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THE CASE OF SAFEHARBOR INTERNATIONAL

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE

DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION

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Dedication

From the west to the east, I have flown to be near you

I have come all this way to be close, to be here with you

And now, all my heart, I will lay down precisely at your feet

"Love Letter to Japan" by The Bird and The Bee

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You too must befriend the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Deuteronomy 10:19

Abstract

The integration of culturally-distinct employees remains a desirable, yet challenging, dream to realize in the modern workplace. Field research at a multinational, multilingual organization, SafeHarbor International, was conducted as a means of investigating multiculturalism in organizations. The case of SafeHarbor explored the sensemaking cues employees received regarding multicultural integration, and how these cues influenced organizational outcomes. The study addressed two primary objectives: What cues did employees receive for and against multicultural integration (RQ1) and what are the outcomes of those cues in relation to Cox's (1991) model of integration (RQ2). Findings for RQ1 revealed conflicting cues, which created an ambivalent sensemaking environment with both "Green Lights" (indicating support for integration) and "Red Lights" (indicating resistance to it) reported. For RQ2, outcomes relating to Cox's dimensions of integration reflected *both* pluralistic *and* multicultural organizational status. This study contributes to the literature by offering insights into the liminal organizational space that can exist between pluralism and multiculturalism within a single organization, documenting ambivalent cues, and advancing research on sensemaking in multicultural contexts. Findings also offer the original concept of *silicon curtain* (i.e., management's overuse of specific technologies at the expense of relationship development), which involves the limitations of technology in facilitating integration between culturally-distinct groups within an organization.

Keywords: Multicultural organization, workforce diversity, pluralism, ambivalence, sensemaking

Chapter 1: Introduction

In our increasingly interconnected, globalized world, the topic of how organizations can fully integrate and appreciate diversity among workers has only grown in salience (e.g., Harrison & Klein, 2007). Workforce diversity improves group learning (Gibson & Vermeulen, 2003), allows for greater creativity (Bezrukova & Uparna, 2009), increases organizational appeal to job seekers (Williamson et al., 2008), and helps alleviate structural injustices, among many other benefits. Along these lines, Cox (1991) offered a model describing stages of diversity development in organizations—from monolithic to plural and finally, multicultural. In monolithic organizations, diversity is minimal. In plural organizations, diversity exists, usually at lower levels of the hierarchy, but is not apparent throughout the organization. In fully "multicultural" organizations, cultural biases and intergroup conflict are minimal, workforce diversity is fully integrated throughout the organizational hierarchy and informal networks, and reciprocal influence exists between majority and minority cultures (Cox, 1991; Larkey, 1996). Interestingly, truly multicultural organizations remain exceedingly rare, even and especially in an age of multinational organizations, in which physical distance, time, and language—among other barriers—must be taken into consideration. As will be explained throughout this investigation, multicultural organizations, while admirable, are rare because of many social and cultural forces which make the integration of diversity across an organization extremely challenging.

Workforce diversity can be understood broadly as the distribution of differences across members of a work unit in relation to a particular attribute (Harrison & Klein, 2007). There exists a wide range of attributes along which workers can be considered diverse, such as age (e.g., Greer & Talbert, 2024), racioethnicity (e.g., Kang et al., 2016), gender (e.g., Joshi, 2014), and, important to the present case, national cultural background. Investigating the diffusion of

national cultural background across an organization is a relevant form of diversity for inquiry because advances in technology, travel, and globalization are making contact with culturally-distinct others common. Additionally, these emergent forces mean that many successful organizations will inevitably have to manage national cultural diversity among stakeholders both within and outside the organization.

Workforce diversity may provide many benefits to employees, both at the individual and organizational levels. Organizationally, a diverse workforce can lead to greater creativity (Bezrukova & Uparna, 2009) and improved group learning (Gibson & Vermeulen, 2003). Team diversity contributes positively to organizational performance (Horwitz & Horwitz, 2007), due in part to greater cognitive diversity, or the degree to which team members differ in terms of thought processes, technical knowledge, and practical experience (Miller et al., 1998). On an individual level, workforce diversity brings employees into contact with new people and ideas. Being exposed to new perspectives can result in personal and professional growth. Practically, when organizational members are more accepting of workforce diversity, minority group members have greater opportunities to experience upward career mobility and earn the compensation associated with those higher-tier organizational roles (Sheeley, 2025).

SafeHarbor International—the subject of this case study—is a multinational weather organization with 30 offices in 21 countries. Analysis of 24 interviews and over 100 hours of observations revealed the trials and triumphs of this multinational, multilingual organization as it struggles to move from pluralism to true multiculturalism. That crucial move is hampered by competing sets of sensemaking cues, which, at times, help and, at times, hinder full multicultural integration. The objective of this case study is to explore the role of sensemaking in enabling and constraining the rise of multiculturalism within a large, Japanese multinational organization.

Therefore, this investigation has the potential to reveal previously-unacknowledged interpretive dynamics that constrain organizations' movement from plural to multicultural status. A Japanese multinational organization is of particular theoretical interest, due to unique Japanese workplace norms, which can contribute to expatriate failure (Black, 1988) and difficulties in organizational socialization (Greer &Wyant, 2024).

This study contributes to the literature in several ways: First, it contributes to research on diversity in organizations new insights on the liminal stage between pluralism and multiculturalism. Second, and relatedly, findings documented ambivalent sets of specific cues, which subsidiary members read as indicating both a digression from (i.e., "red lights") and progression toward (i.e., "green lights") multiculturalism. Third, it contributes to limited research on sensemaking in multicultural contexts, specifically attending to the influence of non-Western members on western organizational members. Fourth, findings contributed the novel observation that technology use helped international task coordination at the cost of relational development across national boundaries.

Chapter 2 details prior research and theory relevant to this project, including multiculturalism in organizations, sensemaking theory, and ambivalence in organizations. Then, in Chapter 3, case study methods are explained, including a description of the organization, participants, ethnographic methods, analytic strategies, and credibility checks. In Chapter 4, findings are explained. Two data tables are presented. One table documents sensemaking cues that signalled to members of a subsidiary branch that organizational leadership was both in favor of and in conflict with multicultural integration. Another table leverages Cox's model as a framework for exploring outcomes relating to diversity integration apparent in the case study. In

Chapter 5, theoretical contributions and practical implications of the case study are discussed. Finally, Chapter 6 explores limitations and conclusions of the research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Multiculturalism in Organizations

Multiculturalism is an interdisciplinary concept. Broadly defined, multiculturalism refers to "attitudes and behaviors that support cultural diversity at the individual level," exemplified by "support for and adjustment to a culturally diverse society, acceptance of minority ethnic cultures, anti-discrimination, and interactions between members of the host society and minority groups" (Stogianni et al., 2021, p. 209). In the 20th century, multiculturalism has been increasingly relevant to scholars and practitioners as advances in technology, travel, and globalization brought individuals from different nations and cultures closer together. The Western political theorist, Kymlicka (1989), describes the concept of "cultural community," in which people "share a culture, a language and history which defines their cultural membership" (p. 135). When a community contains "two or more groups of people who have different cultures, speak[...] different languages, develop[...] different cultural traditions," Kymlicka (1989) refers to this multiplicity of cultural communities as a "cultural plurality" (p. 135).

The term "multicultural" is later described by Modood (2013) as "the political accommodation of minorities formed by immigration to western countries from outside the prosperous west" (p. 5). This definition, however, is limiting, as it refers primarily to the demography of a place, neglecting ideological and psychological components of multiculturalism. Stogianni et al. (2021) describe the ideological components of multiculturalism as promoting respect and support for cultural diversity, which may include organizational policies designed to facilitate intercultural communication and improve the integration of minority groups. Psychologically, multiculturalism is "attitudes and behaviors that support cultural diversity at the individual level," exemplified by "support for and adjustment to a

culturally diverse society, acceptance of minority ethnic cultures, anti-discrimination, and interactions between members of the host society and minority groups" (Stogianni et al., 2021, p. 209). A multi-faceted approach to multiculturalism aligns with a model proposed by Cox (1991), which describes multiculturalism within organizational contexts.

According to Cox's model (1991), the term "multicultural," in an organizational setting, refers to "the degree to which an organization values cultural diversity and is willing to utilize and encourage it" (p. 34). Cox's descriptive model outlines how organizations move from *mono*cultural to *multi*cultural. Implicitly, the model suggests that monocultural organizations are common and that the move to multicultural status is desirable, but likely rare, due to the inherent challenges of coordinating members' intercultural interactions in the achievement of organizational goals. Cox explains that members of multicultural organizations experience minimal cultural biases and intergroup conflict. The model suggests that the rare, but admirable, multicultural organization will have high-levels of workforce diversity integrated throughout the organization's hierarchy and informal networks. Additionally, multicultural organizations prioritize mutual influence between majority and minority cultures, and boast equivalent levels of organizational identification (i.e., feelings of oneness with or belongingness to an organization) across organizational sub-groups (see also Larkey, 1996). See Table 1 in Appendix A for a full list of Cox's dimensions of integration. The model describes the stages of diversity development in organizations—from monolithic to plural and finally, multicultural. The following paragraphs elaborate on these three stages of organizational multicultural development.

Monolithic Organization. In a monolithic organization, members share a similar cultural background. Homogeneity, in terms of ideology and demography, is common and widespread

throughout the organization's command structure. While intergroup conflict may be low, prejudice and discrimination against minority groups are prevalent. Prejudice and discrimination can contribute to minimal informal socialization between groups and low minority presence in the upper echelons of the organization (Gelfand et al., 2005). According to Cox, there is a large gap in levels of organizational identification between majority and minority groups in monolithic organizations; minority groups are expected to assimilate to the majority group's culture in monolithic (as well as pluralistic) organizations (Cox, 1991). An example of such an organization might be a local grocery business in a small, demographically homogeneous town. Diversity among workers is scarce, and prejudice can be expressed openly. The few minority group members that are employed in the organization experience isolation and are expected to follow majority cultural norms. Monolithic organizations such as this example are difficult for minority group members to traverse. Movement toward embracing and integrating minority group members can be found in plural organizations.

Plural Organization. In a plural organization, members of different cultural backgrounds are prevalent, but minority groups are not well-incorporated. Levels of integration (hierarchical, informal) are moderately higher than a monolithic organization, but prejudice and discrimination persist. Given the increased presence of diverse populations in a plural organization, intergroup conflict is high. Increased intergroup conflict can contribute to gaps in organizational identification between majority and minority populations. Minority populations may feel that their organization does not protect them from conflict and prejudice, therefore reducing their sense of belonging within the organization. Consider, for example, a multinational organization with offices in several countries across the globe. Organizational members rarely meet in person, but must coordinate operations in order to achieve organizational goals. Since

organizational members do not know one another or their respective cultures very well, misunderstandings are frequent, creating friction between branches and an "us" versus "them" mentality. An "us" and "them" mentality sews division, reinforcing the pluralistic culture of the organization (Cox, 1991).

Multicultural Organization. The last stage of development in the Cox (1991) model is the multicultural organization. Multicultural organizations practice reciprocal acculturation across cultural groups. Instead of expecting minority populations to assimilate to the majority culture, minority and majority groups learn about one another's cultural practices and compromise between the two. In a multicultural organization, full integration exists within organizational hierarchies and informal networks. Prejudice and discrimination are eliminated, intergroup conflict is low, and there is no gap in organizational identification between majority and minority groups. Consider, again, the aforementioned multinational organization. Instead of an organization where members of different cultures are scattered across the globe and scarcely know one another, members are encouraged to travel frequently. Travel allows the employees to meet one another in person and learn about each other's respective cultures. In this example, organizational members from around the world are represented in leadership, and members of different offices connect socially outside of working hours. The important distinction between this example and the pluralistic one is that—while diverse group members are present in both—organizational members are integrated, represented, and cared about in the multicultural organization. Integration, representation, and the care experienced in a multicultural organization tends to be rare (Cox, 1991).

Despite the rise of globalization and multinational organizations, truly multicultural organizations are rare—even among multinational organizations. Organizations may have

members from diverse ideological and demographic backgrounds without necessarily achieving a multicultural state. Despite the many benefits of diverse work teams—such as financial outperformance compared to non- or less diverse competitors (McKinsey & Company, 2020) and an increased likelihood of capturing new markets (Zheng et al., 2023)—pluralism persists. In a 2019 *Glassdoor* study, 61% of employees stated that they had experienced or witnessed workplace discrimination (Jackson, 2019). Additionally, in 2020 *Beamery* reported that less than half of employees agree that a diverse workforce is a competitive advantage. These, and other contemporary beliefs and issues relating to workplace diversity, are less related to the *presence* of diverse individuals but their *integration* into the workplace. While diverse employees may exist in many modern organizations, these employees experience discrimination (Jackson, 2019), and may not be appreciated for their unique contributions (e.g., not seen as a "competitive advantage"; Beamery, 2020). Cox's (1991) model emphasizes inclusion when distinguishing plural from *multicultural* organizations (Shore et al., 2011), which can be challenging in more homogenous societies, such as Japan.

Multiculturalism in Japanese Organizations

A multinational organization headquartered in Japan is a theoretically interesting site to study the dynamics of multiculturalism outlined by Cox (1991). Japanese organizations are exceptionally difficult for non-Japanese employees to adapt to, with reported expatriate assignment failure rates up to 80% (Black, 1988). Japanese workplace culture is characterized by norms and values that may be unfamiliar to non-Japanese workers, especially non-Japanese employees from the US or European countries. Differences in the mindsets and interactional patterns of members from different nations has been the subject of organizational scholarship for decades. Famously, in the mid-1960s, social psychologist Geert Hofstede distributed surveys to

70 national subsidiaries of the technology company *IBM* around the world, totalling approximately 100,000 questionnaires. Hofstede's analysis of the survey data resulted in the 1980 volume, *Culture's Consequences* (GeertHofstede.com, n.d.). Hofstede (1980) categorized cultural norms and values into five "cultural dimensions"—individualism-collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, femininity-masculinity, and time orientation. Importantly for the present investigation, *power distance* refers to the degree to which power differentials are expected and accepted within a society. Power distance is especially relevant in a workplace context, where entry-level employees frequently interact with power holders (e.g., more senior, tenured employees). Japan is a high power distance culture (Hofstede et al., 2010), which manifests in the workplace as strict observance of and deference to authority figures and organizational hierarchies (e.g., Peltokorpi & Ramaswami, 2021; Vogel et al., 2015). Within the Japanese context, tenure within the organization is important, as it can affect the language one uses (e.g., *keigo*, or Japanese honorifics; Moody, 2018), whose authority to respect, and even the hours one works (e.g., *tsukiai zangyo*, or collective overtime; Ono, 2018). The following paragraph details how power distance manifests communicatively in the workplace.

