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# **An Outsider's Insights from the Inside: Implications of Emic Concepts on Qualitative International Management Research**

## **ABSTRACT**

**Purpose** – Recent calls in International Management research ask scholars to conduct more context-sensitive research, however; little attention has been paid to the methodological particularities that inform such context sensitivity. This article addresses this shortcoming by exploring how emic concepts implicate international management research processes during qualitative field studies.

**Design/methodology/approach** – We carried out ethnographic fieldwork in Brazilian subsidiaries of three German multinational enterprises. We relied on the researchers' experiences and data from a larger research project including 63 semi-structured interviews, seven focus groups, documents, and field notes. Adopting a culturally sensitive and self-reflexive lens, we reflect on the researchers' experiences in the Brazilian sociocultural context from an interpretive paradigm.

**Findings** – Our findings reveal how seven identified emic concepts affect four prototypical phases of the research process: securing access, collecting data, analyzing data, and presenting findings. We discuss how these seven emic concepts influenced the research process and impacted research outcomes, as experienced by the researchers.

**Originality** – This research contributes to the epistemological and methodological debate on context-sensitive research by arguing that intercultural sensitivity needs to be managed as an integral dimension for any form of international fieldwork. Findings contribute to interpretive approaches showing how emic concepts affect research practices, with implications for critical management perspectives.

**Research limitations/implications** – Findings are limited by our self-reflexive capabilities as foreign researchers, limited explanatory power of emic categories, our paradigmatic positioning, and the research context.

**Practical implications** – We contribute to research practice by providing eight suggestions for conducting international fieldwork and propose avenues for future research.

**Keywords:** international management research, research process, intercultural sensitivity, emic concept, fieldwork, reflexivity, positionality, indigenous management, post-colonial, methodological plurality, Brazil

## **1 Introduction**

International management (IM) scholars have recently called for more context-sensitive research to help understand social and organizational phenomena in their unique settings and subsequently to provide new insights for theory building (Bansal *et al.*, 2018; Welch *et al.*, 2022). Doh (2015), for example, argues in favor of “phenomenon-based research” to generate new knowledge on grand challenges in their natural contextual settings, and, as part of this knowledge-generation process, Welch *et al.* (2022) propose a “contextualized explanation” to enhance rigor and relevance.

Simultaneously, management scholars adopting indigenous perspectives (e.g., Jackson, 2013; Love, 2020; Van de Ven *et al.*, 2018) have underlined the need to critically question, and

thus to enrich management theory by incorporating local knowledge from the applicable understudied country settings (mostly emerging markets), with the potential to mitigate epistemic and methodological neocolonialism (Chowdhury, 2023; Ibarra-Colado et al., 2006; Thambinathan and Kinsella, 2021).

To date, international research is predominantly guided by theories and concepts from the global north that carry assumptions, ideas, and sense-making processes from this context. Similarly, generalized assumptions dominate methodological approaches to organizational phenomena, and methodologies are often depicted as culturally universal (e.g., Eisenhardt, 2021; Gioia *et al.*, 2013; Yin, 2017). The prevalent literature suggests that the proposed methods work as “templates” or “cookbooks” (Gioia *et al.*, 2013, pp. 25–26) independently of a phenomenon’s context. Therefore, there is evidence that the literature on methodology tends to focus on the methodological commonalities and shared themes during data-analysis rather than on their contextual specificities (Alcadipani *et al.*, 2012; Earl, 2022) or singular views (Llewellyn and Northcott, 2007). Management research is thus mostly concerned with ‘etic’ perspectives (e.g., Hofstede’s [2010] dimension-based cultural framework), that is, recurring universal categories which have been observed to be shared across cultures from the outside, as opposed to ‘emic’ concepts that describe the unique characteristics of a culture from the inside (Buckley et al., 2014; Headland et al., 1990).

However, from a methodological perspective, scholars investigating cross-border phenomena experience research processes differently across cultures (Holtbrügge, 2013). While researching foreign cultural contexts, researchers are likely to encounter unanticipated challenges that can impact the processes of data acquisition, access, and analysis, thus influencing knowledge production (Guttormsen and Moore, 2023). Regardless of common assumptions, the research process is non-linear and messy (Mees-Buss *et al.*, 2022), and researchers encounter many surprises that frequently remain hidden in published articles. Since

research context nurtures content, some scholars have underlined the need to include a description of “how one’s research ‘actually’ unfolded” (Van Maanen *et al.*, 2007, p. 1150). If researchers aim to understand phenomena in context and to elevate their findings to the level of knowledge production, they must also understand and pervade this context to draw appropriate conclusions about the phenomenon.

To summarize, notwithstanding the heightened call for contextualization, reflexivity, transparency, openness, and candor in research processes, a prevalent tendency within publications to homogenize methodologies and their accompanying descriptions persists. In IM research, only a handful of scholars have attempted to address the emic, that is, culture-inherent and contextual specificities authentically (e.g., Chapman *et al.*, 2008). From a culturally sensitive perspective, little has been said about the real-life processes, practices, and procedures in qualitative and quantitative research across cultures and the associated challenges (e.g., Azungah, 2019; Earl, 2022). This shortcoming is surprising because a lack of intercultural sensitivity can not only cost researchers their research subjects’ trust but also lead to distorted assumptions and conclusions about the context being studied. Intercultural insensitivity can then cause essential elements to be overlooked or misinterpreted, or sometimes even actively disregarded, with negative consequences for the quality of the produced knowledge. As posited by critical scholars, this trajectory can precipitate the consolidation of standardized management knowledge, carrying consequential implications for individuals and organizations embedded in alternative realities and truths that lie outside the scope of this standardized knowledge paradigm (Chowdhury, 2023; Ibarra-Colado *et al.*, 2006).

