7. Working Misunderstandings

7.1. Working misunderstandings and ethnographic insight

The term "working misunderstanding", in the context of ethnographic research, was first coined by Paul Bohannan in his analysis of colonialism in Africa.

> In an African colony, then, the political and economic situation was assessed by the European rulers in terms of European culture; the same situation was assessed by Africans in terms of their various African cultures. Their common heritage and their common humanity assured that for some matters the two evaluations were complementary. Just as surely their separate histories led them to view other matters divergently. […] Such is the nature of the "working misunderstanding". […] There were two sides and neither really knew the "codes" – the connotations of word and deed – in which the other group perceived the situation, valued it, communicated about it, and acted. (Bohannan 1964: 12-13)

According to Bohannan, the political and economic structure of colonialism was possible because of the differing interpretations (i.e. selections of understanding) of the situation by the colonisers and the colonised, and remained "working" as long as the two systems were kept apart (ibid.: 25). Or, as Marshall Sahlins put it more precisely: „We have to deal rather with a parallel encoding […] as a "working misunderstanding." It is a sort of symbolic serendipity, or at least a congruent attribution from two different cultural orders of a special meaningful value to the same event." (Sahlins 1982: 82)

Hence, a working misunderstanding arises when at least two social systems interact with each other on the basis of a common situation, term or activity. Both systems interpret the situation (i.e. select their understanding of it) in terms of their system-specific context, which might fundamentally differ

from the other's. But the situation can be re-contextualised so that it "makes sense" within the realms of one's own system (Gershon 2005: 103) and this enables a continuity of interaction. Interaction across social systems functions not only *despite*, but also *because of* these working misunderstandings. They can be seen as the bridge between systems that enables uninterrupted (i.e. successful) interaction between them, and hence intact and "working" communication.

Such working misunderstandings have been employed by a number of scholars, within both anthropology (Reed 2006, Wijsen and Tanner 2008, Watkins and Swidler 2013, Cole 2014, Losonczy and Mesturini Cappo 2014, Dorward 1974) and other disciplines, such as sociology (Jaffee 2012), law (Chen-Wishart 2013) and history (Spear 2003, Iliffe 1979). The term "productive misunderstanding" in ethnographic studies is almost synonymous (Gershon 2005, Tsing 2005, Livingston 2007, Monteiro and Keating 2009), as is "*malentendu productif*", which is a direct translation of the term in French (Nadége 2007: 34, Papinot 2007). Other scholars have drawn on the concept of structured misunderstandings (Servais and Servais 2009) – "*malentendu bien entendu*" (La Cecla 2002) – or have not used a specified term to illustrate the role of misunderstanding as a means of supporting successful social interaction (Durrenberger 1975, Fabian 1995). Guido Sprenger (2016) proposes a differentiation of structured and unstructured misunderstandings, with the former based on the existence of a shared mode of communication – a term or set of terms with partial semantic overlap that is used by both parties. Unstructured misunderstandings, in contrast, rely on serendipity, as illustrated by Sahlins (1982).

These accounts of working misunderstandings illustrate the positive nature of misunderstandings and their potential contribution to successful social interaction. Application of the concept, however, remains far from coherent and has often lacked analytical direction. Working misunderstandings are obviously a long-lasting topic of academic interest, as they have featured in publications for the past 50 years. Yet no effort has been made to structure the discourse on analytical positions pertaining to working misunderstandings; here, I propose a starting point.

7.2. Working misunderstandings as an analytical category

To approach a common ground for discussion of working misunderstandings as an analytical category for ethnographic insight I will draw on a selection of the works mentioned above and derive from these accounts the two analytical dimensions on which the suggested quadrant typology builds on: *locus* and *modus*.

The *locus* dimension differentiates working misunderstandings into those arising between interlocutors and those encountered between the anthropologist and interlocutors. I will illustrate this dimension in the following section (7.2.1) using three examples from the existing body of ethnographic studies. Section 7.2.2 will address the *modus* dimension, which defines working misunderstandings along the lines of intentionality and non-intentionality, on the basis of further ethnographic examples from the literature. Both dimensions (*locus* and *modus*) will then be combined into a quadrant typology model, onto which the current body of literature will be structured (Section 7.2.3).