From an organizational communication perspective, strict observance of and deference to authority structures and organizational hierarchies can lead to the suppression of upward dissent, as members want to respect the "face" or "image" of their boss or superior (Bisel et al., 2012; Nishiyama, 1971). Face, here, is one's intended self-presentation (Sueda & Wiseman, 1992). In the Japanese context, scholars have noted that employees typically reach informal agreements before a meeting is called, in order to avoid a face-threatening event (i.e., a threat to one's desired public image) and the embarrassment that could be created by publicly disagreeing with powerholders (Sueda & Wiseman, 1992). Public disagreement with one's supervisor can lead to

team embarrassment, or embarrassment as a result of another team member's behavior, primarily due to the concern that negative attributions will be generalized to the team as a whole (Cupach & Imahori, 1993). Avoidance of team embarrassment is particularly relevant in collectivistic cultures, such as Japan, where people identify with and are oriented toward the collective whole, more so than self-interest (i.e., individualism; Hofstede et al., 2010). Japanese employees may avoid upward dissent and other organizational communication behaviors—such as information seeking (e.g., Jablin, 2011)—in order to avoid a team or supervisor-oriented face threat.

Long working hours are another distinctive facet of Japanese workplace culture. Despite efforts by the Japanese government to alleviate this issue in recent years, working hours in Japan have not decreased (Ono, 2018). In fact, they have remained at a similarly high level—over 2,000 hours per year per full-time employee—since the 1990s. Comparatively, European countries, such as Germany, work less than 1,400 hours per year per full-time employee (Ono, 2018). Ono (2018) posits that this is evidence of a social or normative issue caused by (1) Japan's input-oriented (i.e., commitment and loyalty as demonstrated by time) society, (2) long working hours as value signaling due to lack of true transferable skill, (3) group awareness and hierarchical relationships, (4) an internal (firm-specific) labor market, (5) ambiguous job descriptions, and (6) gender divisions of labor. Group awareness and hierarchical relationships in the workplace lead to the phenomenon of collective overtime.

Collective overtime refers to the practice of continuing to work beyond normal working hours when one's boss or coworkers are still in the office (Ono, 2018). Collective overtime is emblematic of Japan's collectivist orientation (Hofstede et al., 2010), where in-group status and harmony are emphasized (e.g., Tomalin & Nicks, 2014). In organizational communication terms, collective overtime can be viewed as a form of concertive control. Concertive control refers to

the phenomenon in which workers monitor one another's behavior in place of traditional supervision by management. Contrary to expectation, concertive control often results in *tighter* organizational control (i.e., compliance with management's will), due to a culture of surveillance and peer pressure among coworkers (Barker, 1993). Organizational members who participate in collective overtime are not explicitly told that they should stay until their boss and/or coworkers leave for the day. However, it is understood *implicitly* that to leave on time would be a violation of social norms that can lead to workplace consequences. The implicit understanding and peer-to-peer surveillance of who does or does not work overtime is concertive control.

Collective overtime is a behavior used to demonstrate commitment and loyalty to the organization (Ono, 2018). If an employee were to betray this workplace norm, they risk being perceived as uncommitted, disloyal, or even lazy. Low-performing or poorly received employees may become "*madogiwazoku*," a term literally translated as "window-gazing tribe," which refers to employees who have slowly had tasks and workplace opportunities rescinded, leading them to a state of isolation in which they are left to merely "gaze out the window" at work (Lincoln & Nakata, 1997).

Japanese workplaces feature a number of distinct cultural characteristics that may prove difficult for Western out-group members to navigate, such as high power distance (Hofstede, 1980), an emphasis on face preservation (Sueda & Wiseman, 1992), long working hours, and collective overtime (Ono, 2018). The following sections detail the workplace integration experiences of non-Japanese employees.

Negative Integration Experiences of Non-Japanese Employees. Research on non-Japanese employee experiences in Japan is somewhat limited, and findings are both positively and negatively valenced. Non-Japanese employees tend to encounter language barriers

that reinforce their outgroup status (e.g., Moody, 2018; Okamura, 2009). When foreign workers experience difficulty speaking Japanese and make mistakes, these instances highlight their outsider status, in addition to exacerbating communication issues (e.g., Kowner, 2004). Language and communication issues hinder relational development for newcomers (e.g., Griffith, 2002), which is of particular importance in the collectively-oriented Japanese workplace (e.g., Wolff, 2018). Imagine, for example, that it is lunch break at a Japanese organization. A non-Japanese employee wants to coordinate lunch with their employees, however; they are unable to speak Japanese well enough to initiate conversation, and perhaps even feel communication apprehension about doing so. At lunch, the Japanese employees discuss the contents of the upcoming afternoon's meeting informally. As a consequence, the non-Japanese employee is unable to participate in the decision-making process that occurs prior to a formal meeting (i.e., at lunch). They must either accept the consensus or express a dissenting opinion after the fact, potentially relegating them to out-group status (Watanabe & Kanazawa, 2021).

Differences in cultural norms can have detrimental effects for non-Japanese employees as well. Simmons' (2017) case study reports a situation in which Japanese and non-Japanese employees clashed over workplace expectations regarding personal privacy and what kinds of inquisitions were appropriate. The Japanese employees in Simmons (2017) asked their non-Japanese coworkers questions about their personal lives (e.g., questions about their romantic lives). The non-Japanese employees expected reciprocity (e.g., Japanese employees disclosing their dating exploits), however; a perceived information asymmetry existed. One non-Japanese participant expressed this in the following terms: "They [Japanese employees] know more about us [non-Japanese employees] than we do about them" (p. 52). Conversely, Japanese employees thought of these questions as demonstrating care and concern for their foreign coworkers, despite

the fact that they would not share similar information or ask their Japanese coworkers these kinds of questions. The non-Japanese employees felt that they were being treated differently and expressed discomfort over the boundary violations (Simmons, 2017).

Incompatibility with Japanese workplace norms among non-Japanese employees persisted in Yorozu (2023). Non-Japanese employees in Yorozu (2023) cited unhealthy work habits, slower promotion, and ambiguity in their work roles when expressing turnover intention at their Japanese organizations. Unhealthy work habits, promotional concerns, and role ambiguity reflect important cultural differences among Japanese and non-Japanese workplaces. When discussing unhealthy work habits, one foreign employee stated: “They treat staff as machines, not as humans” (p. 401). This statement came as a description of the culture of long working hours and intolerance for mistakes, emblematic of Japan’s high power distance culture and collectivist mindset (Hofstede et al., 2010). Slow promotion arises as a result of uniquely Japanese tenure and time expectations, where employees demonstrate commitment through time spent with the organization, a necessary component of advancement (Ono, 2018). Role ambiguity—or a lack of clarity regarding role expectations (Kramer, 2010)—can also be explained, in part, by cultural differences. Japan is a high-context culture, in which members of a group are meant to understand meaning through implicit, veiled cues (Hall, 1976). If foreign employees come from low-context cultures, they may expect direct instruction in relation to their work roles, which members of high-context cultures, such as Japan, would not provide. A lack of explanation can lead to misunderstandings, potentially resulting in negative integration experiences. Conversely, the following section details positive integration experiences of non-Japanese employees.

Positive Integration Experiences of Non-Japanese Employees. There are also *positive* integration experiences among non-Japanese employees into the Japanese workforce. For example, Greer and Wyant's (2024) interview study of US and European expats working in Japan revealed that the non-Japanese employees reported feeling included, developed strong relationships with other expatriates, and were accommodated by their Japanese employers, which led them to feel satisfied with their organizations. These employees expressed a strong intention to remain with their Japanese organization, likely due to the strong social ties they developed with coworkers. Additionally, while foreign executives in Japan were once viewed as "ruthless job-choppers from the outside" in the 1990s, modern foreign executives in Japan are seen as agents of much needed change (Hamada, 2008, p. 43). The foreign executives in Hamada (2008)—an ethnographic case study of *Nissan*, the Japanese auto-manufacturer—were embraced by the organization.

In multicultural settings, group members are often confronted with unfamiliar norms and values, which can induce anxiety. Members of foreign cultures operate on different social scripts (Goddard & Wierzbicka, 2004), and when host country nationals (HCNs) encounter these scripts (or vice-versa—foreign workers encounter the unfamiliar scripts of HCNs), it disrupts the mundane "autopilot" of everyday life. The Japanese middle managers interviewed by Hamada (2008) made sense of the foreign executives' arrival by ascribing them positive, heroic attributes. The process by which the *Nissan* managers came to understand the presence of foreign executives can be illustrated by sensemaking theory.

Sensemaking Theory

Sensemaking theory describes the process by which individuals and organizations make meaning of the world around them (Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005). The sensemaking process

is largely invisible and taken-for-granted, yet its impacts can scarcely be overstated for organizational meaning-making and resultant (in)action. Weick and colleagues (2005) detail this process in the "ESR" (enact, select, retain) model. The first phase—*enact*—occurs after an environmental, ecological change has occurred. In this phase, individuals engage with one another and the environment to understand a novel situation. In the next phase—*select*—individuals select meanings generated from phase one that are the most soothing and anxiety-quelling. In Hamada (2008), for instance, managers soothed their anxiety about a business merger that resulted in foreign executives' arrival by describing the executives as business heroes. In the last phase—*retention*—these meanings are retained for routinization in future use when confronting the results of ecological change, or for future disruptions to sensemaking (Weick et al., 2005).

The ESR model is useful in understanding sensemaking on a macro, institutional level; however, sensemaking should also be considered from an individual perspective. On an individual level, sensemaking begins with *autopilot*, where an individual is navigating their day to day life in an unquestioning way, operating on safe presumptions about the world around them. Next, *anxiety* is introduced through some kind of unexpected event. In the case of a foreign worker in Japan, anxiety may occur when a Japanese coworker makes a seemingly strange comment about their appearance. For example, "You look cold today." The comment requires *attention* from the foreign employee, who will then make an *attribution* as to the cause or nature of the comment. In this case, perhaps the foreign employee knows enough about Japanese culture to understand that the comment was likely meant to imply they are dressed inappropriately. The employee would then take *action* by putting on a sweater or cardigan.

Taking action will help them achieve psychosocial coping, or *anodyne*. The employee can then return to *autopilot*, until the next anxiety-inducing event (Weick, 1995).

Sensemaking and Organizational Culture

As illustrated by the previous example, the process of sensemaking can prove especially difficult among people of different cultural backgrounds. For instance, if the foreign employee in the example did not know enough about Japanese culture to understand the implicit meaning of the comment, "You look cold," they may have attributed a meaning such as, "I must look sick today," or "Perhaps my face is red." In either case, the attribution does not align with the commenter's intended meaning, potentially resulting in a misunderstanding. A cultural Discourse is "an era-based system of thought with its own linguistic tool bag of terms, metaphors, themes, and familiar arguments that culture members draw upon in the moment of communicating" (Fairhurst, 2011, p. 210). Through the passage of time, defining moments—such as monumental events and the rise of significant leaders—begin to shape the way members of a particular culture view the world. A new way of viewing the world subsequently affects ways of talking and behaving (i.e., communication) in everyday life (Fairhurst, 2011, p. 32). Non-members of a culture (e.g., out-group members, foreigners) may struggle to comprehend certain communicative events if they do not have knowledge of the cultural Discourse in-group members are referencing. This lack of knowledge of cultural Discourse can exacerbate existing misunderstandings.

Returning to the previous example, making sense of the utterance, "You look cold," occurs within the broader context of the history and advancement of women in the Japanese workplace. Historically, female employees in Japan have been seen first as women, then as workers (Faison, 2007). This ordering left female employees in Japan to cope with parentified

organizations that policed their bodies and contacted their parents should they betray strict ordinances (Faison, 2007; Freedman et al., 2013). Modern Japanese women of the twentieth century desired social, economic, and physical mobility. They often pursued work with the goal of achieving this mobility, such as the "elevator girls" of the late 1920s and 30s. These women aspired to middle-class lives, performing "fantasy" in luxury settings (Freedman et al., 2013). Unfortunately, a pattern in women's work that has prevailed to the present day is a "ceiling" to labor mobility. While Japan boasts relatively high women's labor participation rates (71% in 2019; Nakamura et al., 2021), many of these jobs are non-promotion track (i.e., secretary-type roles with no opportunity for advancement beyond the initial position).

The history of female employees in the Japanese workplace has contributed to a cultural Discourse, where policing women's appearances is expected and accepted communication behavior (Faison, 2007). The comment, "You look cold" is a high-context phrase commonly used to communicate that an outfit is inappropriate for work (i.e., a "tool" in the linguistic tool bag). When a non-Japanese person comes to work in Japan, there will inevitably be cultural Discourses that they are unaware of, due to their lack of familiarity with the culture more broadly. When a Japanese person enacts a cultural Discourse with a non-Japanese colleague, this can lead to poorly informed sensemaking, often resulting in faulty attributions.

Pluralistic organizations, as defined by Cox (1991), may present an especially treacherous terrain for intercultural sensemaking. Misunderstandings, such as the misinterpretation of the phrase, "You look cold," occur in multicultural settings due to a lack of understanding about different cultures. Plural organizations feature assimilation as their mode of acculturation, meaning that diverse employees must adapt to the majority culture's way of operating. In such an environment, majority cultural members are unaware of minority cultural practices, because the

onus of adaptation is placed solely on minority group members. A lack of reciprocal cultural knowledge can lead to faulty sensemaking, because culturally-distinct others' social scripts (Goddard & Wierzbicka, 2004), norms, and values, are unknown. When the individual who is *making sense* of a situation does not know the motivations or intentions behind others' actions, faulty attributions are commonplace.

Communication issues that arise from a lack of reciprocal national cultural knowledge can contribute to issues of organizational culture. Organizational culture and communication are inextricably linked. Keyton (2011) posits that organizational members contribute to the creation of organizational culture "by making sense of [their] work environment, work activities, and the people [they] work with" (p. 46). Sensemaking is an inherently social process, because the conclusions reached are developed in a social setting (Keyton, 2011). In the case of this research, the social setting is a multinational organization. At the same time that employees are contributing to the creation of organizational culture, organizational culture contributes to the process of sensemaking. A co-creation perspective of organizational culture is referred to as the "grounded in action orientation," where members' communication is both enabled and constrained by organizational culture (Bisel et al., 2010); similarly, "organizational culture is reinforced or challenged with every new interaction"; Keyton, 2011, p. 45).