Therefore, in this article, we adopt an interculturally sensitive and self-reflexive lens and ask the following question: *what implications do the consideration of emic concepts exercise on international management research processes and thereby knowledge production?*

Our data is based on ethnographic case studies that we conducted in the Brazilian subsidiaries of three German multinationals as part of a larger research project focusing on the cross-cultural transfer of quality management practices. While reflecting on our intercultural and qualitative fieldwork in the Brazilian subsidiaries, we encountered several emic concepts that materialized as evident facets, and indeed as relevant substantive knowledge to convey, that impacted our research process and outcomes of our study. We reflect on these emic concepts from an interpretive paradigm (Burrell and Morgan, 1979; Romani *et al.*, 2018) with the goal of delivering descriptive insights based on our fieldwork. However, it is worth noting that our findings may offer significant value to inquiries grounded in critical and postcolonial paradigms as well.

We chose Brazil as a research context because the country's multicultural society offers an excellent terrain for inductive theory development, but also to gain a deeper understanding of the research processes and practices involved (Aguinis *et al.*, 2020). Thus, we give insights into emic cultural concepts that influence management research in one of the world's largest emerging markets. We map our findings into a prototypical research process with four phases—securing access, collecting data, analyzing data, and presenting findings—and discuss how the emic concepts impact the research and knowledge production processes. We address the methodological debate concerning the integral role of the cultural context during qualitative international fieldwork from an emic and interpretive perspective. Our contribution lies in accentuating the imperative of incorporating cultural specificities and insider perspectives into research practice, thus fostering a comprehensive and refined comprehension of cultural phenomena. Moreover, we present recommendations that can guide researchers in their qualitative fieldwork endeavors. By acknowledging the importance of the emic concepts, we also contribute to epistemic and methodological plurality in management research.

## 2 Emic Cultural Concepts and Intercultural Sensitivity

### 2.1 Emic cultural concepts

In international and cross-cultural research, a customary dichotomy is often established between ‘etic’ methodologies, which are cross-cultural in nature, and ‘emic’ approaches, which are tailored to specific cultural contexts, for the exploration and delineation of cultural systems (Buckley *et al.*, 2014; Headland *et al.*, 1990). Whereas researchers use etic approaches to search for universal characteristics in multiple societies (in the form of cultural dimensions, such as proxemics, time orientations, power distance, and individualism), they use emic approaches to search for unique characteristics inherent to a specific cultural system. In etic approaches, researchers therefore assume that they take a position outside the system in order to maintain objectivity, whereas in emic approaches they take a position within the system in order to capture the subjective experiences and interpretations of its members (Buckley *et al.*, 2014). Emic concepts are therefore usually challenging to translate because they are bound to the context and meaning system in which they emerge. Some examples of emic concepts include *guanxi* or *mianzi* in China (Buckley *et al.*, 2010), African *Ubuntu* and Indian *jugaad* (Holtbrügge, 2013), or Islamic principles of consultation (*Shura*) and honesty (*Al-Sidq*) (Patel *et al.*, 2018). Although the implications of emic concepts for IM and beyond are partially discussed (Buckley *et al.*, 2014), their impact on the research process has only been scantily reflected on (Buckley and Chapman, 1997).

The large disregard of emic cultural-specifics in IM research is partly driven by the limitations imposed on researchers in quantitative research that subscribe to the positivist paradigm (Chapman, 1997), which assumes that it is not possible to statistically compare categories absent in the units being compared. This is why, from a positivist paradigm, scholars tend to compare *dimensions* (e.g., power distance, universalism versus particularism) that, nevertheless, render the cultural specifics (such as the specific labeling of different positions in

a society's kinship system) of said cultures obsolete. However, it is often these specificities that, ironically, are most helpful when learning how to interact with the culture in question (Chapman, 1997; Guttormsen, 2015). The emic approach, in contrast, assumes that certain meaning-attributions related to attitudes and behaviors are unique, depend on the respective social context, and do not allow for comparisons (Malinowski, 1922). Instead, local meanings and local knowledge are at the center of studies that often (but not exclusively) follow an interpretative paradigm (Burrell and Morgan, 1979).

As emic concepts relate to analyzing culture-specific phenomena, specifically their attributed meanings, from the perspective of a culture's insiders (Malinowski 1944; Sapir 1949[1927]), they are closely linked with the notion of 'native categories', that is, self-generated concepts research subjects establish as expressions of their reality (Buckley and Chapman, 1997; Moore, 2015). The presupposition underlying the utilization of 'native categories' posits that ostensibly 'objective' and 'scientific' Western concepts may lack explanatory power within non-Western contexts. This deficiency could potentially lead to the distortion of research findings or obstruct the researcher's ability to discern novel, context-specific insights.

Yet, uncovering emic concepts and native categories is not an easy task because the concepts are deeply ingrained in the culture under study, usually taken for granted and unconscious to research subjects. Even though language and symbols play a fundamental role in detecting these categories, it is often about individuals' behavior and action (Buckley and Chapman, 1997). In anthropology and ethnography, scholars have therefore long debated whether it is more suitable to be an 'insider' or 'outsider' to the population under study (e.g., Simmel, 1950). In line with this anthropological debate, and as a distinction from other fields, we use the term 'insider' to refer to a person who is a member of a particular culture, while an 'outsider' is a person who is foreign to that culture. While the merits associated with insider



status encompass shared language proficiency, congruence in meaning systems with research subjects, social legitimacy, and the capacity to cultivate trust and rapport, it does not preclude researchers from encountering challenges in comprehending sub-cultures and the associated difficulties to detect native categories as they may be taken for granted for the researcher, too. An outsider position bears the potential to detect emic concepts through contrasts, contradictions, and differences to the researcher's culture (Agar, 1980; Simmel, 1950) – as 'Self is mutually constituted through an Other through an Othering process' (Guttormsen, 2018, p. 325, see Barth, 1971)–but may be challenged by the lack of local knowledge. However, the disadvantage of missing local knowledge can be overcome by spending a suitable amount of time in the field, language learning, and familiarizing with the local culture. Most groundbreaking anthropological knowledge has thus been detected by researchers with an outsider perspective (e.g., Geertz, 1973; Malinowski, 1944) who spent considerable time in the field observing and understanding local people. To put it in the words of Geertz's, we therefore argue that an outsider researcher can showcase emic concepts "from the natives' point of view" (Geertz, 1974), thus becoming an outsider revealing insights from the inside. Yet, to showcase the natives' voices with the least subjective interference as possible, high degrees of intercultural sensitivity and self-reflexivity are needed, two concepts we will turn to in the next section.