7.2.1. The *locus*: Misunderstandings amongst interlocutors or between interlocutors and the anthropologist

Watkins and Swidler (2013) illustrate, in their work, how the different parties involved in HIV prevention (donors, brokers and villagers) operate on a narrow set of programme labels – or "themes that make everyone happy" – that enable all agents to attach different meaning. Intervention programmes aiming at "fighting stigma", for example, can appeal to religiously motivated donors, as they enable HIV intervention without mentioning sexual protection. Of course, for Malawian communities, "fighting stigma" merely refers to reciprocal obligations to kin. Although the theme means something different to each of the involved parties, all are able to work together under it. The common theme allows parties to collaborate without needing to confront the different meanings attached to the same words (ibid.: 203).

Similarly, Anna Tsing collected stories of the different key players involved in a successful anti-logging campaign in a Meratus village in Indonesia. In this process, she realised that all parties seemed to describe different events, corresponding to their differing commitments to nature. It was not despite, but because of the misunderstandings between village elders, provincial nature lovers and national environmental activists that they were able to collabo-

rate successfully and accomplish the campaign's goal of removing the logging company from the village (Tsing 2005: 245 ff).

A further ethnographic example of the productivity of misunderstandings is provided by Marko Monteiro and Elisabeth Keating (2009), who collaborated in an interdisciplinary cancer research team with scientists from fields ranging from computer science and biomedical engineering to applied mathematics and medicine. By tracing the communication at the team's weekly meetings, they illustrated how strategies such as the "eyeball norm" (presenting data in such a way that it looks plausible to everyone) were used to facilitate successful collaboration despite a lack of shared understanding across the disciplines (ibid.: 9).

These three studies refer to the same *locus* of working misunderstanding, as they each analyse how a working misunderstanding supports interaction *between* interlocutors. They illustrate the successful cooperation of different parties despite incongruent – or even conflicting – pre-dispositions and worldviews. The working misunderstandings discussed in these three studies relate to topics the researchers were able to examine without being part of the misunderstanding, themselves. The authors seemed to have no strong ascriptions to the situation of misunderstanding, and no conflicting understanding that was salient in the analysis.

But working misunderstandings can also arise between an anthropologist and his or her interlocutors. The detection of misunderstandings, in general, is neither surprising nor rare – it is part and parcel of fieldwork and is of value to the anthropologist, as it renders the perception that he or she is in dialogue with agents of a group with a different conceptual framework. The working misunderstanding, however, provides an additional level of insight, as it not only highlights the distinctiveness of the other party's understanding, but it also reveals layers of similarity, as the actions that result from one party's understanding are similar or at least comprehensible to that of the other party, despite the differing understandings. This is why misunderstandings can go unnoticed until a behaviour reveals the difference. The "working" aspect describes the point to which a more or less superficial congruence between the anthropologist's and the interlocutors' ascriptions exists. Such working misunderstandings have seldom been analysed in the literature, and my own case, analysed in Chapter 8, will contribute to filling that gap. The following three studies have, however, already addressed the issue.

Johannes Fabian (1995) describes how he assumed the Swahili term *muzungu* applied only to a white man when one of his interlocutors told him

about a *muzungu* who had joined a religious movement in Zimbabwe. Only years later did he realise that it was the female African-American anthropologist Benetta Jules-Rosette to whom his interlocutor had been referring to as a *muzungu* in the interview (ibid.: 43). The term *muzungu*, for the informant, referred to a non-African, while Fabian inferred that it described a white, male person, despite being aware that the Swahili language does not mark gender. But, as Fabian points out, ethnographers must accept misunderstandings and "settle for a version we can live with" (ibid.: 44) in order to continue communication and allow the cross-system interaction to function.

In a methodological reflection on the application of photo-elicitation interviews, Christian Papinot (2007) describes how a misunderstanding between himself and his interlocutors on the meaning of photos proved productive. He had taken a series of close-up photographs of decoratively painted inscriptions and motifs on public transport buses in northern Madagascar, with the intention of utilising these photographs in his interviews to trace his interlocutors' interpretations of the motifs. But his understanding of the photos as a supportive tool of enquiry differed significantly from his interlocutors' understanding of them. His use of photographs in the interviews collided with the Malagasy social definition of a photograph (Papinot 2007: 83). Consequently, the images did not lead to interpretations of the decorations, as Papinot had expected; rather, the close-up, seemingly truncated images were perceived as an invitation to identify the driver of the vehicles. However, this misunderstanding of the purpose of the photos was productive, as it allowed for a conversation that led to the revelation of a connection between the decorative elements and a rivalry that was occurring between vehicle drivers (ibid.: 84).