The question becomes, What happens when organizational members experience repeated misunderstandings in attempting to communicate with culturally-distinct others in their workplace? Joann Martin's (2002) groundbreaking study of the culture of Peace Corp Africa revealed that sub-groups were readily identifiable in the multinational organization–what she termed, differentiation. Differentiated sub-groups held values and assumptions consistently within groups, but not between them, creating communication challenges. Imagine, for example,

trying to communicate with coworkers from a different national culture. Over time, when those communication attempts result in misunderstandings, conflicts, or confusion, a pattern arises such that sub-groups are formed and reinforced. Such a pattern may ultimately create barriers to multicultural integration. A macro-level *D*iscourse emerges—members of different national cultures do not intermix—as a result of the individual- and group-level *d*iscourse of employees (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004). In this instance, differences in national culture become a constraint to efficient organizing, rather than a resource for competitive advantage (Keyton, 2023). As described previously, cultural diversity has many positive outcomes for organizing (e.g., Gelfand et al., 2007); however, significant misunderstandings or silence among national sub-groups could threaten to undermine those advantages by creating interunit communication barriers.

Implicitly or explicitly categorizing coworkers as "us" (i.e., those who share my culture) and "them" (i.e., those who do not share my culture) may arise from or result in identity threat. Sensemaking is a process grounded in identity construction (Weick, 1995), and a threat to one's notions of the self can trigger the process (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Cultural pluralism within an organization can create moments of uncertainty about oneself. For instance, consider the following scenario: it's 5:00 pm—the end of the workday in a non-Japanese employee's culture. However, within their Japanese organization, they observe that their coworkers are continuing to work late into the night. If a salient component of this employee's identity is that they are hard-working and diligent, they may experience an anxiety-inducing event. If they leave work on time, are they still a hard worker? Such questions introduce an identity threat, which the employee will have to make sense of. In order to soothe anxiety, the employee will likely craft favorable attributions in order to reach anodyne and finally, autopilot, again.

Sensemaking in Multicultural Organizations

There is limited research on sensemaking in multicultural and/or non-Western environments. Shenoy-Packer (2015) used critical sensemaking theory to analyze how immigrant populations in the United States navigate microaggressions in the workplace. Immigrants made sense of microaggressions through rationalization, creating "alternative" selves (e.g., "work self" versus "authentic self"), and taking ownership (i.e., self-blame). Such experiences might be avoided by sophisticated diversity education. However, Tomlinson and Egan (2002) provide evidence to suggest that the language of cultural diversity training (e.g., "value of difference," "value of diversity") may lead to a hyperfocus on differences, sewing division among groups. Participants in Tomlinson and Egan (2002)—students in an international MBA program—made sense of their frustrations with integrating diverse groups of students through the recognition that the language of cultural diversity (used to attract them to the program) is not easy to apply. Tomlinson and Egan (2002) suggest that the students' ultimate interpersonal understanding is attributable to "coordinating actions and interactions, anticipating each other's cues and making mutual adjustments to accommodate differing perspectives and expectations" rather than recognizing or amplifying cultural differences, as diversity training might suggest (p. 95). The preceding explanation of the multicultural organization, sensemaking, and culture suggests that the presence of multiple competing values and interpretations is likely in diverse organizations. Those countervailing forces may generate complex and ambivalent sensemaking environments for members of multinational organizations.

Ambivalence

Ambivalence, as defined by Merton and Barber (1963), is the "incompatible normative expectations of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors" (p. 95). Ambivalence is paradoxical, co-existing

with other streams of organizational communication research, such as cognitive and emotional dissonance, hypocrisy, ambiguity, and equivocality (Ashforth et al., 2014). In recent years, increasing attention has been placed on the topic of ambivalence. Lucas (2011) investigated the paradoxical Discourses of the "American Dream" (i.e., class mobility) and the "Working Class Promise" (i.e., class maintenance). Through a series of 62 in-depth interviews with members of working class families, competing messaging led participants who did achieve class mobility to feel stigmatized. This stigma arose as a result of the perceived moral degradation of "upper class" work. However, from a fragmentation perspective (Martin, 2002), ambiguity and ambivalence are inherent and expected, especially with respect to manifestations of culture.

Ambivalence may be a particularly salient dynamic in the Japanese workplace context, where high-context communication, power distance, and other norms require a high degree of competence within the cultural environment (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 1980). In short, high power distance between supervisors and subordinates prevents subordinates from directly confronting an issue with a supervisor that may be face-threatening (e.g., Hofstede et al., 2010). High-context communication is used to veil displeasing information (e.g., hedging; Macpherson, 2017), which can be difficult for members of low-context cultures to interpret (Hall, 1976). For example, a boss or supervisor might not directly ask an employee to work overtime, but instead may say, "It would be nice if this task were finished today." An employee who is a member of a low-context culture might wonder, "Does this mean that my boss expects me to work overtime?" However, to ask directly in this instance would violate high-context communication norms, which value face-preservation and the avoidance of an aggressive style. High-context communication norms tend to produce the expectation that cultural members will interpret indirect cues. In many cultures, working overtime is not an expectation, and to do so may even violate local laws

(European Union, n.d.). In this instance, the employee is caught between unclear, competing expectations—an outcome of ambivalence.

Summary

A review of the multicultural organization and sensemaking literatures suggest that organizational cultural change is at least in part a product of the interpretive cues created and read by organizational members. As such, this study endeavored to explore the sensemaking cues read by members of a subsidiary branch of a multinational organization regarding management's willingness to achieve multicultural integration. The term "multicultural" has demographic, ideological, and psychological components (Stogianni et al., 2021). In a workplace context, the multicultural organization is one that hires diverse employees and integrates them thoroughly throughout organizational hierarchies and informal networks. In addition, truly multicultural organizations minimize cultural biases and intergroup conflict through reciprocal acculturation, leading to more or less equivalent levels of organizational identification across sub-groups (Cox, 1991; Larkey, 1996). While an admirable vision, achieving this stage of workplace diversity integration is rare, especially within more homogenous societies, such as Japan (e.g., Sugimoto, 2014). Japanese workplaces feature a variety of culturally-distinct norms and values that may prove difficult for non-Japanese employees to navigate (e.g., Peltokorpi & Claussen, 2011). Using sensemaking theory, this project aims to understand the process through which employees come to understand and evaluate their organization's progression towards a multicultural state. To do so, a case study investigation of a large multinational organization—SafeHarbor—was conducted. The researcher proposed the following research questions to guide case study inquiry:

> RQ1: What kinds of sensemaking cues indicate to SafeHarbor employees that their organizational leadership (a) do or (b) do not embrace multicultural integration?

RQ2: How do employees' interpretations of SafeHarbor's cues shape their perceptions of the organizational outcomes (acculturation, structural integration, informal integration, cultural biases, organizational identification, and intergroup conflict) proposed by Cox's model?

Chapter 3: Case Study Methods

Research Context and Participants

SafeHarbor International (SHI) is a multinational organization (30 offices in 21 countries), headquartered in Japan. The focus of the organization is to provide weather routing services, primarily to sea and aircraft vessels. The organization is of theoretical interest for the following reasons: (1) SHI is multinational, meaning it encounters communication challenges above and beyond that of a domestic operation (e.g., language barriers, cultural barriers, logistical barriers), (2) SHI is headquartered in Japan, which is culturally, linguistically, and geographically distant from Western countries—such as the United States—introducing greater complexity to the integration process (e.g., Hofstede et al., 2010), and (3) SHI is a high-reliability organization (HRO; Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007), meaning that it operates under conditions in which life and safety are at risk, greatly increasing the need for accurate task coordination among international branches of the operation.

For the present study, participants were primarily employees (interviews, $n = 24$; observations, $n = 25$-50) at the US-based branch of SafeHarbor International.[1] The US-based branch is one of five service centers. Service centers are located at the organization's headquarters (Japan), the US, Denmark, the Netherlands, and France. The US branch is a subsidiary office employing skilled workers who facilitate sky, sea, and offshore energy communication services.

The specific branch investigated is located in a suburban area in the south-central United States. This branch provides weather routing services to sea, sky, and offshore energy vessels (SafeHarbor, 2024). Unlike a typical American organization, the local SHI branch has several

[1] The researcher observed meetings with employees in Europe and Japan. The researcher also interviewed two European employees and one Japanese employee.

unique Japanese features, such as compensation. SHI compensates employees via a classically Japanese system of pay-tiers. The key informant for the present study, Sam[2], has worked at SHI for approximately 20 years, and is in a pay-tier category termed *keiei* 経営 (upper management). This tier has many responsibilities and a high expectation that these employees will invest in the organization. Below this category are "professionals," followed by several other categories. Additionally, SHI has contract workers and "regular" employees (*seishain*; 正社員). "Experts," or those who communicate with ships at sea, are contract and regular employees.

The research site was an office, which featured human resources and technical support, in addition to experts. HR and technical support were physically separated from the rest of the office. Other positions included CS or "Communication Support," which received contact from vessels and passed them along to Voyage Support and Planning. Most of the employees belonged to this category, which represented the main operation for this office. Voyage Support and Planning communicated with ship captains using English (maritime language). SHI interacts with a variety of vessels, but primarily works with international cross-ocean voyages (e.g., oil, cargo vessels). Voyage Support primarily assisted captains in navigating weather conditions, but were limited in what they could control. SHI tends to serve vessels primarily in the northern hemisphere. Therefore, weather conditions are worse in the winter months and better in the summer months. The key informant has stated explicitly that safety is the first priority for the organization.

Employees at SHI Norman used the software *Slack* to communicate with employees at headquarters in Japan. Slack is an online software that allows for text, audio, and video communication between members of an organization (Slack, n.d.). The majority of communication between employees in Japan and the United States was text-based. While the

[2] Sam is a pseudonym.

Japanese employees had some degree of English proficiency, some were more willing to speak English than others, according to the key informant. The primary language of the organization is Japanese, though the key informant—and many of the employees in Norman—had limited Japanese proficiency. Artificial Intelligence (AI) is used to facilitate translation between and among employees in different nations. Importantly, Slack had a lot of "channels" in a variety of languages (e.g., Japanese, English) that the key informant monitors. Prior to Slack, employees communicated via video call. Some meetings still occurred via video.

At the time of data collection, some employees at the US-based office worked remotely, while others worked from the office. Employees worked in weekly shifts from Sunday-Wednesday and Wednesday-Saturday. Wednesday was a designated "cross-over" day—the only day of the week in which all employees worked during the same 10-hour shift. SHI operates 365 days a year. The key informant traveled to Japan often—approximately two to three times a year—though this changed during the pandemic. Handover communication occurred at the beginning and end of each shift, where communication between vessels and SHI was passed between the European, Japanese, and American offices.

Procedures

Data Collection

Data collection for this project involved ethnographic observations and ethnographic in-depth interviews. The researcher conducted 105 hours of observation during a span of seven weeks, resulting in 62 single-spaced pages of field notes. Ethnography is defined by Emerson and colleagues (1995) as "the peculiar practice of representing the social reality of others through the analysis of one's own experience in the world of these others" (p. 10). In other words, ethnography involves immersing oneself in an initially unfamiliar world, with the goal of

adequately representing that world in a written account (Handwerker, 2006; LeCompte & Goetz, 1982; Philipsen, 1992; Reyes, 2018; Tracy, 2020). Contrary to experimental or certain survey approaches, ethnographic research precludes a 'detached, passive observer' approach. Instead, researchers should consider themselves "passionate participants," whose goal it is to understand what the people under study find meaningful (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Practically, ethnography allowed the researcher to observe firsthand the operations of SHI and report on intercultural organizational communication, which would not be possible via other research methods. Here, intercultural organizational communication refers to workplace communication among US-based, European, and Japanese employees.

Field, administrative, methodological, and analytical notes were taken throughout the process. According to Emerson and colleagues (1995), field notes should describe experiences and observations of social life and social discourse. It is important to note that within this process, data are inseparable from the observational process; the researcher is the research instrument. The way a researcher engages in discovery is intrinsically linked to what they have discovered (e.g., a researcher discovers something about women in a society through attending a women's-only event). However, it is the responsibility of the researcher to foreground indigenous meaning as much as possible (Emerson et al., 1995). Although the researcher should not be detached, personal interpretation of events should not obscure interpretations of the observed.

In addition to observational field notes, the researcher also took administrative notes. Administrative notes include important contextual information, such as the date, place, and time that the incident(s) described took place (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017). Administrative notes were used to corroborate the dates of important meetings, as well as to note the frequency of events.

Then, the researcher took methodological notes. Methodological notes include how the information was collected as well as any factors that may have affected the quality and/or quantity of information. Methodological notes were used to note the context under which certain data were collected. Next, the researcher took analytical notes. Analytical notes involve the researcher drawing connections between different points of data and identifying themes. These themes were used in later coding (Clark-Kazak, 2023).

Ethnographic and In-depth Interviews

Interviews were important for this project in order to capture multiple bases of evidence (Creswell, 2007)—a hallmark of high quality, qualitative research. The researcher conducted 24 semi-structured interviews, resulting in 502 single-spaced pages of transcripts. Participants' ages ranged from 24 to 50 years old (M = 35.8). 62.5% of participants identified as male and 37.5% identified as female. 80% of participants were white, 12% were Hispanic, 4% were African-American, and 4% were Asian. The educational background of participants was as follows: 70.8% bachelor's degree, 20.8% master's degree, and 8.4% attended some college (i.e., did not complete a degree). Interview data were collected through theoretical sampling until data saturation was reached.

Interviews have the ability to reveal moments hidden from observation as well as retrospective accounts regarding motives and strategy selection reported by interactants (Lindlof & Taylor, 2018). There were inevitably important moments—including moments in the distant past—that the researcher could not observe. In these instances, interviews allowed the researcher to learn about these moments from employees themselves. Wording of interview questions were crafted on the advice of Dillon (1990; e.g., word choice, question order, interrogating

presuppositions) and Tracy (2020; e.g., avoid asking why). See Appendix B for the interview guide.

Process of Induction

The focus of this research shifted through a process of induction and progressive focusing (Bisel et al., 2014). Process of induction refers to an approach to conducting research in which theory is generated a posteriori, usually emergent from data rather than preconceived notions (e.g., existing models, theory; Lindlof & Taylor, 2018). Progressive focusing occurs as the researcher continually refines exploration in the field, in accordance with emergent data and the potential to contribute to theory (Bisel et al., 2014). In order to avoid confirmation bias, high-quality qualitative research stresses an emic understanding of the observational field. An emic understanding emerges from participants' point of view and is context-specific (Tracy, 2020). The researcher approached the case with the intent to study handover communication (i.e., the transfer of professional responsibility to another organizational stakeholder; Manser, 2013) the organization shifts operations to another branch) in a multinational high-reliability organization (as reflected in the interview guide; Appendix B). However, upon arrival in the field, the researcher observed a curious pattern through ongoing interactions with participants. On the first day of observations, the researcher noticed the key informant presenting to US and European employees a visual aid with Japanese text. The key informant did not speak Japanese, nor did the vast majority of employees in the meeting; however, a translated visual aid was not shared with the key informant. Therefore, the key informant presented his understanding of the slides' contents without knowing the language on those slides. Given the highly consequential nature of operations at SafeHarbor, the researcher took notice of this event—a pattern which recurred several times subsequently (i.e., a language or cultural difference was noticed by the

researcher or brought up by a participant). The pattern led her to shift the focus to multicultural integration (inductive theorizing; Lindlof & Taylor, 2017). In short, the researcher pursued an inductive emic approach (Tracy, 2020), allowing emergent qualitative data to guide inquiry.