## 2.2 *Intercultural sensitivity and reflexivity*

Intercultural sensitivity can be understood as a person's ability to develop a positive attitude towards cultural differences. This includes accepting, understanding, and appreciating specific cultural traits in a research context and manifesting them by being able to respond appropriately to the local environment. Intercultural sensitivity embraces cognitive, emotional, and behavioral competencies, which reflect cultural and linguistic knowledge, open-mindedness,

empathy, and an ethnorelative attitude (Bhawuk and Brislin, 1992; Chen, 1997). Intercultural sensitivity is essential for any kind of international research because it delivers the prerequisite of understanding, reasoning, and making sense of unfamiliar cultural situations, interactions, and behaviors.

Interculturally sensitive research is rooted in anthropology and ethnography (e.g., Geertz, 1973; Malinowski, 1944), two fields of research that aim to provide comprehensive descriptions of social groups and societies from an insider perspective. Studies in these fields aim to capture the meaning and attributions of how and why research subjects construct their social realities. The inclusion of emic approaches and perspectives on culture is crucial within qualitative fieldwork, as they offer comprehensive and intricate insights into the specificities of a given culture.

(Inter)culturally sensitive lenses have also been partly adopted in IM and cognate areas from a critical paradigm (e.g., Jackson, 2013; Van de Ven *et al.*, 2018). Two streams of research include ‘indigenous research practices’ (Jackson, 2013; Holtbrügge, 2013; Love, 2020) and ‘engaged indigenous scholarship’ (Van de Ven *et al.*, 2018). Jackson (2013), for instance, uses his African research experience to critically reflect on the ‘indigenesness’ of data and findings by touching on topics of colonialism, global powers, and resistance. Researchers should distinguish ‘research about indigenous peoples’ from ‘indigenous research for and by indigenous peoples’ and reflect on the “delineations between inner and outer world” (p. 33) using context-sensitive research methods. Such context-sensitive methods are also highlighted by Love (2020) as he identifies methodologies such as ‘yarning’, community-building, or storytelling, suitable to deliver insider perspectives on indigenous communities. Moreover, Van de Ven *et al.* (2018) argue that truly indigenous research embraces active researcher engagement through an emic perspective with a reflexive attitude, humility, and respect. Yet, researchers agree that despite their growing global economic significance, indigenous

communities' emic insights, rooted in emerging economies, are insufficiently represented in Western management theory (Earl, 2022; Holtbrügge, 2013), with consequences for scientific management knowledge.

The identification of emic concepts into IM theory and research, facilitated by intercultural sensitivity and reflexivity, hold the potential to both counterbalance and enhance the prevailing positivist discourse within management studies. This discourse, primarily emanating from Western, typically Anglo-Saxon countries, stands to benefit from the nuanced contributions that emic perspectives can provide (Chapman, 1997). Especially scholars from critical and postcolonial perspectives have criticized the epistemic neocolonialism, that is, the transfer, imitation and adoption of Western concepts and theories to explain and fit non-Western realities (Barros and Alcadipani, 2023; Chowdhury, 2023; Ibarra-Colado, 2006). The main argument is that these contexts do not echo the rationale of Western, developed countries' context from which these concepts originate, e.g., regarding (working) institutions, stability vs. change, or principles of time and space, and therefore fail to adequately speak for, explain, and serve local realities and thus knowledge creation. Thambinathan and Kinsella (2021, p. 1) therefore pledge for “decolonizing methodologies in qualitative research” and to “incorporate decolonial learning into our research methodology”.

An integral component of culturally sensitive research is therefore (self-)reflexivity which involves the careful interpretation and reflection of a phenomenon and its context (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2017), as well as the researcher's role, personality, and sense-making processes, known as positionality (Creswell and Poth, 2017). Especially in qualitative research, reflexivity is essential as it enables researchers to scrutinize potential biases within the researcher-knowledge production process and the resulting knowledge (Guttormsen and Moore, 2023). Additionally, it addresses the challenges researchers encounter in unfamiliar environments, aiming to minimize (subjective) distortions in data collection, analysis, and

theory development. As fieldwork researchers may ‘go native’ and feel that they become part of the researched group, researchers need to reflect not only on first-order (formulated perceptions of the natives) and second-order interpretations (the interpretations of the natives of a culture), but also on third-order interpretations of the researcher (interpretation of the natives’ interpretations) and the relationship between researcher, research subjects, and context (Geertz, 1973).

With this article, we aim to contribute to a methodological plurality in IM research by delivering insights on how local, emic concepts influence and inform field research in Brazil. Emic concepts and native categories have been dealt with mostly at a content-level basis, but little is known about how emic concepts may influence the research process. In extant literature, we found mostly generalized assumptions about how to conduct research across cultures, and there needs to be more evidence regarding how emic concepts influence the research process and thereby knowledge production. Therefore, we critically reflect on our research practices and processes in the Brazilian subsidiaries of three German MNEs from an intercultural sensitive and self-reflexive lens. Before presenting the findings, we provide an overview of the research context, the researcher’s and companies’ background, the data, and its analysis.