A final example relates to Anna Tsing's reflection that understandings of a forest can be social, rather than naturalist, which she learned in the course of her fieldwork. She realised that her view of the Meratus forests was steered from a naturalist perspective, which led her to appreciate the variety of species and the forest views from a mountain ridge. Her interlocutors' understanding of the forest, however, was one in which "individuals and households traced their histories: House posts resprouted into trees. Forest trees grew back from old swiddens." (2005: xi). Here, the anthropologist became part of the discourse, as her understanding of a concept, term or situation differed from that of her interlocutors.

7.2.2. The *modus*: Tracing the intentional/non-intentional

The examples from the literature discussed in Section 7.2.1 centred on the analysis of a working misunderstanding between interlocutors or – in the latter case – between an anthropologist and interlocutors. But despite their difference in *locus*, one can locate a commonality in each of the working misunderstandings: their non-intentionality (*modus*). The working misunderstandings happened unconsciously and were unintended – at least, this is my assessment of the situations on the basis of the information provided in the literature. Neither of the involved parties seemed to have insight into the other party's ascriptions, and they did not actively shape their actions to maintain the misunderstandings working.

Working misunderstandings, however, are not always kept "working" maintained solely on the basis of an incidental, undiscovered and semantic overlap across interacting systems. While Sahlins (1982) argues, in his account of Captain Cook, that a working misunderstanding occurred between Cook and the Hawaiians – explaining that Cook's murder was not a *necessary* consequence but a *possible* consequence of the working misunderstanding – he primarily wished to explain the behaviour of the Hawaiians, who perceived Captain Cook's behaviour as fitting well into their context (Reed 2006: 157). Isaac Reed instead argues that Cook might have understood the role in which the Hawaiians saw him very well and adjusted his behaviour accordingly, in order to avoid being unmasked as a human being (e.g. by avoiding women, unlike his crew members). In order to maintain the misunderstanding working, "each side played certain roles in the other sides drama" (ibid.: 158).

Similarly, in her study of Malagasy women who are married to French men, Jennifer Cole (2014) illustrates how these women strategically play on ambiguities in Malagasy kinship as a working misunderstanding in order to maintain the complex interactions between the French and Malagasy family systems:

> She claimed that the French term sœur [sister] and the Malagasy term rahavavy [sister] referred to the same semantic field, even though she knew that rahavavy covered a wider range of kin than her husband would have recognised as sœur. She built a working mis/understanding premised on the gap between Malagasy and French definitions of the term sister to smuggle in – literally – a relative whom she deemed important but whom Pierre [her

husband] would almost certainly not have counted. (ibid.: 541, emphasis in original)

A party's ability to actively play on such unarticulated ambiguities and semantic overlaps is a particularly interesting aspect of analysis in relation to working misunderstandings, as this ability requires a certain level of knowledge of the other party and conscious shaping of one's actions to bring them in line with the other's expectations.

Anne-Marie Losonczy and Silvia Mesturini Cappo illustrate this in their study of two Ayahuasca shamans in Iquitos (Peru): one of them failed to attract occidental clients due to his inability to play on the working misunderstanding of shamanism between local/mestizo concepts and Western ideas, which the other apparently did very well, due to his experience of travelling through Europe and his frequent contact with occidental tourists and apprentices (2014: 124-26). The latter shaman was able to actively shape his actions to make them more similar to ascriptions of shamanism between the two social systems, allowing the misunderstanding to remain working and preventing dissonance with his European apprentices.