Data Analysis

This project employed two data analytic methods—a modified form of constant comparative analysis (CCA; to address RQ1) and the phronetic iterative approach (RQ2). CCA is the original qualitative data analytic strategy put forth by Glaser and Strauss (1967). CCA in contemporary communication scholarship has since evolved (e.g., Charmaz, 2000; Tracy, 2020), but retains many of its original elements. In this research, collection and analysis of data overlapped. As the data were collected through observations and interviews, the researcher began to note patterns and themes as they emerged in analytical notes. Data coding occurred in a three-step process. First, the researcher engaged in open coding and data reduction simultaneously. In this phase, the researcher coded any and all information relevant to the research questions by identifying and then assigning summative labels to segments of data that pertained to research questions. Then, those labels were compared and sorted in an iterative fashion until all codable data were accounted for. Second, the researcher conducted focused coding. Focused coding involved consolidating similar categories derived during open-coding into fewer, and more abstract, but also more explanatory, categories. Lastly, in axial coding, the researcher synthesized the remaining categories with the literature and postulated the interrelationships among categories in order to address research questions (Charmaz, 2000; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Tracy, 2020).

In order to address RQ2, the phronetic iterative approach was used. The phronetic iterative approach (PIA) refers to an analysis which “alternates between emic, or emergent,

readings of the data and an etic use of existing models, explanations, and theories" (Tracy, 2020, p. 209). PIA is an ideal analytic strategy for inductive research when the analyst wants to move back and forth between theoretical frameworks and unstructured, text-rich data. Classical forms of grounded theory avoided the consultation of theoretical frameworks during analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). However, later methodologists identified the potential payoffs of consulting theoretical frameworks while simultaneously applying principles recommended by grounded theorists (Bisel et al., 2014; Tracy, 2020). Unlike constant comparative analysis, which relies on inductive identification of themes in the data, a phronetic iterative approach uses existing theory to guide interpretation. In this particular project, the phronetic iterative approach allowed the researcher to consult Cox's (1991) dimensions of integration at SafeHarbor while also analyzing field notes and interview transcripts inductively. Assessing Cox's dimensions of integration at SafeHarbor allowed the researcher to analyze outcomes related to multicultural integration. Focused and axial coding applied these dimensions of integration to the dataset, in order to understand the effects (i.e, outcomes; dimensions of integration) of employee sensemaking.

Credibility Checks

Creswell (2007) recommends that researchers employ credibility enhancing strategies in order to bolster the quality and credibility of qualitative research. Specifically, Creswell (2007) recommends that researchers use a minimum of two validation strategies in any given study. This study employed five. First, this study employed prolonged engagement and persistent observation in the field. The researcher engaged in 105 hours of ethnographic field observations over the course of seven weeks. Second, this study's claims are based on multiple bases of evidence (i.e., interviews and observations), which is termed crystallization. In the case of this project, the researcher used both interview transcript data and field notes to corroborate findings.

Third, the researcher engaged in a peer review with a senior organizational communication scholar highly trained in qualitative data collection and analysis. Peer review allowed the researcher to scrutinize emergent findings and reassess them in the field. Fourth, this study engaged in member checking (i.e., returning to participants to solicit disagreement and nuance findings). The researcher provided the key informant with an overview of findings and asked him for critiques and commentaries, given his emic understanding of the organization. Substantive critiques were minor and integrated into the findings reported below. He disagreed about whether a practical recommendation would be successful, which is noted in the findings section. Fifth, this project employed rich, thick description by including interview quotes, portions of field notes, and participant descriptions in the findings.

Chapter 4: Findings

Constant comparative analysis revealed eight themes in response to RQ1: cues for multicultural integration. Four of these themes are "Green Lights" (i.e., cues *in favor of* multicultural integration): (1) global culture, (2) language and cultural sensitivity, (3) travel and relationships prioritized among management, and (4) frequent international communication among management. The remaining four themes are "Red Lights" (i.e., cues *in conflict with* multicultural integration): (1) Japan-centric, (2) language and cultural issues, (3) travel and relationships deprioritized among frontline employees, and (4) limited international communication among frontline employees. The presence and interplay of competing Green and Red Light cues cultivated an ambivalent sensemaking environment at SafeHarbor. The terminology of red and green light was borrowed from Dutton et al. (2002). This terminology was helpful as a metaphor and communication shortcut to indicate cues for and against a future course of action—in this case, multiculturalism. In order to illustrate this ambivalence, each "Green Light" is presented alongside its opposing "Red Light" in the findings below. Please see Appendix C for a table of findings.

Then, in order to answer RQ2, a pragmatic iterative analysis was conducted, which revealed both pluralistic and multicultural outcomes within Cox's (1991) dimensions of integration framework. Each dimension of integration—(1) acculturation, (2) structural integration, (3) informal integration, (4) cultural bias, (5) organizational identification, and (6) intergroup conflict—are represented in the findings. Similar to RQ1, positive (i.e., multicultural) outcomes are presented in tandem with their competing (i.e., pluralistic) outcome. Please see Appendix D for a summary of findings. Dualistic (i.e., pluralistic and multicultural) findings

suggest that SafeHarbor occupies a liminal space between plural and multicultural organization, according to the perceptions and interpretations of employees observed at the satellite branch.

RQ1: Embracing Multicultural Integration

Green Light 1: Global Culture

Employees at SafeHarbor indicated that their organizational leadership espoused and enacted a *global culture*. Employees perceived that SafeHarbor leadership was proud of its multinational status and they indicated being proud of that status as well. One component of this global culture was respect, appreciation, and recognition from leadership towards international employees. When employees at the US office were solicited for feedback or new ideas, they reported feeling respected and appreciated, which led to a sense of global unity. One employee (male, upper management) described when the organization initiated a line of communication with the US office—in contrast to a previously established pattern of minimal contact:

> I think also when [HQ] really opened up to having more communication with us in terms of sharing ideas and asking for feedback, things like that, I think that really helped a lot. Because it made everyone in this office feel like we were all part of the same company and that the opinions here mattered. So I think that was the time when I felt like we were one company.

The employee made sense of this solicitation of feedback as an indication that the international employees' "opinions here mattered," leading him to an attribution of unity. A feeling of unity (i.e., "we were all part of the same company") allowed for a shared, global culture to develop. As communication between offices increased, employees were able to learn more about one another, which allowed them to discover commonalities. Some of these commonalities were work-related, as the following employee (female, frontline) details:

> As far as [...] conversations go, we can bond over being weather nerds, get excited about a certain weather pattern, or a place that has really freaky weather that's cool. One of the Japanese [...] members mentioned that she was coming to [US branch], so I had a small chat with her about tornadoes. Reassuring her that she'd be okay here.

Other commonalities were personal, such as the following from a senior, male employee:

> My direct team leader [...] he's hilarious. He's absolutely hilarious. And also, he loves baseball, and so he loves this guy, Shohei Ohtani [Major League Baseball player]. He hit a home run in the All-Star game yesterday, and so we connect a lot through that.

Such commonalities allowed US employees to feel a "bond" or to "connect" with Japanese employees. Shared interests in weather, baseball, and other matters diminished feelings of anxiety or uncertainty between offices, allowing trust to form. As employees began to trust one another interpersonally, they began to trust one another as colleagues. One employee (male, sales role) describes the interweaving of personal and professional relationships:

> Most of my colleagues that can be considered friends are in the sales department of our business. So we have common goals, common understanding, common targets, common challenges. So let's say that we talk more and we can [...] ponder a little bit more about what's going on. So we create a more informal and friendly approach.

The employee encapsulated the complexity of interwoven personal and professional relationships. While it is difficult to say which comes first—personal or professional trust—there are clear benefits to developing personal relationships. One such benefit would be frequent contact, leading to informal conversations about workplace matters. The informal chatter leads to a "common understanding" across offices. Importantly, it also assists in the accomplishment of shared goals. Another employee (male, middle management) explains the company's origins: "I

think that's the goal of SafeHarbor, is for mariner safety. That's how the company was started way back when [...] Everything we do is to strive to bring safety to marine travel." The employee described a shared goal—mariner safety— and the origins of the company. Notice the employee used "we" to describe efforts toward the goal, implying *all* employees at SafeHarbor. The shared goal of mariner safety and understanding of company origins created additional common ground for employees. Through the culmination of mutual respect and appreciation, strong personal and professional relationships, and shared goals and company mythos, a shared, global culture is born:

> I don't know. It kind of goes back to what I just said. We all are together. We're on this planet together and in the company, we're all here to do one thing. And that's part of our culture is to do that no matter our geographic and our social cultures, wherever we are physically, we're one company with people that are here to do one thing.

The employee (female, frontline) states that it's "part of our culture" to "do one thing" (i.e., protect mariners). While she makes reference to differences in geographic and social cultures, the unifying power of the shared goal triumphs.

Cultural differences between employees are minimized through interpersonal and professional interactions, which include recognition from organizational leadership in Japan towards US-based employees. Employees share the common ground of organizational goals and company history, in addition to relationships facilitated by intercultural communication. The culmination of these factors establishes a shared, global culture between employees of different nationalities and cultural origins.

Red Light 1: Japan-centric

In contrast to the perspective that SafeHarbor possesses a global culture, some employees recognized cues from organizational leadership that led them to the attribution that the organization is *Japan-centric*. In fact, many employees acknowledged these seemingly contradictory notions—that the organization has a global culture *and* is Japan-centric—within the same interview. In direct opposition to Green Light 1, some employees stated that their opinions were *not* solicited by leadership with respect to key decision-making matters, such as the advancement of a new project. One employee (male, sales role) describes feeling frustrated by his Japanese colleagues:

> One example [...] is that you have meetings with colleagues from Japan, you discuss and you agree on certain actions going forward. And then when you meet again in the next meeting you realize that those actions that you agreed upon, they were not really followed through. Other actions were taken most times by the Japanese. Or I don't really feel part of the decision-making, like my work with my colleagues in Japan, even if I'm the product owner.

A "product owner" at SafeHarbor is an employee who oversees a certain product or service provided by the company to its clients. Despite being the product owner in this case, the employee above describes a lack of control, where agreed upon actions were "not really followed through," and other times actions were "taken [...] by the Japanese" unilaterally. The employee had an expectation that as a product owner, he would be able to guide decisions related to the product. However, that had not been his experience. A perceived desire for control from HQ was expressed in multiple instances:

> I mean even though it's a global company, but I think that there was always this, my headquarters wanted to have a lot of control over everything. So I think even though they wanted to think of themselves as a global company to a certain degree, I don't know, I felt that maybe they *weren't trusting necessarily people that were not Japanese*. There was that feel maybe that you suggest something and maybe they wouldn't hear from you. But then if somebody that is Japanese suggested, then they're like, oh, that's a good idea.

The employee above (male, middle management) made an attribution of mistrust against Japanese leadership—that perhaps Japanese leadership does not trust "people that were not Japanese." The attribution of mistrust was based on a cue (i.e., a "feel") that his suggestions might not be taken into account as a non-Japanese employee. He went on to state that if a Japanese person were to make the same suggestion, leadership would think it was a "good idea." In other words, ideas can only be good ideas if they come from Japanese employees. The notion that Japanese employees possess some kind of superiority reflects a power imbalance, which was directly articulated by another employee (female, middle management): "For us, we kind of think of [HQ] as higher than us on a totem pole level, so we don't want to make them mad." The employee implies that the idea of HQ as "higher than us" is a shared notion, stating that "we" think of them as such. Importantly, the employee also notes a feeling of fear (i.e., "we don't want to make them mad"). She elaborates in the following quote:

> Pretty much how our office is run is just however [HQ] decides. Last year or the year before, we had a... What was he? I think he's the top sales guy. He was pretty much telling us we were all ungrateful because they gave us decent cost of living raises, and they thought that would be motivation for us to all go back into the office on a full-time

> basis. Most people, I think like 70% of the people, all said that we would prefer working from home. They did some poll for it. So, he got on to us for that.

The employee describes how the power imbalance between headquarters and the US office is exacerbated by organizational leadership's ability to reprimand. According to the employee, headquarters provided the US office with raises. The covert expectation was that this would motivate employees to return to the office; however, employees continued to prefer remote work. The employee above states "he got on to us for that," implying a reprimand. A reprimand is only made possible by the cue that the organization is *Japan-centric*, where a power imbalance exists between the "higher" Japan office and the "lower" US office. Fear or anxiety associated with leadership interactions, such as those described by the employee above, is not conducive to strong workplace relationships. Poor interactions or impressions led some employees to view "global culture" as unrealistic:

> It's one of those ideals that I think movies like to idealize. And it's definitely something I think we should strive for, but it's so complicated of an idea, just because we're all so different and we all want different things. So I like the idea of it. I think that's great. I don't think we're there yet.

The employee speaking (female, frontline) states that "we're all so different and we all want different things," a perspective that stands in contrast to the idea of commonalities between offices (expressed in Green Light 1). In the absence of a perceived global culture, employees viewed the organization as Japanese first. The following employee (male, middle management), when asked to describe the organization's culture in three words, responded: "Definitely *Japanese* corporation would be I think two of them and then maybe loyalty or something along those lines."

In direct contrast to Green Light 1, some employees at SafeHarbor International felt that their opinions were *not* solicited by organizational leadership in Japan. These employees perceived a desire for control from headquarters, which reinforced a power imbalance between the "higher" Japanese office and the "lower" US office. A power imbalance between the two offices allowed for Japanese leadership to use reprimands as a form of control, contributing to fear and diminishing relational potential. Weak relationships and a poor perception of Japanese headquarters led some US-based employees to view SafeHarbor's espoused global culture as unrealistic. In its place, a perception that a *Japan-centric* culture existed was widespread among some US-based employees.