### **3 The research context**

We conducted ethnographic casework in the Brazilian subsidiaries of three German MNEs for a larger research project that focused on the cross-cultural transfer of quality management practices. Brazil provides an exciting research context for reflecting on intercultural research due to its cultural complexity, based on a highly multicultural society and colonial history: settled by a multitude of indigenous tribes, the country was colonized by the Portuguese in 1500 who, due to laborious efforts to manage the extensive land, enslaved indigenous tribes and inhabitants from African colonies to settle and work the newly declared country. Along its

history, labor shortages prompted the government to incentivize immigration and colonization from Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. The colonial heritage and immigration make Brazil thus a socio-culturally diverse country, in which people from different ethnic backgrounds and social strata co-exist. Moreover, despite being considered the powerhouse of Latin America based on GDP, Brazil is yet under-researched compared to other large emerging markets. The high levels of social inequality and institutional instability make the country an exciting terrain that can provide novel insights for IM theory and methodology development (Alcadipani *et al.*, 2012; Aguinis *et al.*, 2020; Bausch, 2022).

We selected the companies through a criteria-based sampling strategy (Fletcher and Plakoyiannaki, 2011): they (1) represent high standards of quality and are market leaders in their respective industries; (2) belong to comparable industries; (3) actively transfer and adopt managerial practices; (4) maintain production sites in Brazil; and (5) reveal similar length of business activity in Brazil. We identified around 40 companies that met these criteria which we contacted to ask for participation in our study. Since we were unable to establish contact through official communication channels, we asked friends and members of the first author's alumni network for people in their professional network who work in the selected companies. Finally, we could establish contact with three companies who accepted our research proposal.

### *3.1 Background of the companies and the fieldwork researcher*

We have given the three companies fictitious names. Yellow Machines (YM) is an MNE operating in the construction machinery sector founded in the 1940s. The company expanded to Brazil in the 1970s, where it holds a production site in the federal state of São Paulo. We conducted our study in one of its ten business units, which is dedicated to constructing excavators and wheel loaders. Blue Technologies (BT) operates in the automation technology sector and was founded in the 1920s around Stuttgart. The company employs 20,000 staff worldwide, of which 500 work in its subsidiary in São Paulo, Brazil. Red Woods (RW) was

founded in the 1920s that is dedicated to producing forestry machinery, such as chainsaws and gardening tools. The Brazilian subsidiary is situated in the federal state of Porto Alegre and employs around 2,500 employees.

The fieldwork was carried out by the first author, a German female PhD researcher in her late 20s from the area of Germany where the company's headquarters are located, who at that point of time worked as a PhD researcher. First socialized in Germany, she spent several years in Latin America, and speaks fluent Portuguese. Being an outsider to the Brazilian culture and the organizations allowed the researcher to recognize specific cultural particularities through contrasts and differences to her home culture and other cultures she has lived in (Agar, 1980; Simmel, 1950). Having previously lived in Brazil provided her valuable insights into the local culture and language, and the ability to quickly connect with the interview participants. We thus consider the first researcher as an outsider researcher with local knowledge which gave her the advantage of learning about the organizations through culturally connecting with the local people. Moreover, former training in systemic consultancy and intercultural experiences allowed her to switch constantly between the content and meta levels during fieldwork and to adopt an emic perspective, that is, seeing the research situation from the locals' point of view while reflecting self-critically on her own (outsider) role in the research process. The data and initial findings were further critically discussed with the second author, a German cross-cultural senior researcher and consultant with many years of qualitative research experience, who contributed to uncovering some of the emic concepts as well as other concepts in cross-cultural management studies along the research process by raising similarities and contrasts with other cultures. The third author, a Norwegian cross-cultural senior researcher with years of experience in conducting qualitative intercultural field research, finally contributed with theoretical concepts and the framing of the article.

### 3.2 *Analysis of fieldwork experiences*

The first author conducted ethnographic fieldwork at the subsidiaries in Brazil, including semi-structured and focus group interviews, documents and field notes (Table I).

[Insert Table I here]

The reflection on our research and data unfolded iteratively and in non-linear ways (Mees-Buss *et al.*, 2022), going back and forth between the data and concepts and theories. As the first author is familiar with the literature on emic concepts and intercultural sensitivity, she engaged in critical self-reflection from the onset of the research project. She relied on introspection, especially after conducting the interviews and the intensive fieldwork phases and engaged in research diary writing. She reviewed field notes on the behavior of interviewees and reflected on the reasons, actions, and reactions she experienced throughout the day. This included reflecting on how the interviewees treated her as a researcher, how the interviewees talked to her, how she talked to them, whether certain comments triggered specific actions, how the interview guideline questions guided the actual interview, and which information was (not) received and why (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2017). Self-observation on these questions led to the presentation of the research process in several phases, which helped the first author to map and organize the diffuse information. Follow-up discussions with the two co-authors throughout the project, as well as with European and Latin American colleagues from the IM community at international conferences and seminars helped the authors to reflect on these questions and answers and to refine the emic categories and their impact on the research process and outcomes. Moreover, the computer-aided program MAXQDA allowed the authors to reflect on transcripts, field notes, photos, and documents during data collection and analysis.

We deliberately position our research within the interpretive paradigm (Burrell and Morgan 1979) which considers culture as a framework of meaning (Geertz, 1973), to be uncovered by the researcher. While the positivist paradigm, dominant in IM research, employs

an objectivist and realist ontology and positivist epistemology (usually using nomothetic and quantitative methods), the interpretive paradigm employs a subjective and relativist ontology and constructivist-interpretive epistemology (often using qualitative and ideographic methods). Both paradigms tend to remain at the descriptive level and seek to describe the (relative) stability of social reality. In contrast, critical or postcolonial paradigms can adopt either subjectivist or objectivist ontologies, but generally aim for social change and the representation of marginalized groups (Burrell and Morgan, 1979; Romani et al., 2018). While the positivist paradigm assumes that culture exists a priori and influences individuals independently of their specific context, the interpretive paradigm assumes that actors create but are also influenced by their social reality, for which the consideration of the cultural context becomes crucial for the research content (Grosskopf and Barmeyer, 2021).

