their culture, it is having their own strength, and they are brought up from the childhood to that concept. So, it is pretty much situational.”</p> <p>“Once you get to understand that is just that, things are different, and that it’s just the way things are, you can accept it, and you can move on.”</p> <p>“There is a pressure on you to adapt and to understand things that are different, and sometimes contradicting: you have a positive pressure to understand others’ perspectives.”</p> <p>“Initially, I got used to it, I accepted it. Today I like it.”</p> <p>“You have to understand that each person is different, have a different background, believe in</p>



	<p>different things, and think in different ways, which are not wrong: you can learn a lot from them.”</p> <p>“An important issue is to understand the personal and cultural needs of others, I had to orientate myself into the comprehension of others and into the integration of myself and my culture into a different environment.”</p>
<b>Integrate the culture</b>	<p>“So, this experience allows you to open your mind to the understanding, accepting and integrating into your own personality a different culture.”</p> <p>“I don’t think that being Italian defines my identity. My identity is defined by all these experiences, and all these cultures I got in touch with.”</p> <p>“Today, I feel that I don’t have one unique background, and this leads to the fact that I live using a mix of habits, way of behaving, and I believe in a mix of values.”</p> <p>“You are not obliged to marry another culture, however, for me, I started first to understand the differences, and then I tolerated them: for some of these, I found that they became part of my personal culture, for others I stick to my values, and I just took note of the differences.”</p> <p>“I learned to relativize, when you always lived in one context, you believe that there is only one way of living and doing things: the one you were taught. When you move, you realize that there are other alternatives.”</p> <p>“All the cultures I got in touch with became part of my background.”</p> <p>“You learn that there is not only one way, there are infinite ways of doing things, and being open to observe them, you can learn them, and create your own combination of doing things.”</p> <p>“We have a different way of thinking, I learned to think in a more European way, and to manage both way of thinking.”</p> <p>“I found a way to make the values of my home country and the ones of my host coexist, even if in some cases they could seem to contradict each other.”</p> <p>“You get used to all these differences, acquiring the capacity to make them part of your own culture.”</p> <p>“The experience changes you in a substantial way. (...) You become more critic, you are able to integrate the aspects of both cultures in your personal way of thinking and behaving.”</p>
<b>Tolerate different perspectives</b>	<p>“I learned that there is not right or wrong in any situation. It is important to consider all the opinions and contributions, many time they are all right, and the solution might be a balance of them.”</p> <p>“Something that this bicultural experience thought me is that there is no right or wrong: depending from which angle we look at things, two opposite things can be true at the same time.”</p> <p>“My experiences have a huge influence on the way I am now. (...) I am open to change my view on things, what for me is right or wrong.”</p> <p>“Before moving, I could just see the perspective that I was raised up with, and this was a limit that I was able to overtake just moving and being open to understand other cultures.”</p>
<b>Tolerate different approaches</b>	<p>“You learn that there are different approaches that can be adopted to solve each problem, believing that just one is true can be a presumption.”</p> <p>“It’s a matter of perspectives, there are different ways to solve a problem, all have pros and cons.”</p> <p>“There is not a good or bad way. For sure what I learned, is to get the best from both approaches. Those are two different recipes to the same issues.”</p> <p>“They all solve the problem. The process is always right but always different, and sometimes contradicting, it is driven by the society and all these conditions in which they are.”</p> <p>“The reaction on a problem, and its solution, is usually depending of the situation: they are adjusted on culture, country, wheatear, what are the conditions of life. All depends on how, where and in which circumstances they are living, and even if they are different, they are all right.”</p>
<b>Perception of home culture and values</b>	<p>“I believe that I didn’t change my values, but my perception of them.”</p> <p>“Then, I started changing my behavior as well, I changed my acceptability, I changed my perception of thinking things in my mind.”</p> <p>“Going abroad made me see my own values and beliefs in a different way.”</p> <p>“When you live in another country, one thing that happens is that you live your own culture in a different way, you learn to see it objectively, understand its pros and cons, and try to get only the best from it.”</p>
<b>Criticality</b>	<p>“When you start dealing with different way of doing things and different ways of thinking, it is normal that you change, you are more open to differences, you are more critical.”</p> <p>“The bicultural experience changed my way of thinking and being, I am more critic.”</p>
<b>Helicopter view</b>	<p>“I gained for sure a broader thinking, which allows me to understand and accept other points of view.”</p> <p>“I think that now I am able to see things with a helicopter view.”</p>

	<p>“You learn to see the big picture.”</p> <p>“You found yourself to live in a condition in which your way of thinking is not anymore determined by the background in which you grow up and you got used to think.”</p>
<b>Learn to understand and adapt</b>	<p>“The most difficult experience was the first time I went abroad. I think it is because after the first time you get used, and it becomes easier to move, to adapt, to understand the differences, and to understand the other culture.”</p> <p>“Among my experiences abroad, the first one was the most difficult, then you learn to adapt to a new culture.”</p> <p>“The first experience abroad was very difficult, but then you learn how to adjust.”</p> <p>“You learn to communicate, to interact in situations which are different.”</p> <p>“When you move to another country, you feel that something is changing in you, and in your way of thinking by talking to other people, hearing other perspective and reasoning about it. You become more open to understand others, to tolerate different ideas, to confront with others, you get used to other perspectives and you are not shocked by them anymore, and you adapt your-self more easily.”</p> <p>“Now I am more open to different cultures, and I adapt more easily.”</p>
<b>Adapt the behaviors on others</b>	<p>“I learned to understand other cultures, and how to behave in different ways with different people.”</p> <p>“Now it’s easier for me to understand people from a culture or another and relate to them, I am not shocked anymore when I see a different behavior, and I know how to behave in different circumstances.”</p> <p>“People behavior depends on the place you are living. When you move, you learn to understand that since people are different also the way you relate to them and you treat them is different.”</p> <p>“Living in 3 different countries taught me to understand people from all over the world, and I learned how to communicate with them in a better way.”</p>
<b>Flexibility</b>	<p>“For sure, I learned to see things from different perspectives, and this allows me to be more flexible.”</p> <p>“I am more open and flexible.”</p> <p>“You become more flexible and elastic, you interface with people from different cultures, and initially it looks like an obstacle, but then it enriches you.”</p> <p>“I learned to see a problem from different aspects but try to bring to the discussion what is the end game, what is what we want to achieve and why. The how we do it can be done in different ways.”</p> <p>“You are not anymore bounded by the schemes and the prejudices that you always had.”</p>
<b>Self-confidence/ awareness</b>	<p>“I gained self confidence in dealing with the unknown, with the diversity.”</p> <p>“I understood what is important for me.”</p> <p>“Also, I gained awareness of myself, and my capacities.”</p> <p>“This experience allowed me to auto criticize and challenge my beliefs and values.”</p>
<b>Open mind</b>	<p>“You make your thinking more open. You have to understand other approaches, and other people.”</p> <p>“You open your mind, and you develop a capacity to understand and accept opinions and perspectives, which are completely different from yours.”</p> <p>“I became more open, and I learned to listen and then accept others’ opinions.”</p> <p>“I am less judgmental.”</p> <p>“Before moving to other countries, I was very judgmental of the differences, and I was closed to the other culture as I believed in stereotypes. After moving, I have become more open.”</p> <p>“This made me more open to different ideas.”</p> <p>“You learn that there are many differences in people, behaviors and opinions from which you can learn.”</p>

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