Green Light 2: Language and Cultural Sensitivity

Another cue in favor of multicultural integration was perceived language and cultural sensitivity from leadership at headquarters. While the native language spoken by most employees at headquarters was Japanese, the vast majority of employees at the US branch were not able to comprehend the language. In a powerful recognition and acquiescence to this dynamic—and in an effort to cultivate a global culture—Japanese employees used English when corresponding with international (i.e., American and European) employees. The following employee (male, sales role) articulates this:

> They [organizational leadership] also try to adapt English to more people in [HQ]. To learn English, to understand English so we can use a very common language because in the past year, we've had many presentations [...] that were strictly in Japanese and we need to hear the translation coming from a person in the room, which is not the same of course. So they are making some steps to be more globalized, let's say.

The employee acknowledges steps that the organization has taken to be more English-friendly, which included the prioritization of English comprehension among Japanese employees. The employee attributes a sincere effort towards globalization to these steps (i.e., “steps to be more globalized”). While the employee remarks that a translation is “not the same” as hearing from Japanese colleagues directly, the presence of a translation was recognized and appreciated by many employees:

> Recently, especially for this past time in November, the translation was way better than it's ever been before. We have several translators that work for the company, but they hired more, I guess temporarily, for this planning session. And it was really great because the translators were good, we got real-time information. [...] I do think the company is trying to improve on that.

The employee acknowledged and appreciated that—not only was there translation—but it was “way better than it’s ever been before.” The cue here, which is the increased presence of high-quality translations, led the employee to the attribution that the company is “trying to improve” with respect to language accessibility. Sensitivity to the needs of English speakers is an important step towards multicultural integration. Relatedly, employees also recognized cultural accommodations from headquarters:

> I will say that SafeHarbor [...] they've definitely become more Westernized over time. What I mean by that is they recognize that people want to spend time with their families [As a Westerner] you're not going to be available all the time. So you're going to say no if you're asked to come in. And then people at my [senior] level are more available. But in Japan, that would be like 24/7 available. But they even understand that even at [a senior]

> level here in the US, there are still some limitations to it, especially if you have a family. So they do account for that.

Despite the fact that the employee (male, upper management) belongs to a tier of management that is expected to be "more available," headquarters is sensitive to American cultural differences. Organizational leadership recognized that although high-ranking employees in Japan are "24/7 available," US-based employees prioritize family life during certain days and times of the week. Different perspectives on work-life balance represent a cultural difference between Japan and the United States, to which leadership is becoming more sensitive. In service of cultural sensitivity goals, some employees act as "cultural intermediaries" for Japanese and US-based employees:

> Sometimes you need that intermediary to be able to say, hey, this is what this person's actually saying or proposing. And sometimes vice versa. I ask John[3], "Hey, am I understanding this correctly?" because I have a real good relationship with John, I'm able to approach him on just about any topic and go, okay, hey John, I don't think I understand what they're saying here.

"John" is a cultural intermediary for the quoted employee (male, middle management). Cultural intermediaries are employees with a high level of knowledge regarding both Japanese and American (or Western) cultures. John is a native English speaker living and working in Japan at SafeHarbor headquarters. He has a high degree of knowledge on Japanese culture, and can therefore assist US- or European-based employees in understanding Japanese workplace norms or language issues. In addition to John, local leadership—such as the key informant, Sam—act in the capacity of "cultural intermediary," as they possess long tenure with the organization and

[3] John is a pseudonym for the cultural intermediary.

have frequent contact with headquarters. Employees, such as John and Sam, filter information from headquarters to local employees, thereby mitigating many cultural and language barriers.

Not only were language and cultural differences *accommodated*, they were strategically leveraged by organizational leadership. One employee (male, middle management) describes "courts," which are local contact centers for customers:

> It is basically just having someone who can speak the native language of that country and then being a first point of contact. You're in the time zone. You're able to communicate fluently with them and then if need be, if they're like, "Hey, we need this out right now," or, "We need this done," they can do it.

These local contact centers provide a meaningful service to SafeHarbor customers. In contrast to the aforementioned sentiment that SafeHarbor lends credence to Japanese over non-Japanese employees, the local contact centers are seen as "local experts" who can communicate with customers in a culturally sensitive way. Instead of routing calls, emails, or other forms of communication to the Japanese headquarters, control is given to local offices who can provide communication in a tailored, culture- and language-specific manner. US-based employees recognized this practice as strategic and a component of SafeHarbor's global culture.

Red Light 2: Language and Cultural Issues

Although many employees viewed SafeHarbor as linguistically and culturally sensitive, others (and, sometimes, those same employees) experienced language and translation issues. Language and translation issues arose frequently during interviews and observations with employees. During the initiating day of field observations, there was a meeting between the European and American offices of SafeHarbor. The meeting was a weekly video conference where local leadership at the US branch share information passed down from organizational

leadership in Japan. Importantly, the manager who oversees the entire US branch also oversees the European branches, so this individual is an important point of contact for European employees, as she is their intermediary with Japan.

During the meeting, the key informant, Sam, began sharing information passed down to him from Japanese leadership. A slide appeared on the screen, in which the entirety of the text was in Japanese. Sam explained that the meeting with Japanese leadership was in Japanese—and given that he does not speak Japanese—some of the information may have been lost in translation. Full-text slides in Japanese, as well as meetings with leaders in Japanese, were a common occurrence witnessed by the researcher at several points during field observations. One employee (male, frontline) described his first experience seeing these Japanese slides as follows: "It made me kind of realize, I kind of had a stroke though, like maybe I need to learn Japanese, but someone told me, "You don't need to learn Japanese." When asked whether these presentations held value for him, he responded, "When I can understand it." Here, he implies that there are times where the meanings are obfuscated by language differences, thereby diminishing the quality of information sharing. Consider that, as an HRO, accurate and efficient information sharing can be of grave importance at SafeHarbor, given that life and safety are at risk. Difficulties in information sharing occurred throughout the organizational hierarchy. While frontline workers received information in Japanese, or partial information in English, organizational leaders also dealt with inefficiencies regarding information sharing.

Field notes revealed that leadership in the US branch and Japanese employees who occupied their equivalent role at headquarters (e.g., "manager of X department in Japan" and "manager of X department in the US") met to share information about their respective offices, typically on Wednesday evenings. The Wednesday evening meetings were first initiated by

American leadership, who wanted to know more about what was happening at headquarters. Wednesday evening meetings were specifically set aside as English-language meetings, so that the US-based leaders could communicate more efficiently and effectively. None of the US-based leaders spoke Japanese, and given the consequential nature of decisions made at headquarters for the US office, the leaders wanted information delivered in a way that was direct and clear to them.

During the evening meetings, Sam expressed concern over the manner of communication he observed from Japanese leadership. Japanese leadership rarely spoke unless called upon by US leaders. When they did, they would often share information about key decisions that were made without US involvement. The lack of US involvement in decision-making frustrated Sam, as he felt that US input could inform corporate decisions that would ultimately affect the US office. In addition to this behavior, Japanese leadership would often leave meetings early and/or schedule overlapping meetings, which gave Sam the impression that these meetings were low priority. Cultural differences between Japan and the United States might explain why Japanese leadership behaved in this manner. However, Sam interpreted their behavior through the perspective of expected and accepted behavior during workplace meetings in the United States, leading to unfavorable conclusions.

In observations, although Wednesday evening meetings were designated as English-language meetings, Japanese employees would sometimes use Japanese phrases or switch to Japanese entirely for periods of time. Other meetings that US-based leadership were expected to attend were Japanese-only. Real-time translations were provided at times, but other times, they were not. Some translations were provided after the fact, as recounted by the following employee (female, upper management): “So the ones [leader] shared today, there were

a couple of things in Japanese that's part of the planning session. Probably it'll be translated in a week or two or something like that." Another employee (male, upper management) expressed how this might be demotivating to employees with shorter tenures within the company:

> There's too much stuff in Japanese and for us to be a truly global company, there's more things that need to be in English [...] That might be why a lot of people feel like their voice may not be heard, or maybe they don't speak up because they don't think it matters. They may not be aware of everything that's going on in the company, so maybe they have nothing to speak about because they don't keep track of all the Japanese.

The employee engaged in sensemaking by proxy, explaining the interpretation of cues by frontline employees and the possible outcome. In his view, less tenured employees made sense of the cue that documents were in Japanese to mean that their perspective doesn't matter. Otherwise, the materials might have been translated to a language they can understand. At the same time, employees are unaware of what's happening with the company at large due to the language barrier. Therefore, they have "nothing to speak about."Although this is speculative—there may be other reasons why employees don't speak up—it remains his attribution. In short, the language barrier inhibits US-based employee participation in company direction, hindering multicultural integration.

Green Light 3: Travel and Relationships Prioritized Among Managers

Members of management consistently expressed that there were many opportunities to travel abroad and meet employees in Japan and Europe, which led them subsequently to develop personal ties with international coworkers. Managers interpreted organizational leadership's investment in them (i.e., presenting travel opportunities, facilitating relational development) as a

cue in favor of multicultural integration. Members of management espoused the many benefits of travel, both personal and professional:

> I feel most connected [to the broader organization] when I go over there [to Japan] because I feel like I'm in the meetings and I have a voice in the meetings. They hold a lot of meetings during our nighttime, so we're not able to join. We go over there usually once a year for some big meetings that help plan the next year for our department, and that's when I feel most connected.

The employee (female, upper management) expresses a personal benefit (i.e., "I feel most connected") and a professional benefit (i.e., "I have a voice in the meetings") that she could not attain while working in the US. Travel helped employees feel like their organizational leadership cared about their perspectives and were invested in their professional development. When organizational leadership traveled to the US office, this also served as a cue for multicultural integration. Toward the end of field observations, a newly promoted senior executive from Japan traveled to the US office to meet employees and share his vision for the organization. The senior executive, Min-ho[4], was Korean and spoke several languages, including English. During his stay, he conducted one-on-one meetings with all employees in English, asking them for feedback on the organization. Employees expressed that, in these meetings, he would write down their suggestions and concerns, which led them to the attribution that he was genuine. Promoting Min-ho—a polyglot who has lived in several countries—was an important cue for multicultural integration, signalling a new direction for the organization.

Travel facilitated personal connections for employees—both when US employees traveled to Japan and vice-versa. One Japanese employee, who had spent extensive periods of time at the US office, described his relationships with employees in the following way: "I like

[4] Min-ho is a pseudonym.

[US employee], he's, of course, my coworker, he's one of the best friend[s] of mine. Of course, when I was in Oklahoma, we [would] go for a beer or softball or other things." The Japanese employee (male, upper management) describes this American coworker as a "best friend" of his, detailing social activities the two would engage in. Close, personal connections like these are difficult to establish without travel, as frontline employees experienced (detailed below).

Management espoused and enjoyed the many personal and professional benefits of travel. Managers felt "connected" and valued during travel to headquarters. When Min-ho, a newly promoted leader in Japan, visited the US-based office during field observations, US-based employees were able to speak with him one-on-one, thereby connecting them to the broader organization. Travel also allowed for personal relationships to develop between employees, which were later maintained online. In-person connections established via travel to or a visit from organizational leadership in Japan facilitated multicultural integration among US and Japan-based employees.

Red Light 3: Travel and Relationships Deprioritized Among Frontline Employees

In contrast to travel opportunities afforded to middle and senior management, frontline employees consistently expressed that there were limited or no opportunities to travel to headquarters in Japan. The lack of travel opportunities left frontline employees at a disadvantage in developing personal relationships with Japanese employees, which hampered multicultural integration. More tenured employees discussed the existence of an exchange program in the past that allowed newly hired frontline employees to visit headquarters. However, the exchange program was discontinued many years ago, and plans to reinstate the program have not been reestablished. Without the exchange program, newly-hired employees lacked access to crucial socialization experiences, which contributed to a lack of knowledge regarding Japanese culture

and the organization overall. One employee (male, frontline) describes how travel to headquarters would benefit current frontline employees:

> I think it would be beneficial because say someone from over here go spend some time in Japan, they interact with them or the culture a little bit, then if there is some issue or something that comes up during our office hours and not theirs, then we would be more equipped to handle those types of situations and communicate it more effectively.

The employee believes that travel of new hires to Japan could result in professional benefits. In other words, according to the participant, travel to Japan would allow frontline employees to understand Japanese culture, which would help them communicate with their Japanese colleagues. These kinds of comments indicate that SafeHarbor employees prize travel to HQ and interpret a lack of travel opportunity as detrimental to their career within the organization. Currently, frontline employees experience limited communication with headquarters (Red Light 4), partially due to the fact that they have not met them in person. The following quote illustrates this sentiment:

> I feel like the other issue is I've never met these people in person, so I've never really interacted with them and I feel like that's necessary to build more personal connections rather than strictly just professional. So the fact that I've never actually met anybody, I feel like that's the bigger difference.

The employee (male, frontline) describes in-person meetings as “necessary” to “build more personal connections.” However, those opportunities have not been extended to new, frontline employees. Therefore, those personal connections have not formed, and communication between them and their Japanese counterparts is infrequent.

Green Light 4: Frequent International Communication Among Members of Management

Members of management at SafeHarbor engaged in frequent international communication, which drove multicultural integration among US-based and overseas employees. Employees in the managerial tier indicated that they spoke with their Japanese colleagues every day, or nearly every day, through Slack or other forms of digital communication. Frequent contact led to attributions of cooperation and connectivity, which helped facilitate multicultural integration. One employee (female, middle management) described the benefits of frequent, digital communication as follows:

> We all rely on each other. For me, I love to get second and third opinions, especially on something that I'm not totally confident in. At least in my department, everybody is happy and willing to do that. [...] I think with us being halfway across the world from each other, I think that it offers different perspectives. I think it's important to have those different perspectives.

Here, the employee views cultural differences between herself and her non-American colleagues as positive (i.e., "it offers different perspectives"). Her ability to access those perspectives, "second and third opinions," is facilitated via communication technology. Many employees espoused the benefits of technology in ensuring everyday contact with non-American coworkers:

> And by [...] having these abilities to interact directly with one another the way we do, I think it removes a lot of roadblocks. So yeah, there's no border, there's no wall. There's really no window. You can talk back and forth with each other.

The employee (male, upper management) is referring to technological advancements in the company—such as Slack and Google Meet—when he says "these abilities to interact directly with one another." The employee describes the advancements as removing "a lot of roadblocks."

As a tenured member of management, this employee can recall a time where such technology was not available to employees, and contact with coworkers outside of the United States was less frequent. Additionally, technological advancements have improved daily information sharing between US and international employees:

> Because we can type out the information, it's much more clear. If I were to say a shift name on a [video conference], is the person going to understand me? Am I talking too fast or too slow? Can they hear me properly? So the quality of information sharing maybe is better. You're just losing some of that more interpersonal connection.