#### **4 Findings: Research Practices**

During our fieldwork in Brazil, we experienced many culture-specific nuances when interacting with the local workforce. We found that such nuances directly influence the various facets of the prototypical process of qualitative research; therefore, we present our reflections in four key research phases: securing access, collecting data, analyzing data, and presenting findings. In each phase, we present our fieldwork experiences and elucidate the emic concepts. To maintain the emic concepts' authenticity, we introduce them in Portuguese, accompanied by an English translation where possible. We summarize our findings in Table II.

##### *4.1 Securing access: personalismo and jeitinho brasileiro*

###### *Fieldwork experiences*

After defining the sample criteria for the research project, we established contact with three companies in Germany through alumni network members who knew middle and senior managers at the headquarters. These people turned out to be bridge individuals between the



German headquarters and the Brazilian subsidiary due to shared international projects, and revealed knowledge about culture's importance in management, openness to exchange, long-standing experience, and general interest in the research project. These middle and senior managers used their long-lasting personal connections with Brazilian managers to facilitate access to the subsidiaries.

However, due to their limited availability, persuading Brazilian managers to participate in the interviews required much effort. Sympathizing with the secretaries was of utmost importance because they function as gatekeepers to Brazilian managers by either passing along or retaining information and managing schedules. At YM, the researcher first contacted the secretary via telephone during the first day of research at the headquarters with Peter, a German engineer who had spent several years working at the Brazilian subsidiary. The following excerpt from the field notes reveals that human-related topics were discussed before the upcoming research stay and the reason for the call were mentioned:

The secretary is on the telephone. They talk about the weather, the working hours and the time difference, and the past football game. Peter introduces me. She calls him respectfully 'Senhor G.' We talk about my Portuguese and my stays in Brazil even though I did not say much. She praises my language skills. He says that I should get in touch with [the plant manager]. [...] Peter makes the joke that Brazil is playing for the last time in the World Cup today and then adds, '*O meu segundo coração bate para o Brasil*' (My second heart beats for Brazil). They talk about the fact that he no longer has a Brazilian shirt but several shirts from local soccer clubs. [...] He tells her that I will visit Brazil in the first two weeks of August. (Field notes, YM)

The excerpt shows the importance of personal commonalities to create trust because many secretaries in Brazil are often only competent in their mother tongue and less so in English.

With the secretaries' help, we established connections to more Brazilian managers via telephone calls and extensive email exchanges. During this process, we felt that the researcher's personal experiences in Brazil, language fluency in Portuguese, and connection to the managers were more important to gain legitimacy in the field than a title or academic position. A production manager uttered, "In Brazil, who you know is what you know," revealing the importance of trusting relationships to access information. During this initial stage, physical presence was significantly important because spending time together deepened the relationship with the interview partners through common coffee breaks, lunches, and even party nights out. For example, the presence at BT when arriving to Sao Paulo facilitated scheduling more visits two weeks later, after having visited RW in the South of the country. The researcher was thus able to conduct more interviews in a second field work stance (field notes, BT).

Following the advice of one of the German managers, the first author brought small gifts to thank the secretaries for the established connections. These gifts strengthened the relationship because conversations with the secretaries offered unique insights into the organizations. For example, the researcher learned about the back entrance of one of the companies' buildings, which served as the "secretary's entrance". Non-executive employees were not allowed to enter the building through the main entrance, reserved only for managers and visitors, reflecting Brazil's social stratification:

[At the end of Day 2], the secretary accompanies me to leave the building. Different than expected, we leave the building through a back door with a turnstile at which she must check out with her *crachá* (employee ID). I ask why we go this way; she responds that the main entrance is only reserved for visitors, clients and top executives; employees like her must enter and exit the buildings via the back door. This reflects high-power distance between employees and managers. It reminds me of other office and apartment buildings in Brazil, where staff uses an own elevator or even an own entrance door than the residents; reflects somehow 'master-servant' structures. (field notes, YM)

### *The emic concepts and impact*

We attribute the importance of relationships to the emic cultural concepts of *personalismo* (personalism) (Caldas, 2006; Holanda, 1995[1936]) and *jeitinho brasileiro* (Brazilian way of doing things) (Duarte, 2006). *Personalismo* is the belief that personal relationships regulate social relations (Caldas, 2006) and refers to the valorizing of relationships over tasks. This underscores that securing access is not solely an exercise in entering an organization/physical space but also to access the sociocultural meanings of the information and observation conveyed to the researchers (Fjellström and Guttormsen, 2016). The cultural anthropologist Holanda (1995) argues that *personalismo* results from a lack of social cohesion in Brazilian society, constituted by colonizers and settlers from all over the world. Due to institutional voids and strong social stratification, solidarity only exists among people who share personal and/or emotional connections. This reinforces the significance of individual autonomy and the emergence of informal ties beyond organizational boundaries. Therefore, *personalismo* impacts the research process by highlighting the importance of small talk, cordiality, and (informal) social networks to obtain access to people and information.

Sympathizing with the secretaries by bringing small gifts strengthened trust and nurtured relationships, which is an example of a phenomenon in Brazil called *jeitinho brasileiro*, defined as a genuine Brazilian process of reaching a specific goal by eventually bypassing the law and using favors, courtesies, and networks (Duarte, 2006). The *jeitinho* serves to circumvent complex bureaucratic processes through favors that, as a side product, strengthens trust. However, as a complex and highly controversial concept, it is both positively and negatively connotated as it offers fast and efficient goal attainment but also fosters corruption and nepotism (Da Matta, 1984; Prestes Motta and Alcadipani, 1999). It is thus similar, yet not to be cofounded with the *personalismo* as both can benefit researchers by helping them gain access through trusting relationships and established networks.

#### 4.2 *Collecting data: estrangeirismo, cordialismo, and fluidez*

During data collection, we encountered several culture-specific experiences, of which we will present two. We reflect on the overall response to the researcher and the project and on the temporal and structural unfolding of the data collection. We attribute these two experiences to three emic concepts: *estrangeirismo* (appreciation of foreign things and persons, from pt. *estrangeiro*, ‘stranger’), *cordialismo* (cordialism), and *fluidez* (fluidity) (see Table II).