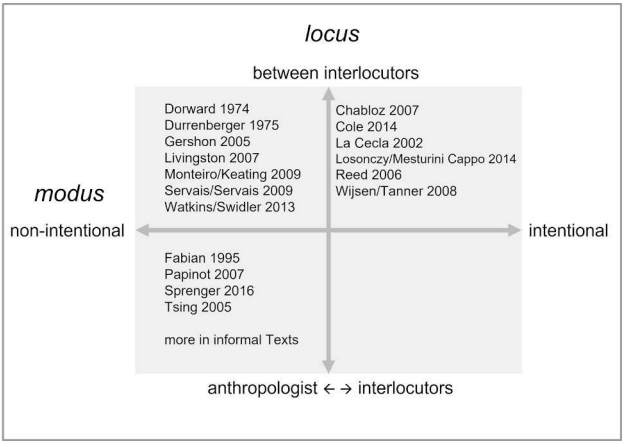
The common notion of misunderstandings sees them as unintentional and contingent. The ethnographic accounts in this section, however, show a certain level of intentionality on the agents' part to keep the misunderstanding working by leveraging opacities in the interacting systems. I therefore suggest to structure working misunderstandings along a second dimension that differentiates between notions of intentionality and non-intentionality. This second analytical dimension of the *modus* will be applied to case studies of client projects at Advice Company in the context of unintentional (see Chapter 8, Section 8.1 and Chapter 10) and intentional (see Chapter 8, Section 8.2 and Chapter 9) working misunderstandings.

7.2.3. Towards a framework of working misunderstandings

I have illustrated how the analytical category of working misunderstandings can be separated into two dimensions: the *locus* and the *modus*. These dimensions, which derive from existing applications of working misunderstandings in ethnographic analysis, are proposed as a categorical orientation to structure the existing body of research on misunderstandings and to foster further discourse on this topic. To account for the interdependencies of the analytical dimensions while retaining a certain level of lucidity, I suggest their arrange-

ment into a quadrant, along which the examples discussed can be allocated (notwithstanding the risk of oversimplification) (Figure 14).

Figure 14: The L/M quandrant of working misunderstandings



From the several accounts of working misunderstandings, it is apparent that, in general, the *locus* anthropologist ↔ interlocutor is an underrepresented category in ethnographic literature. Accounts reflecting the intentional *modi* of working misunderstandings between the anthropologist and his or her interlocutors constitute a seemingly marginalised category. This category refers to working misunderstandings in which the anthropologist is (at least partially) aware of the differing ascriptions of his or her interlocutors, and actively shapes his/her behaviour to keep the misunderstanding working. Such a situation can of course also occur in the opposite direction, with interlocutors modifying their actions to comply with the anthropologist's different understanding. Uncovering such working misunderstandings is difficult, and misunderstandings of this type were not presented in the literature review.

In the following chapters, I will apply each of the four categories of working misunderstandings and illustrate the potential of the *modus* and *locus* as analytical dimensions. By reflecting on an intentional working misunderstanding between the interlocutors and myself, I will address the identified gap in the analysis of working misunderstandings.

7.3. The client project as a service commodity

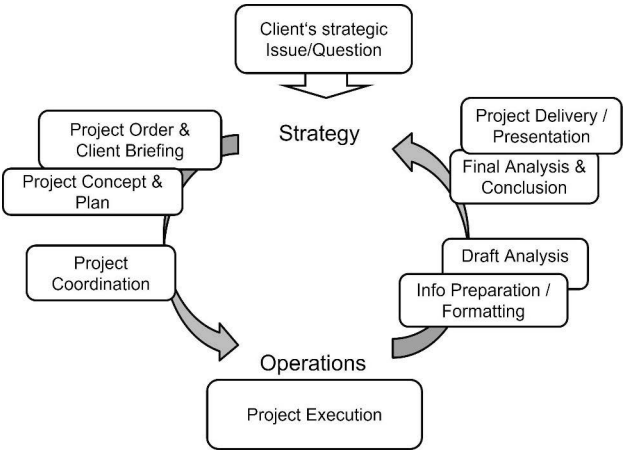
Section 7.3 takes the client project as the central subject of analysis, following the project development process through the organisation and situating the development steps along the client centricity scale.

7.3.1. Following the project's process

Advice Company generates a significant amount of revenue by providing advice and consultancy in relation to clients' specific strategic decisions of their clients. When a client representative approaches a member of the consulting team in order to request help in resolving an issue or question, or when Advice Company pro-actively offers follow-up services on a completed project, an iterative phase of project proposals, negotiations and refinements follows. When Advice Company wins the "pitch" of project proposals over competitors, the project is officially ordered and a contract is signed. In a teleconference between Advice Company consultants and the client, the project scope, expectations and details are discussed. These meetings are often supported by documentation that is sent by the client in the form of a presentation or text file prior to the meeting. This project briefing represents the central communication over the organisational boundary, with the consultants serving as the boundary communication specialists.