Many employees—including the one above (female, upper management)—expressed difficulty in understanding some non-native speakers of English. Previous company protocol required employees to video conference at least twice a day in order to "hand over" operations to another office. In recent years, this handover—as well as other communication between offices—has moved to Slack, making information sharing "much more clear," as this employee describes it. There are, however, consequences to streamlined, text-based communication. As the employee above states, you lose "interpersonal connection," which will be discussed in Red Light 4.

Red Light 4: Limited International Communication Among Frontline Employees

In contrast to the experiences of employees in management, frontline employees consistently expressed that their contact with Japanese employees was infrequent. The infrequency of their contact was interpreted as a cue in a variety of ways, most of which were negative. One employee (female, frontline) made sense of the situation in the following way:

> I definitely wish there was more connectivity between us. It just kind of feels like every office is doing their own thing. There's not a lot of communication between the offices. And that leads to a lot of differences in how we do our job. [...] I wish there was more

> unity in how we did things, we felt more like a whole team as opposed to just a team here, team here, team here.

The employee states that there is “not a lot of communication” between offices. The statement lies in direct contrast with the experiences of management, suggesting a disconnect between the roles of manager and frontline employee. Although for managers, communication is frequent, frontline employees experience the direct opposite. The employee expresses an unfulfilled desire for “connectivity” between the offices, which she believes leads to a lack of standardization. The lack of standardization leads to fragmentation (i.e., “a team here, team here, team here”). The fragmentation of offices diminishes notions of teamwork and camaraderie between employees, as articulated in the following quote:

> They [organizational leadership] preach teamwork, but I don't feel like there's as much teamwork as there should be. As I mentioned before, the different offices are very different entities. So I feel like we have our own set of standards. The next office has its own set of standards and they don't mix.

The employee (female, frontline) describes the contrast between messages from leadership (e.g., “preach teamwork”) and the reality of operations. She describes the offices as “very different entities” whose practices “don’t mix.” The separation of offices contributes to and is exacerbated by a lack of information sharing. One employee (female, frontline) states,“None of us really understand the structure of the company very well.” The sentiment that important company information, such as hierarchies and details about headquarters, was unknown to frontline employees (i.e., “us” in the quote) was expressed numerous times throughout interviews and observations. Frontline employees were aware that members of management had frequent communication with employees abroad. By contrast, for frontline workers, one employee

(female, frontline) summarized the discrepancy succinctly: “Just me on the ground, right here, I really don’t know what goes on.”

Summary

RQ1 addresses the sensemaking cues SafeHarbor employees interpret from their organizational leadership that either do (i.e., “Green Light”) or do not (i.e., “Red Light”) indicate multicultural integration. Employees received cues *for* multicultural integration, which included (1) the presence of a global culture, (2) language and cultural sensitivity, (3) the prioritization of travel and relationships among managers, and (4) frequent international communication among managers. However, employees also received conflicting cues *against* multicultural integration, such as (1) an emphasis on Japan, (2) language and cultural issues, (3) a lack of prioritization of travel and relationships among frontline workers, and (4) limited international communication among frontline workers. The ambivalent cues that SafeHarbor employees interpreted resulted in ambivalent organizational outcomes, addressed in RQ2.

RQ2: Organizational Outcomes

Acculturation

Acculturation, as previously mentioned, is the adaptation process to one or more different (i.e., not your heritage) cultures (Cox, 1991). US employees perceived and shaped both pluralistic and multicultural outcomes regarding acculturation. In terms of *pluralistic* acculturation, some US employees expressed a disinterest in or rejection of assimilative acculturation practices. As a result of Red Lights such as language and cultural issues, employees gravitated towards those who were closer to their “ingroup,” which tended to be either local employees or those who spoke English at a high level. The following quotation illustrates this sentiment: “Of course, you do gravitate towards those who can speak English. I do find that

happens a lot." The employee (female, frontline) had the rare opportunity to travel to headquarters in Japan. She expresses how she would "gravitate" towards English speakers while she was there. Many frontline employees did not have the opportunity to travel to Japan (Red Light 3). The following quote (male, middle management) illuminates the outcomes of inexperience:

> I'd much be more comfortable obviously going to [local leaders] just because I know I can fully communicate with them and discuss what's going on versus going to a higher up in Japan. Some of it's also just because for the most part I've never met a lot of the other people in the other particular Asian offices, which definitely lowers what your level of knowledge and comfortability is going to be.

The employee here acknowledges greater comfort, and by implication, candor, with local leaders, due to (1) greater confidence in his ability to communicate with them and (2) greater familiarity with them. The employee's confidence and familiarity with locals are a result of Red Lights 2 and 3—language and cultural issues and limited travel opportunities. Language and cultural issues with Japanese employees and limited travel opportunities (which would allow US-based employees to meet Japanese employees) led US-based employees to gravitate towards their ingroup and reject assimilation with the dominant culture (i.e., Japanese workplace culture).

In terms of *multicultural* acculturation, employees expressed enthusiastic reciprocity. In other words, when employees encountered the Green Lights of (2) language and cultural sensitivity, and (3) travel and relationship opportunities, this led them to be more eager to reciprocate. "Enthusiastic reciprocity" primarily presented itself in developing a shared language (e.g., "Japanglish") and embracing cultural learning opportunities abroad. Many employees remarked on the SafeHarbor-specific terms and vernacular used among employees. For example,

as revealed through field notes, US employees customarily used the term "-san" when addressing or discussing Japanese colleagues. "-san" is a Japanese honorific meaning "Mr." or "Ms." Although the vast majority of US-based employees did not know Japanese, they were familiar with this custom—it is emblematic of the formality of Japanese workplace culture. US employees *acculturated* to this practice willingly, even those who had not traveled to Japan.

The majority of employees who had traveled to Japan spoke of embracing opportunities to learn about Japanese culture. One employee (male, middle management) describes going out for karaoke, a common recreational activity in Japan:

> It took me probably a while. I was reticent to start that because I am not a singer, and I definitely... Yeah, I don't belong on the radio at all, but it's a lot of fun. [...] I think it's important to not just go in there and work the whole time and stay in an office and not ingratiate yourself to the community and to the people.

The employee discusses his initial reluctance to participate in an activity outside of cultural norms within the United States. However, he embraced the opportunity and emphasized the importance of "ingratiat[ing] yourself to the community and to the people." Through this principle, the employee was able to overcome his hesitancy and take part in a uniquely Japanese activity, thereby learning more about his coworkers' culture.

Competing sets of sensemaking cues led to an ambivalent mix of both pluralistic and multicultural outcomes in relation to acculturation. Red Lights 2 and 3 led US-based employees to gravitate towards local, English-speaking employees over their Japanese counterparts. In short, employees showed a disinterest in or rejection of reciprocal acculturation. Interestingly, at the same time, other employees expressed enthusiastic reciprocity with respect to acculturation opportunities. Green Lights 2 and 3 led some US-based employees to develop a shared language,

"Japanglish," with Japanese employees. Additionally, these US-based employees embraced opportunities to learn about Japanese culture while spending time at the Japanese office. In sum, contrasting Red Light and Green Light cues created ambivalence within the acculturation dimension of integration.

Structural Integration

Structural integration refers to the degree to which non-majority members of an organization are integrated throughout organizational hierarchies (e.g., middle management, upper management, top decision makers at headquarters ;Cox, 1991). In terms of *pluralistic* structural integration, some employees perceived barriers to entry with respect to many leadership roles within the organization. All four Red Lights contributed to this perception. One employee (male, upper management) describes how Japan-centrism (Red Light 1) and the deprioritization of travel (Red Light 3) in particular contributes to this perception:

> There's this assumption like if we're going to give anybody a promotion that's going around, we want to make sure that they're contributing to the company vision of automation. One problem with that, all the projects related to automation are being done in Japan [...] So you're actually making it very difficult for people outside of Japan to feel like they can move up if you're limiting it to just the very thing that they can't actually participate in. Physically, there's no way they can participate in that.

US-based employees who are interested in promoting within the organization are limited by the simple fact that they reside in the United States. As the above employee states, promotions are currently being given to employees who contribute to the automation goals of the company. However, projects in automation are being carried out in Japan—emblematic of Japan-centrism

(Red Light 1). Employees are limited by time and physical distance, and the deprioritization of travel further limits employees' ability to be involved in promotion-worthy projects.

Language and cultural issues (Red Light 2), as well as limited international communication (Red Light 4), also contributed to this perception. The primary language used by most employees at headquarters is Japanese. Therefore, if a US-based employee does not speak Japanese, this would significantly complicate a potential role for them at HQ. Additionally, limited international communication leaves US frontline employees largely unaware of what is happening at headquarters. The four Red Lights converge to create barriers to entry.

In terms of *multicultural* structural integration, US-based employees perceived changing norms with respect to who can be a leader within the organization. The most significant example of this was Min-ho, the new senior executive at SafeHarbor. Min-ho was a Korean man who had lived abroad in several different countries and demonstrated proficiency in multiple languages. Min-ho's predecessor—an older Japanese man—held the position for many years and visited the US office sparingly. Several employees mentioned that his English was limited, so he was not able to speak at length with US employees. Conversely, Min-ho demonstrated a high degree of English proficiency, making jokes and meeting with each employee at the US branch one on one. These one on one meetings were conducted in English and left many employees feeling positively about this new change in leadership. Min-ho, along with a few others (e.g., the cultural intermediaries), exhibited multiculturalism in their leadership roles, expanding the horizons for what a non-Japanese employee might aspire to.

Competing sets of Red Light and Green Light cues led to dualistic, ambivalent outcomes within the structural integration dimension of integration. Frontline employees possessed a limited perspective of the broader organization due to geospatial constraints (i.e., time and

physical distance). Additionally, the language barrier hindered upward mobility, as employees who did not speak Japanese could not fully participate in many of the business activities at headquarters. However, field notes revealed that Min-ho, a newly promoted Korean polyglot, reflected an important change in who could be a leader within the organization. *Pluralistically*, some employees perceived barriers to entry with respect to structural integration, while *multiculturally*, these norms were changing. Coexisting plural and multicultural outcomes reflect the ambivalent sensemaking environment of the organization.

Informal Integration

Informal integration refers to the interweaving of informal social groups within the organization (Cox, 1991). US employees perceived and shaped both pluralistic and multicultural outcomes related to this dimension. Specifically, in terms of *pluralistic* informal integration, opportunities to socialize were limited, due to geographic distance and limited travel opportunities among frontline employees (Red Light 3). Among those who were able to travel, some employees expressed a disinterest in informal socialization opportunities. One employee (female, upper management) states: “I would say from the American side, we're much more likely to go back to our hotel rooms and just drink some beer in our room or hang out by ourselves.” When probed further, the employee offered the following explanation regarding why Americans typically do not embrace cultural learning opportunities: “We're working long hours. We usually work about at least 10 hours a day, I would say, while we're there. And so we didn't really have the energy to go out.”

Long-working hours—a facet of Japanese workplace culture—were followed by US employees when they traveled to Japan. In contrast, European employees worked shorter days and embraced opportunities to travel, according to this employee. Long-working hours—related

to Japan-centrism (Red Light 1)—presented a barrier to informal socialization for some employees. Other employees embraced their limited opportunities to socialize with Japanese employees—emblematic of *multicultural* informal socialization.

US employees who decided to embrace opportunities to connect with Japanese employees tended to develop relationships that extended beyond their limited stay in Japan. One employee (male, middle management) describes such an experience:

> Tanaka-san[5] [...] invited myself and a couple of the other colleagues from [the US]. [...] They took us to a Japanese temple, which was really cool to see. Took us to the farm. We helped pick out some type of roots, I guess [...] and then went from that to enjoying, like I said, a large sit-down meal with his family. They set out a whole bunch of tables, chairs and fed us a huge spread, huge spread. [...] Lots of family there, lots of friendliness.

The employee was able to experience many aspects of Japanese culture (e.g., temple visit, rural farming), culminating in a sit-down meal with Tanaka-san's family. The experience of traveling around the area with Tanaka-san was significant to the employee, who remarked that he maintains the connection with Tanaka-san via social media. Another employee (female, frontline) shares a similar story:

> One of the employees over there, Keiko[6], she's a fantastic woman. She actually took me out to [...] a Japanese spa [...] Very interesting. I also, at that particular location they had where you can put your feet into a pool and there's little fish. [...] It was pretty cool.

Similar to the previous employee, the employee above was able to experience many aspects of Japanese culture, thanks to Keiko. She later described her relationship with Keiko as "very comforting, extremely comforting" and stated the following about their present relationship: "I'm

[5] Tanaka-san is a pseudonym.
[6] Keiko is a pseudonym.

sure I could message her [Keiko] tomorrow or today and she'd respond within 24 hours. She's that kind of person." Despite the fact that the employee had not been to Japan in many years, she felt assured of Keiko's goodwill towards her. Such connections were an invaluable step towards multicultural informal integration.

Cultural Biases

Cultural biases, as defined by Cox (1991), are levels of prejudice and discrimination towards minority groups within an organization. US employees at SafeHarbor observed both pluralism and multiculturalism with respect to cultural biases, contributing to the overall ambivalent, liminal state of the organization. A pluralistic cultural bias is defined by Cox (1991) as progress towards egalitarianism, containing some persistent prejudice and discrimination. The cues from Red Light 1: Japan-centric led to some perceived prejudice towards US employees (e.g., a preference for the perspectives of Japanese employees). However, many employees acknowledged the progress the organization had made, claiming that the organization used to be *more* Japan-centric, but leadership has made efforts to involve other offices. Sam, the key informant, explained that when he started with the organization, employees had little to no contact with headquarters. Presently, the contact is daily. The increase in contact and involvement in HQ projects represents progress towards egalitarianism within the organization.

Multicultural organizations contain no prejudice or discrimination. Many employees perceived significant progress in this respect. Employees stated that they knew of foreign workers at headquarters, and were even able to recall former US-based coworkers who had transferred or been promoted to headquarters: "Isaac[7] started off in our office here in [the US] and he transferred over to [HQ]. He learned over there, did a lot of stuff over there." Additionally, new leadership—such as Min-ho—emphasized this step, that multiculturalism at

[7] Isaac is a pseudonym.

headquarters was to be embraced and appreciated. Conversations with Min-ho made many US-based employees feel positively about the direction of the organization.

Organizational Identification

Organizational identification refers to levels of belonging, loyalty, and commitment to an organization (Cox, 1991). Although levels of organizational identification among Japanese employees were not measured in this study, a notable pattern emerged in the interviews with US employees. Organizational identification manifested as a disparity between management and frontline workers. Due to the Red Lights (1-4), frontline employees expressed consistently that they did not know much about the organization at large, and some employees indicated turnover intention. One employee (male, frontline) who indicated turnover intention, stated the following about his fellow frontline coworkers' intent to stay with the organization: Of the people I've talked to, yes. I think this isn't long-term for them either."