##### *Fieldwork experiences*

Early in the fieldwork, the researcher experienced a very positive attitude and sparkling enthusiasm in the research project and her person from the workforce. This was expressed through a great willingness to participate in interviews and a welcoming attitude toward her stay. The participants shared data with her in a trustworthy way even though she was an outsider to the organization. For example, several interview partners wanted her to interview them twice: “If you want to make another appointment [...] let’s meet another day. Thursday can be. Just call me” (Bruno, Production Manager RW). At BT, she was given her own desk and invited to several coffee breaks and a barbecue, and employees at RW organized a Southern Brazilian lunch on the last day of her research stay. Once, a YM employee noticed that her notebook for ethnographic notes was full and provided her a new one only two hours later. Reflecting on these events, she noticed that her national background and ethnicity, age, and gender influenced the data collection process. As a foreigner, local employees showed themselves very interested in getting to know more about the researcher’s international experience and life in Germany. Most of the interviewees have never left the country and were themselves eager to learn about foreign cultures. For example, during a short break in a focus group, an employee asked about her studies, if she liked teaching and whether her city is close to one of the company’s production plants (focus group 5 YM; field notes YM). At BT, people asked about her family, whether her father works at BT, and how she learned Portuguese (focus group 6 BT; field notes

BT). Especially during lunches and coffee breaks at BT and RW, conversations were often centered around the researcher's background, experiences, and the motivation to carry out the field study (field notes BT, RW), and several interview partners wanted to take photos (field notes BT). Moreover, she also felt that the fact of being a (comparatively young) woman influenced in showing hospitality and friendliness in the male-dominated industries. For example, when going out for lunch or dinner, she was usually invited by the male participants (field notes YM, RW), reflecting traditional gender roles that are not as marked as in Germany.

### *The emic concept and impact*

We explain these behaviors with two emic concepts: *estrangeirismo* and *cordialismo*. *Estrangeirismo* is an indigenous Brazilian phenomenon that describes an appreciation for what is foreign—mainly from Europe or North America—and disregarding what is Brazilian (Caldas and Wood Jr, 1997). It refers to enthusiasm and interest in people, products or institutions from abroad and manifests in giving products from abroad more value than Brazilian products or in giving people from developed countries higher status (Caldas and Wood Jr, 1997). The concept stems from Portuguese colonialism, in which the European aristocracy was considered of higher social status than people from indigenous America or Africa. This even led to the whitening movement (*branqueamento*) in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, in which people omitted going to the beach, wore European cloths and some even drank vinegar to whiten their skin (Prestes Motta et al., 2001, p. 70). This goes back to the nature of Portuguese colonization, which was based on exploitation rather than production, leading to a higher valuation of products from other European countries than from Portugal. Moreover, the import substitution policy implemented during the military dictatorship (1964-1985), which aimed to reduce dependence on imports by promoting domestic industries, reinforced the *estrangeirismo*, since Brazilian products were perceived of inferior quality compared to imported ones.

Like the *jeitinho brasileiro*, the *estrangeirismo* has a positive and a negative impact on the research process: on the one hand, interview partners proved themselves very talkative and interested in the project, asking many questions about the researcher, her previous experience, and her opinions about Brazil. This enthusiasm for the foreign helped the researcher generate conversation, and thus data, broadening and diversifying our empirical understanding of phenomena. We argue that the richness and versatility of data later influenced the inductive data analysis: the more information we obtained, the more accurately we were able to create a mental model of the interviewees' reality.

On the other hand, the researcher's nationality presented a challenge in the interviews: when addressing problems and challenges, some interviewees were hesitant, and it seemed that they aimed to present the subsidiary's performance only from the best side. Because the researcher had the same national background as the headquarters, she could have been perceived as a spy (as mentioned as a joke by a manager in focus group 4 at YM), and respondents might have feared consequences if they talked about problems. In one incident, the researcher knew about a severe quality problem that had occurred at the subsidiary, but when addressing it, interviewees repeatedly mentioned the subsidiary's excellent quality: "YM Brazil has always been a company of excellent quality. Customers prefer to receive machines from Brazil because it [has] fewer problems than from [Europe]" (Vilnicus, Production Manager YM).

As such, the *estrangeirismo* can have severe consequences for research projects: depending on the researcher's physical appearance, gender, national, or ethnic background, interview partners may be more engaged, interested, or willing to answer specific questions. Would a male researcher from another Latin American country have received the same responses as we did? Highly unlikely.

The pronounced positive attitude and cordiality we experienced can also be attributed to the concept of *cordialismo* (cordialism). The term stems from the word *cordis* (of the heart) and the concept links to the figure of the *homem cordial* (cordial man), an ideal image of Brazilian people (Holanda, 1995[1936]; Randall, 2018). The cordial man represents the exaltation of values such as hospitality, generosity, and virtues shown to strangers and focusses on avoiding conflicts and upholding harmony in the social realm beyond immediate personal relationships. It is also linked to the legacy of a patriarchal culture in which people of lower power and socioeconomic status must be careful not to offend those of higher power and socioeconomic status.

In our research, we experienced *cordialismo* through indirect communication and politeness, and through emphasizing own achievements, as explained above. For instance, we coded *orgulho* (pride) 27 times. It came up in statements such as “That’s why we even have a higher quality level than our colleagues” (Daniel, Managing Director of Production YM) and “In this indicator here [...] we are first. In this one, we are number one. In this one we are number one” (Gabriel, Production Manager RW). Although the *cordialismo* upholds a positive social function to make researchers and interviewees feel comfortable during data collection, foreign researchers must be aware that it also provokes distortion in data analysis when situations are displayed more positively than they are.