Once a project is requested and the briefing is complete, the consultants conceptualise the project and plan the expected degree of involvement from the executing teams. Through internal briefings, the project is handed over to the project coordination team with specific timeline expectations. The project coordinators organise further briefing meetings with the execution team leads in order to inform them of the tasks and required delivery dates. Once the execution teams complete their tasks, the preparation teams transform the information into presentation files and other serviceable outputs. These raw presentations are then analysed by the client consulting teams, who select and condense the information. Through the final shaping of the slides and phrasing of the conclusion's wording, the presentation file is transformed into a strategic advice report. This report is then delivered to the client in the form of a performed presentation talk, often at the client's premises. Figure 15 illustrates this full client project development process.

Figure 15: The project development process



7.3.2. The client centricity scale and the project development process

To set the context for the following chapters and to connect the client project to the analysis performed in Part I of this book, I will position the client project and the project development process within Advice Company's organisational orientation along the value client centricity, across the three offices (see Chapter 5).

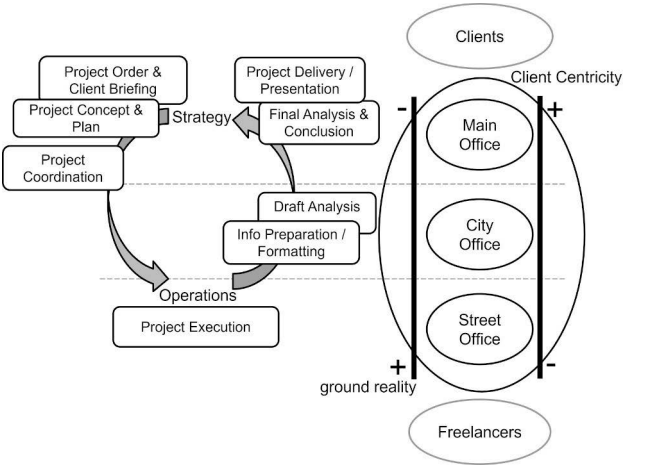
Once a project is confirmed by a client, the sequence of work tasks starts with the client's project briefing. The client project tasks are shared across all three offices of Advice Company in the city and allocated according to the client centricity continuum. The tasks most directly associated with boundary work to the client system are performed at the main office, while the operational activity around the project occurs at the street office – the location associated with the ground reality. At the city office, the work of the execution teams is transformed into a format that can be processed by the consulting team for the project report; therefore, this work occupies a middle position along the client centricity scale. The final project report is produced and delivered by the client consultants at the main office. The initial tasks of the project and the final actions preceding the delivery are not only the most

directly connected to the continuity of the organisation, but also the most directly connected to the client.

The concluding step – the project delivery in the form of a presentation – is often performed at the client's office. This step represents, both physically and structurally, the closest interaction between Advice Company and the client. In the client-centric organisation, this task is associated with high prestige. Stories of how client presentations went, how challenging questions from clients were mastered, what feedback was received and what funny interactions occurred with clients' representatives are told aloud in the office and even retold for several days after the event. I witnessed numerous conversations amongst client consultants in which references to client meetings were given, demonstrating their high prestige.

Figure 16 illustrates the project process, including the office in which each task is performed. Relating this classification to the structural set-up of the organisation (with its sub-systems differentiated according to the value client centricity), the strategic work aligns to client centricity while the operational work aligns to the ground reality:

Figure 16: Project process and offices



The tasks that are directly associated with generating revenue and a strategic, aggregated form of information (project briefing, planning, delivering the final conclusion and crafting advice) are conducted at the main

office, while the work completed in the street office (by the less prestigious roles) is framed in opposition to crafting strategy. The project development process can therefore also be understood as running from client centricity to ground reality and back again. In this context, the challenging role of the project coordinators is particularly apparent, as these employees are located at the main office yet they must bridge the significant chasm between strategy and operations – between the mutually exclusive values of the organisation's guiding difference client centricity/ground reality.

In Chapters 9 and 10 I will analyse how the individual sub-systems in the project development process organise their interactions for successful project delivery along intentional and unintentional working misunderstandings, which can be variously positioned within the L/M quadrant proposed in this chapter.