Another employee (male, middle management) confirmed: "I know they've [organizational leadership] been fighting turnovers. They want people who'd be like, 'We want to be here. I want to commit myself to this.'" Reasons cited for turnover intention included a non-competitive salary, as well as the changing modern workforce (i.e., overall low organizational tenure among new employees). However, knowledge of the broader organization—as well as opportunities for promotion—are contributing factors to general organization identification (Mael & Ashforth, 1992), which were not present for frontline employees at SafeHarbor. Therefore, frontline employees exemplified low organizational identification.

Conversely, high levels of organizational identification were indicated throughout interviews by many US-based managers. US managers exhibited a high level of knowledge

regarding the broader organization, and expressed many times that SafeHarbor was a good place to work. Contrary to the perception of frontline workers, Sam—the key informant—perceived that there were opportunities for advancement that frontline workers did not pursue. According to field notes, Sam expressed that when he was a junior employee, he took advantage of said opportunities and the organization rewarded him for this by advancing him to managerial roles. Therefore, Sam—and many other managers—had a positive perception of the organization and, more specifically, headquarters. One employee (male, middle management) stated that "I really think the Japanese are... They're great. They speak great English for the most part, and so they communicate very well with us, our office [US]." The employee's positive perception of headquarters extended to, and was co-created by, Japanese employees' English ability and their communication with the US office. Due to this positive perception, the employee continued on to say, "They [HQ] could tell us what to do all day long, especially since who are we to tell them what to do when they're working 18 hours?

The employee expected and accepted a power differential between the US office and Japan, and acknowledged their long working hours. The sentiment expressed here—that Japan has authority, in part due to their longer working hours—was not expressed among frontline workers. Frontline workers were largely unaware of the broader organization, which included office culture in Japan. Therefore, they could not appreciate disparities between offices, contributing to a neutral or negative perception of headquarters (i.e., low organizational identification).

Intergroup Conflict

Intergroup conflict refers to tension or friction between cultural groups in an organization (Cox, 1991). Intergroup conflict is high when an organization exists in a *pluralistic* state.

Conversely, intergroup conflict is low in a *multicultural* organization. In this respect, SafeHarbor aligns more closely with the multicultural organizational model, though low conflict is an ambivalent outcome. Although some tension existed (i.e., the "Red Lights"), employees were able to overcome issues by foregrounding professional identity. Due to a lack of personal relationships with Japanese employees among many workers, employees saw their colleagues as coworkers first. Therefore, they were able to overcome personal obstacles and collaborate together in the pursuit of common workplace goals.

Time and physical distance also prevented some conflict from escalating. However, a lack of conflict due to communication barriers is an ambivalent outcome, as conflict may persist in a latent, subdued manner. For example, many employees were skeptical of Japanese employees' expertise with respect to weather:

> My understanding is they do not have meteorology degrees in that [Japanese] office. I feel like in the grand scheme of things, we're a weather company. It's not easy to learn meteorology when you don't have a degree or anything like that. It's just they found people that they're good workers, which is great, and we love that, but it's like we're not prioritizing the things that we as a weather company should be prioritizing.

The employee above (female, middle management) speculates on a discrepancy between the US office and Japan with respect to meteorological knowledge. All employees in a weather routing role at the US office had a meteorological background. The employee above expressed a sentiment that appeared in many interviews—meteorological knowledge should be prioritized among routers. However, employees tended to circumvent this issue rather than address it directly—none of the employees spoke of bringing this concern to organizational leadership.

Summary

RQ2 addresses the ambivalent organizational outcomes (i.e., dimensions of integration) that arose as a result of sensemaking cues in RQ1. Employees perceived mixed cues relating to acculturation. As a result, some employees gravitated towards their ingroup (i.e., other English speakers), and avoided reciprocal acculturation. Conversely, other employees enthusiastically participated in cultural learning, as a result of Green Lights 2 and 3. Employees also perceived mixed cues relating to structural integration. While some employees perceived barriers to entry with respect to promotion and organizational leadership roles, other employees acknowledged changing norms with respect to who can be in leadership (e.g., Min-ho). Informal integration was also fraught with mixed cues, with some employees reporting several barriers (e.g., limited opportunities, long working hours), while others seized limited opportunities and were rewarded with long-term, personal relationships.

US employees perceived mixed cues concerning cultural biases within the organization. Although Red Light 1 led to some perceptions of discrimination (e.g., a preference for the perspectives of Japanese employees), overall, employees acknowledged and appreciated the progress the organization had made towards egalitarianism. Organizational identification among Japanese employees was not measured in this study; however, a discrepancy was noted between frontline workers (low in identification) and management (high in identification) in the US office. Intergroup conflict among Japanese and US-based employees tended to be low—a multicultural outcome—though there were both positive and negative reasons for this. In sum, organizational outcomes in relation to Cox's (1991) dimensions of integration were dualistic and ambivalent, indicating the presence of both pluralism and multiculturalism within the organization.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This investigation had two objectives: Both were achieved. Specifically, this research investigated sensemaking cues SafeHarbor employees received *in favor of* and *in conflict with* multicultural integration (RQ1). Additionally, this research assessed outcomes of employee sensemaking regarding these cues by employing Cox's (1991) model of multicultural integration (RQ2). Findings for RQ1 suggest the presence of competing sets of cues (i.e., "Green Lights" and "Red Lights"), which contributed to an ambivalent sensemaking environment. Findings for RQ2 reinforced this pattern of ambivalence, as both pluralistic and multicultural outcomes related to Cox's (1991) dimensions of integration were documented. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed next.

Theoretical Implications and Contributions

This study contributes to the organizational communication literature an original observational field study of headquarter-subsidiary communication within a multinational, multicultural organization. To date, observational field studies in organizational communication have been largely monocultural and singular with respect to the countries and cultures investigated (e.g., Barbour & Gill, 2017; Bisel et al., 2017; Roeder et al., 2021; Zanin, 2018; Zoller, 2003). Additionally, extant research on headquarter-subsidiary communication often focuses on subsidiaries of Western organizations (e.g., Dang & Xu, 2014; Kim, 2018; Stage, 1999), where Western cultural influence is experienced by non-Western employees in subsidiary locations. This research investigated the confluence of several cultures (e.g., Japanese, American, European) and how unique cultural Discourses (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000) create opportunities within—as well as challenge—contemporary organizational communication theorizing. Additionally, contemporary research concerning international organizations and

cross-cultural comparisons is largely quantitative in nature (e.g., Aycan et al., 2013; Beham et al., 2023; Erez & Earley, 1987; Kraimer et al., 2009; Yamaguchi, 2013). In a 2017 review of the last 100 years of cross-cultural organizational behavior research, Gelfand and colleagues (2017) implored researchers to prioritize qualitative methods, which the authors state have received "no attention" (p. 523). The present research is a response to that call. Using a qualitative case study approach to explore the nuanced communication environment of a multinational, multicultural organization provided new knowledge to the field of organizational communication, which can be used to inform future scale development and other forms of quantitative inquiry.

In addition to the broader scholarly conversation regarding organizational communication dynamics in multicultural contexts, this research specifically contributed to the nascent sensemaking literature in non-Western, multicultural organizational environments. Investigations into sensemaking behavior to date have largely been conducted in Western contexts (e.g., Abolafia, 2010; Doughtery & Smythe, 2004; Kelley & Bisel, 2014). The present research evaluates the universality of sensemaking theory by applying its axioms to a non-Western (i.e., Japanese) organization with fruitful results. Previous research found that cultural differences can heighten anxiety and uncertainty in an organization's sensemaking environment (Greer & Wyant, 2024). Anxiety triggers sensemaking processes (Weick, 1995), which participants in this study frequently engaged in order to make sense of culturally unfamiliar behaviors. In this research, the dualistic, ambivalent sensemaking environment of SafeHarbor International led to reduced organizational identification, problematic newcomer socialization, and role ambiguity among frontline workers. Future research should investigate the relationship between heightened anxiety in culturally unfamiliar environments and increased frequency of—or need for—sensemaking.

This study adds to the growing number of works which leverage sensemaking theory to explore dynamics of ambivalence in organizational settings. Qualitative research is well positioned to study ambivalence in ways that can be challenging for linear statistics. Additionally, multicultural environments, such as SafeHarbor, are fertile ground for competing (i.e., ambivalent) Discourses, as two or more cultures seldom align perfectly in terms of norms and values (Hofstede et al., 2010). At SafeHarbor, employees received competing messages concerning organizational leadership's acceptance or rejection of multicultural integration. Competing "Green Lights" and "Red Lights" led to liminal (non)transition between pluralistic and multicultural status within Cox's (1991) dimensions of integration framework. This pattern of ambivalent messaging leading to ambivalent outcomes resonates with the findings of Lucas (2011), in which competing Discourses of class mobility and class maintenance led workers who had achieved social mobility (i.e., "the American Dream") to feel both proud and yet stigmatized as a result of perceived moral degradation (i.e., "Working Class Promise"). Similarly, employees at Safe Harbor espoused the virtues of a global culture (Green Light 1), while simultaneously accusing the organization of being Japan-centric (Red Light), leading to the paradoxical existence of cultural biases (e.g., "Japan is superior") and the celebration of differences.

In terms of workforce diversity, this study provides a unique vantage point by attending to the influence of non-Western organizational members on the assimilation processes of Western organizational members. Extant research on workforce diversity often focuses on the integration and assimilation of minority racio-ethnic, gender, and other diverse (e.g., non-White, non-male, non-heterosexual) groups into predominantly Western organizations (e.g., Cox & Blake, 1991; Eagly et al., 2003). To date, research suggests that workforce diversity can produce both positively- and negatively-valenced individual and group-level outcomes. Positive effects

include higher adaptability and a broader range of perspectives, leading to increased creativity and innovation (DiTomaso et al., 2007). Additionally, organizations in which top leadership espouse the value of diversity tend to appeal not only to minority job seekers, but also to nonminorities (Williamson et al., 2008). Consistent with intergroup research, however, group diversity can also create negative effects. On an individual level, lower attraction to and perceived dissimilarity with outgroup members (those with dissimilar attributes) can reduce group or team identification (Tsui et al., 1992). On a group level, heterogeneity can contribute to increased conflict, diminished communication, and lower performance (DiTomaso et al., 2007).

Interestingly, this study confirms many general findings from diversity research, which tend to show both positive and negative consequences of a diverse workforce. On one hand, SafeHarbor's global culture (Green Light 1) allowed for a broader range of perspectives. Additionally, language and cultural sensitivity (Green Light 2) facilitated the delivery of tailored services to local customers, showcasing the organization's adaptability to local markets. Throughout interviews and observations, participants expressed appreciation for the diverse, global nature of the organization, often in relation to travel opportunities (Green Light 3). However, SafeHarbor also experienced negative consequences of diversity. In terms of Cox's (1991) dimensions of acculturation and informal integration, some SafeHarbor employees expressed that they were more comfortable with local coworkers, as opposed to their international colleagues, and did not fully embrace cultural learning opportunities. Additionally, frontline employees experienced limited communication with Japanese employees (Red Light 4), which some employees felt contributed to diminished organizational performance. Future research should continue to explore the co-presence of both positive and negative outcomes of workforce diversity. While negative outcomes of workforce diversity may be controversial,

careful investigations of this possibility could hold the potential to identify the sources of trouble and the forces that mitigate them. Future applied scholarship may use positive deviance case selection methodology to identify successful, humane, and diverse workforces so that scholars can explore how these organizational members minimize the negatives of workforce diversity and maximize their positives (Bisel et al., 2020).

This study contributes to Cox's (1991) model of multicultural organizations by largely verifying its analytical fruitfulness nearly thirty-five years after its original publication. Cox's model states that organizations exist in three states in relation to workforce diversity integration—monolithic, pluralistic, and multicultural. Multicultural is the ideal (albeit rare) state, and organizations can progress to multiculturalism via six dimensions (i.e., forms) of integration—acculturation, structural integration, informal integration, cultural biases, organizational identification, and intergroup conflict. The case study of SafeHarbor International was documented to be uniquely situated in the liminal stage between pluralism and multiculturalism, as viewed across the dimensions of integration. Findings confirm the presence of all six dimensions. Acculturation, structural integration, informal integration, and cultural biases each manifested in terms of both pluralistic and multicultural outcomes.

Concurrently, a pattern emerged among frontline and managerial employees in relation to organizational identification (i.e., feelings of oneness with or belongingness to an organization, Mael & Ashforth, 1992). In Cox's (1991) original model, multicultural organizations possess no distinction between majority and minority groups in reference to levels of organizational identification. Levels of organizational identification were not assessed among majority group members (i.e., Japanese employees) in this case study. However, the notable disparity between management (high organizational identification) and frontline workers (low organizational

identification) at the subsidiary branch aligns with disparities in travel experiences and relationships forged across national borders (Green Light 3, Red Light 3) and frequency of communication with Japanese counterparts (Green Light 4, Red Light 4). Employees who were able to travel, form relationships with coworkers abroad, and maintain frequent communication with headquarters tended to hold roles in management. Meanwhile, employees who were not able to travel, form relationships with coworkers abroad, or maintain frequent communication with headquarters, tended to be frontline workers and newcomers. Future research should investigate the connection between strong ties to headquarters and levels of organizational identification among members of subsidiary organizations.

In Cox's (1991) model, intergroup conflict is low in multicultural organizations, in part due to the elimination of conflict-arousing factors such as cultural biases and disparities in structural integration. Here, SafeHarbor once again occupies an in-between, liminal space. While intergroup conflict was overall low at SafeHarbor, cultural biases, disparities in structural integration, and a lack of opportunity—or reluctance—to acculturate reciprocally and integrate informally were present. Presumably, these conflict-arousing factors would trigger intergroup competition or conflict; however, employees at SafeHarbor avoided this outcome. Foregrounding professional identity helped many employees navigate workplace conflict. In this instance, lack of personal relationships among employees (i.e., lack of informal integration) *assisted* in the assuaging of conflict. At the same time, conflict was assuaged in a more impersonal way, through time and physical distance. In the following paragraphs, I offer an extension to Cox's (1991) original model which considers time, physical distance, and other logistical barriers that modern multicultural organizations may face.