We further experienced great flexibility of timing in scheduling and conducting interviews, and we found two peculiarities that occurred more in YM and BT in greater São Paulo and less in RW in southeastern Brazil. First, several interview partners showed interest in repeating interviews to talk more in-depth about specific topics. For example, the researcher interviewed five YM employees (out of 12) and six from BT (out of 12) twice. The reasons were sudden interruptions of the interviews due to other meetings or a particular need the interviewees highlighted to elaborate on a particular topic. In contrast, at RW, pre-defined

interview schedules were kept tighter, and interview partners were interviewed only once (field notes). Only one person requested a second interview. This may be attributable to the company's location in the southeast, a region influenced by German immigration since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Compared to other regions, Southeastern Brazil is characterized by values of order and security, punctuality, and the rule of law, which also reflect RW's organizational culture (documents: RW factory rules, corporate culture in German and Portuguese). Moreover, regarding response behavior, interview partners tended to address some questions several times, moving back and forth in the interview guide. A quality manager at YM explains these dynamics:

If you don't ask again, it's not important. The German says, "Yes, we have discussed it once. That must be enough." That's a conflict that happens very often.

Europeans really assume certain things, but a Brazilian [...] says, 'We've discussed it once, so it can't be that important if he doesn't ask again.'

We therefore observed a circular response style in which some statements were repeated, and themes were expanded whereas some questions remained unanswered and had to be posed several times with different wording. These questions addressed, above all, headquarter–subsidiary relations and critical quality issues:

Eduardo is the inspector. He must inspect everything that comes into the factory. If he identifies any discrepancies between the product's characteristics and the plan, he mentions it. So, Eduardo takes care of materials inspection. Any discrepancies he finds he'll mention so that I can deal with the problem. Whether it's the supplier's problem or an internal error, for example. Because if he finds anything - there's a control plan to control everything. If he finds any discrepancies, he'll mention it.  
(focus group 6 BT Brazil)

*The emic concept and impact*



We attribute this behavior to the concept of *fluidez* (fluidity), which originally stems from discourses about fluid phenotypes due to the interracial unions between indigenous, African and European people: “One can only speak of Brazilian culture in the sense of a complex and fluid entity that does not correspond to a given form but to a tendency in search of authenticity” (Ribeiro, 1978, p. 146, our translation). Caldas (2006) theorizes on distinct ‘fluid cultural profiles’ that represent the influence of multiple cultures and cultural change in various regions of Brazil, resulting in hybridization.

The phenotypical feature can also be found in culture, with the Brazilian culture and communication being characterized by flexibility and circularity (Freitas, 1997). Institutional voids, slow and heavy bureaucratic structures, and a highly volatile political and economic environment require people to adapt flexibly to quickly changing contexts. In organizations, these factors lead to a lack of planning, last-minute changes to projects, and quick, creative, efficient, and economical solutions to problems that may not comply with standards, regulations, and laws. Moreover, in communication fluidity becomes apparent in the circular expression style, mentioning important issues several times.

#### 4.3 *Analyzing data: ambiguidade brasileira*

##### *Fieldwork experiences*

We approached the data with the theoretical concepts and interpretation patterns we had learned during our mainly European professional and academic socialization. Our categorization processes during the coding procedure were therefore clearly influenced by concepts and theories of IM studies originating from the US or Europe, such as institutional theory, cultural dimensions, and internationalization strategies. Most of these concepts unfold according to categories, which implies that a person, process, or phenomenon is categorized into an ‘either-or logic’, while generally neglecting logics of ‘both-and’ (Fang, 2012). During data analysis,

we soon noticed that these concepts proved inadequate in capturing the cultural diversity and intricate nature of Brazilian organizations and individuals' behaviors, thoughts, and identities.

We found Brazilian interview partners united contradictory values, such as an inclination toward *estrangeirismo* with a pronounced national pride, the co-existence of individualist and collectivist values, and a strong group orientation while maintaining individuality. For example, we noticed that even though foreign managerial practices were praised over Brazilian ones, most interview partners displayed an evident pride in their local practices: "A client said the machines from Brazil are giving a better performance than the machines from Europe" (Sebastian, Production Manager YM Brazil). Moreover, we found evidence for hybrid types of cultural belonging, depending on the individual's background and experiences. For example, some interview partners were born and raised in Brazil, never leaving the country, but portrayed typical German rather than Brazilian cultural values: punctuality, straightforwardness, and a focus on rules and standards. As such, we could not provide a clear image of Brazilian culture according to etic cultural dimensions.

### *The emic concept and impact*

We explain these findings through the emic concept of *ambiguidade brasileira* (Brazilian ambiguity): the conflicting, mutually excluding, but co-existing cultural values and behavioral patterns in Brazilian society (Caldas and Wood Jr., 1997). Brazilian society exhibits paradoxes through the coexistence of diverse ethnicities, stark socioeconomic disparities, and persistent institutional instability despite an abundance of stringent laws (Caldas and Wood Jr., 1997). Paradoxes and ambiguities are reflected in language, revealed by terms such as *saudade* (nostalgia or longing for something, uniting happiness and sadness in one word) and proverbs such as *tudo tem um outro lado* (Everything has another side). Da Matta (1997) describes the ambiguity with the metaphor of "the street and the house" (1997) as sociological categories:

whereas the house reflects private family life, patriarchy, and protection, the street is a hostile, public space in which unequal people negotiate over a common space, and in which laws are generally absent but authority watches. Whereas the house cultivates values of collectivism and harmony, the street requires individualism and opportunism. Despite a dichotomous logic, however, the two categories should be understood as intertwining spheres as they “reproduce each other” (p. 55, our translation). This makes Brazil a “relational society” (p. 25, our translation) with a double ethic between the ostensive and the performative:

“Between saying and doing there is an abyss that seems to characterize every system endowed with what Weber called “double ethics”, i.e., codes of interpretation and guidance of conduct that are opposed and only valid for certain people, actions, and situations.” (DaMatta 1997, p. 46-47, our translation)

Thus, we found that Brazilian culture can hardly be captured by dichotomous cultural dimensions or typical features, and must be approached through dynamic, circular, and mutually exclusive categories.