In addition to confirming the analytical utility of Cox's (1991) original model, I offer an extension of the model in two ways, based on the case study. Cox's original model was conceptualized with a Western, domestic organization at the forefront. For this organization, multicultural integration meant the integration of minority racio-ethnic, gender, or other diverse groups of workers. In the modern age, organizations operate across continents and time zones. Communication is facilitated via technology, and notions of diversity are expanded beyond the workers who are geographically close. Therefore, the modern multicultural organization must also consider *geospatial barriers* as a dimension of integration. Geospatial barriers can dramatically affect the extent to which culturally-distinct employees can interact with members of the majority culture, in-person and virtually. Distance, in terms of both time and space, decrease the likelihood and increase the challenges associated with interpersonal contact and relational development. In this dimension of integration, a *monolithic* organization would operate on one time zone with no physical distance between employees (i.e., one office, located in one country). A *pluralistic* organization would operate in several time zones, with physical distance between employees (i.e., multiple offices, located in several countries). Operations in an organization with geospatial pluralism are not well-coordinated between offices, with members of different cultural backgrounds unable to attend important meetings and other collaborative events. In a *multicultural* organization, there would be offices in several time zones and physical distance; however, operations would be well-coordinated at both task and relational levels. The inclusion of members of different cultural backgrounds would be prioritized at important meetings and collaborative events, thereby promoting equal opportunity in opinion-sharing and perspective-taking.

The second dimension I propose here is the *use of technology*. As organizations expand across geospatial boundaries, technology becomes an essential tool in maintaining consistent communication between offices. However, technological use can be a help or a hindrance in multicultural integration, depending on how technology is utilized (e.g., "silicon curtain," see below). In a *monolithic* organization, use of technology is maximized for lean efficiency. Employees are siloed and relationships between employees of different cultural backgrounds—beyond utilitarian and professional—are scarce. In a *pluralistic* organization, the use of technology is paired with in-person contact. Although many employees are still unable to meet and integrate with culturally-distant others, those who are able employ technology strategically to maintain ties. In a *multicultural* organization, technology is used strategically, but relationships between employees are valued. There are many opportunities for employees to meet coworkers of different cultural backgrounds, facilitating necessary in-person ties (i.e., Green Light 3), which can then be continued online. In other words, the *silicon curtain* is lifted, which will be discussed in the following paragraph.

This study contributes to organizational communication technology literature an original concept, which I label, "silicon curtain." Although consensus within the literature suggests that information communication technology can be a powerful tool for the facilitation of global connectivity (Conrad & Sollitto, 2017), the present study reveals a potential consequence of its overuse. The silicon curtain is an unintended consequence that occurs when management overvalues technology-based communication practices that maximize task coordination but minimize relational development and maintenance among organizational members. When the silicon curtain is in effect, reliance on technology is high, and efficiency is prioritized; meanwhile, employees are largely isolated from one another. Although the benefits of

technology—such as streamlined task coordination and improved information sharing—are leveraged, relationships between employees are not initiated and maintained. Employees seldom meet in person, contributing to difficulties in relational development. When relationships between employees are poor, the tendency for employee retaliation behaviors increases, while job performance and extra-role behaviors (i.e., organizational citizenship) decrease (Townsend et al., 2000). These consequences are further complicated among employees of diverse backgrounds.

In the case of SafeHarbor, frontline employees experienced the silicon curtain firsthand. Due to Red Light 3—the deprioritization of travel and relationships among frontline employees—frontline workers felt that there were few opportunities to travel and build relationships with Japanese employees. As a consequence, many frontline workers expressed that they did not hold personal ties to employees abroad, contributing to pluralistic outcomes in Cox's (1991) model, such as a lack of informal integration, cultural biases, and low organizational identification. When employees lacked personal ties to employees abroad, their online communication with those employees was also strained (Red Light 4). Conversely, when upper-level managers were able to travel and facilitate those relationships (Green Light 3), online communication was frequent (Green Light 4). In other words, without a silicon curtain to obscure ties, organizational members experienced multicultural outcomes (i.e., dimensions of integration), such as reciprocal acculturation, informal integration, minimized cultural biases, and high organizational identification. These findings have practical implications.

Practical Implications and Applications

This study has practical implications and applications for organizations attempting to move from pluralism to multiculturalism. "Red Lights" and "Green Lights" are cues *in conflict*

with and *in favor of* multicultural integration. In the case of SafeHarbor, both sets of cues are present, contributing to an ambivalent sensemaking environment that prevents the organization from fully progressing to the multicultural stage. Organizations should view "Red Lights" as "don't"s and "Green Lights" as "do"s in their progression. In the integration process, organizations should strive to highlight and elevate minority cultures, so as to avoid feelings of ethnocentrism among diverse employees (i.e., Red Light 1: Japan-centrism). When employees at SafeHarbor felt that their perspectives were not as valued as those of the majority culture (i.e., Japanese employees), this contributed to pluralistic outcomes, such as cultural biases and latent intergroup conflict. Organizations should also be proactive in addressing language and cultural issues (Red Light 2), which can impede acculturation and informal integration. Employees at all levels of the organizational hierarchy should be encouraged to travel and build relationships with colleagues (i.e., Green Light 3 and Red Light 3). In contrast to extant interpersonal communication research which suggests that modality switching may negatively affect relational development (Ramirez & Zhang, 2007), opportunities to meet in-person allowed for relationships to continue online in this study (Green Light 4), contributing to multicultural organizational outcomes. The key informant disagreed with the potential efficacy of requiring employees to travel to headquarters as a means of relational development, citing past failures. However, during the member check, the key informant also noted the benefits of his own travel to headquarters.

In this research, I offer the novel concept of the silicon curtain. The silicon curtain has many negative consequences for organizations. First, the silicon curtain can exacerbate role ambiguity. Recently-onboarded frontline employees at SafeHarbor expressed that they had minimal contact with employees at headquarters. They were not able to meet Japanese

employees in person, which led them to feel uncomfortable initiating conversation online with their Japanese counterparts. Information seeking is a key component of the organizational socialization process (Jablin, 2001; Kramer, 2011), which can help to resolve questions regarding role expectations (i.e., role clarity). Employees who were not able to seek critical information due to stunted relationships—with Japanese or US-based employees that they did not meet—experienced role ambiguity, which ultimately damaged their organizational identification. Lower organizational identification is another consequence of the silicon curtain. The silicon curtain not only obstructed employees' ability to engage in the organizational socialization process, it also diminished their knowledge of the broader organization. When travel and in-person meetings were replaced with technological alternatives (e.g., Slack, Google Meet), recently-onboarded employees were not able to see headquarters and be exposed to the full extent of SafeHarbor's operations and the tools available to them to perform their job. Knowledge of the organization at large contributes to organizational identification (Mael & Ashforth, 1992), and was diminished as a consequence of the silicon curtain.

Organizations must decide if the trade-offs associated with the silicon curtain align with organizational goals. If an organization values that its employees are assimilated and strongly tied to the organization (i.e., highly identified), then the organization must implement technology *strategically*. Organizations in this category do not need to avoid channels of communication, but rather, should add channels, especially rich media (Daft & Lengel, 1986) that afford strong social presence. In-person channels of communication, especially in the early stages of organizational integration, help facilitate initial relational development, which can be maintained online. Employing technology to maintain and develop ties across the organization continuously,

which already have an in-person element, avoids the pitfalls of the silicon curtain by prioritizing personal relationships and using technology to enhance them.

This research contains many theoretical contributions and practical implications. Theoretically, this research documents a unique case study of sensemaking in a multicultural organizational context. Specifically, this case study is one of the first of its kind to explore the influence of non-Western members on Western members' socialization experiences. Additionally, this study expands Cox's model and offers the novel concept of the silicon curtain. Practically, organizational leaders should view "Green Lights" and "Red Lights" as a guide in their integration efforts. Lastly, this study should raise awareness for organizational leaders as they determine the true costs and benefits with respect to technology use, especially when it replaces interpersonal contact between culturally-distinct others (i.e., silicon curtain).

Chapter 6: Limitations and Conclusion

The author acknowledges limitations of this study. First, this is a single case study, inclusive of many contextual factors that—while enhancing emic understanding of SafeHarbor International—may not be applicable in other contexts (e.g., uniquely Japanese workplace norms). In terms of methods, this case study employed both interviews and ethnographic field observations. However, interviews are limited by the process of recollection, and future research should investigate events—such as informal integration among culturally-distinct employees—in the moment through observation. Additionally, this research did not include breadth or depth of perspectives from employees at the headquarters location, nor did it measure their levels of organizational identification. Future research into multinational headquarter-subsidiary communication should investigate how the perspectives of headquarters employees converge with or diverge from subsidiary branches. Lastly, the dynamic and shifting nature of culture could result in change, sometimes even rapid change. Future research should explore whether or not proposed or intended integration within the organization was successfully implemented.

This case study explored sensemaking dynamics in a multinational, multilingual organization as it moved from pluralism to multiculturalism. Findings revealed that organizational leadership at SafeHarbor cultivated an ambivalent sensemaking environment, in which employees encountered sensemaking cues both *in favor of* and *in conflict with* multicultural integration. Competing sets of Red Light and Green Light cues led employees to ambivalent interpretations, which contributed to paradoxical pluralistic and multicultural outcomes within Cox's (1991) dimensions of integration. This research offers an expansion of Cox's original model to include geospatial barriers and the use of technology as dimensions of integration. Additionally and relatedly, this research offers the novel concept of the silicon

curtain, which future research should investigate both within and outside of a multicultural organizational context.

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Appendix A

Table 1. Dimensions of Integration for Diverse Organizations (Cox, 1991)

Dimension	**Definition**
Acculturation	The adaptation process to one or more different (i.e., not your culture of origin) cultures
Structural Integration	The inclusion and representation of diverse populations within an organization
Informal Integration	The inclusion of diverse (i.e., non-majority group members) within organizational social circles
Cultural Bias	Levels of prejudice and discrimination within an organization
Organizational Identification	Levels of belonging, loyalty, and commitment to an organization
Intergroup Conflict	Disagreement, discontent, and tension or friction between cultural groups within an organization

Appendix B

Interview Guide

01. In your daily work, how frequently do you interact with the international employees of SafeHarbor?
02. How would you characterize or describe those interactions? (e.g., video conferencing, phone call, email)
03. How would you characterize or describe your relationships with the international employees of SafeHarbor?
04. If I asked you to describe the culture of SafeHarbor, holistically, in three words, what would they be and why?
05. Can you describe any moments of connection you've experienced with international coworkers?
06. Can you describe a time where you felt integrated or interconnected with the international branches of SafeHarbor?
07. If it were up to you, what would you change about the culture of SafeHarbor, and what would you keep the same?
08. What does the term "global" or "international" culture mean to you?
    a. Does having a global culture benefit a multinational organization, in your opinion?
        i. Why or why not?
09. Do you think that SafeHarbor has a global culture? Why or why not?
10. Have there been any memorable instances where you noticed language or cultural differences between yourself and international employees?
    a. If so, can you tell me about one of those times?

Handover Communication for Facilitators

01. How long have you worked in this facilitative role (i.e., OP1/2, FRD, OSE)?
02. How did you learn how to accomplish a handover?
03. Can you recall your first experience *receiving* a handover?
04. Can you recall your first experience *sending* a handover?
05. Have you ever trained anyone on handover procedures, and if so, how?
06. During your time at SHI, what has changed concerning handover procedures? What has remained the same?
07. Can you describe a particularly memorable handover? What made this handover memorable?
08. Can you describe a time when you noticed or felt that language or cultural differences were playing a role in handover communication?
09. Are there any questions regarding handover procedures or SafeHarbor in general that I should be asking, but have not?

Handover Communication for Non-Facilitative Catg.

01. How do you become aware of the information shared in a morning handover?
02. At the time of the evening handover, how do you decide what information is important to share?
03. Are there any questions regarding handover procedures or SafeHarbor in general that I should be asking, but have not?

Appendix C

Table 2. Multiculturalism Sensemaking Cues: Red Lights and Green Lights

Multiculturalism Accepted: "Green Lights"	**Multiculturalism Resisted: "Red Lights"**
Green Light 1: Global Culture ● Respect, Appreciation, and Recognition Towards Int'l Employees ● Unity and Global Culture ● Commonalities Across Offices ● Trust	**Red Light 1: Japan-centric** ● US Deprioritized, HQ Prioritized ● Global Vision Not a Reality
Green Light 2: Language and Cultural Sensitivity ● English-Friendly ● Intercultural Awareness and Understanding ● Cultural Liaison ● Respect for and Strategic Use of Diversity	**Red Light 2: Language and Cultural Issues** ● Language and Translation Issues ● Lack of Intercultural Awareness and Understanding
Green Light 3: Travel and Relationships Prioritized Among Management ● Good Relationships Across Offices ● Trust ● Leadership Involved/Invested in Int'l Employees ● Travel Opportunities Available ● Benefits of Travel	**Red Light 3: Travel and Relationships Deprioritized Among Frontline Employees** ● Lack of Personal Relationships with HQ ● Lack of Travel Opportunities
Green Light 4: Frequent International Communication Among Management ● Leveraging Technology for Int'l Connection ● Frequent Contact and Cooperation with Int'l Offices ● Information Sharing	**Red Light 4: Limited International Communication Among Frontline Employees** ● Lack of Contact with HQ ● Lack of Information Sharing and Standardization

Appendix D

Table 3. Outcomes within Cox's (1991) Dimensions of Integration

Dimensions of Integration:	**Pluralistic:**	**Multicultural:**
Acculturation	**Disinterest in/Rejection of** ● Employees gravitate towards their "ingroup," i.e., English-language speakers (RL2). ● Employees gravitate towards local, US-based employees (RL3).	**Enthusiastic Reciprocity** ● Developing a shared language, e.g., "Japanglish" (GL2). ● Embracing cultural learning opportunities abroad (GL3).
Structural Integration	**Perceived Barriers to Entry** ● Limited business perspective in the US (geospatial constraints) (RL1; RL3; RL4). ● Language barrier potentially hinders upward mobility (RL2).	**Changing Norms** ● Leadership exhibits multiculturalism (GL1; GL2).
Informal Integration	**Disinterest in/Limited Opportunities for** ● More comfortable with local employees (frontline; RL1-4). ● Not embracing cultural learning opportunities (management; RL1)	**Embracing Limited Opportunities** ● Embracing cultural learning opportunities (GL3).
Cultural Biases	**Japan is "better" or "superior"** ● Perceived lack of egalitarianism between Japan- and US-based offices (RL1).	**Celebrating Differences** ● Perceived progress towards egalitarianism (GL1).

Organizational Identification	**Low among Frontline** ● Lack of knowledge regarding the broader organization (RL3-4). ● Perceived lack of promotional opportunities (RL1). ○ Turnover intention indicated.	**High among Management** ● High knowledge regarding the broader organization (GL3-4). ● Perceived promotional opportunities (GL1). ● Positive perception of HQ (GL1-4).
Intergroup Conflict	**Latent intergroup conflict ameliorated/exacerbated by:** ● Foregrounding professional identity ● Geospatial barriers	