#### *4.4 Presenting findings: emocionalidade and equivalence*

During the last phase—presenting the research findings—we encountered two major challenges: the sudden loss of initial enthusiasm by interview partners and the untranslatability of cultural concepts. We explain these with the emic concept of *emocionalidade* (emotionality). Lastly, we discuss the general concept of *equivalence*.

#### *Fieldwork experiences*

When starting the research, we encountered great enthusiasm from the subsidiary staff. We were therefore excited and proud to present our preliminary findings in mid-2019, and the final report in March 2022. We arranged physical meetings at the headquarters and set up a videoconference for Brazilian interview partners to participate. Because we needed to diffuse

and discuss the findings with our interview subjects, the first author prepared presentations and executive summaries in Portuguese.

However, we were surprised and disappointed to find that *none* of the Brazilian interview partners attended the meetings. We encountered the same phenomenon for the final reports. On both occasions, we sent the findings directly to the interview partners by email but received no feedback, questions, or comments. Only one middle manager replied in a concise email two weeks later: “Congratulations. [...] Right now, I am in Mexico!” (e-mail, March 2022). We were puzzled: why was there suddenly no interest at all despite the sparkling enthusiasm in the beginning? We considered several reasons: did Brazilian interview partners have no time to attend? Were they afraid of encountering critical topics? Were they not serious although they initially showed interest? Did they forget about it? A plausible explanation could be the lack of a personal, physical meeting, as the *personalismo* taught us. However, because all companies regularly employ videoconferences for work-related topics, this explanation seemed too weak.

### *The emic concepts and impact*

We found an answer to the quickly fading initial enthusiasm in the emic concepts of *emocionalidade* (emotionality) and affectivity (Azevedo, 1958). Holanda (1995[1936]) characterizes Brazil as highly temperamental society that “few foreigners are able to penetrate with ease” (p. 152, our translation). In line, we found the research process to be influenced by a frequent and open expression of emotions and a positive attitude to organizational life, which may explain their absence and initial enthusiasm. We coded such behaviors as “emotio over ratio.”, while we found a “ratio over emotion” rather in Germany. In the words of a focus group participant: “Brazilians are very passionate. The German is more rational. They may fight now, but later they’ll work together.” (focus group 2 YM Brazil). We can also link the shown

emotionality to the figure of the *homem cordial* mentioned above. Thus, we recognized an initial effort to please the researchers and to maintain a feeling harmony, that, however, functioned for social appearance during personal interaction with the researchers. Not responding to the emails can then be interpreted as a form of indirect communication to show that the interviewees did not have the interest or time to participate in the presentation of the final reports.

When writing up our findings, we faced the challenge of untranslatability of emic concepts to third languages, especially English as publishing language. As we analyzed and coded our data in the original languages (Portuguese and German), we were challenged by translation to present our findings at conferences and in articles. We noticed that important meanings got lost when we translated original field notes and interview excerpts into English. For example, our final code list contained lexemes such as *força* (strength, describing the power behind an action), *coleguismo* (collegiality), *simpatia* (sympathy), and *cobrança* (being required and controlled to do something). Moreover, we encountered expressions such as *uma reunião para abrir o coração* (a meeting to “open the heart” = to talk about feelings), and *dar um jeitinho* (to apply a way to reach a specific goal). Although for some expressions it was easier to find a suitable translation (e.g., *força* = strength), we felt that they often failed to convey the term’s connotation. Emic concepts, such as *jeitinho* and *estrangeirismo*, lacked a translation at all.

We can attribute this difficulty to missing equivalence, that is, the nonexistence of specific expressions, meanings, or phenomena in other cultures and languages (Buckley *et al.*, 2014). Language conveys feelings, and we found that the feeling faded when we translated terms into another language due to the lack of semantic inventory in the target language. Importantly, we saw that this missing equivalence limited rich insights into our findings and,

as such, limited theory building due to distinct universes of meaning. We therefore left many expressions in their original language, inserting footnotes with original quotes where possible.

[Insert Table II here]

## 5 Discussion

Our reflexive approach has demonstrated how emic concepts influence and condition the research process, which we mapped into four phases: securing access, collecting data, analyzing data, and presenting the findings. The ethnographic fieldwork we conducted in Brazil yielded several culture-specific concepts that substantially impacted our research process and eventually the produced knowledge. We presented seven emic concepts—*personalismo*, *jeitinho brasileiro*, *estrangeirismo*, *cordialismo*, *fluidéz*, *ambiguidade brasileira*, *emocionalidade*—and their impact on the respective stage of the research process as well as the indispensable role of equivalence regarding translation. It is important to mention that these emic concepts are by no means independent concepts, but can be linked with each other, as they provide mutual explanations (Balbinot et al., 2012). We further discuss parallels of these emic concepts to emic concepts in other cultures, outline the methodological implications of our findings to qualitative IM research and present guidelines to carry out reflexive intercultural fieldwork in Brazil.

### 5.1 Parallels to emic concepts in other cultures

Taking a closer look at the emic concepts on a content-level, we observe parallels to other cultures: as we gain access, the importance of personal relationships, as with the *personalismo*, shows parallels to *rapport* in France, *guanxi* in China, *Ubuntu* in Africa, and *wasta* in the Middle East (Holtbrügge, 2013). These concepts reflect the central role of networks and people's relationships, especially in the early phases of securing access and collecting data. Similarly, the *jeitinho brasileiro* shows parallels to *Système D* in France as a system for achieving goals and solving problems through imaginative and creative use of resources.

However, we argue that even though these concepts have been reported in other person-oriented cultures, often of the Global South (e.g., in Ghana, Azungah, 2019), they manifest differently depending on a culture's history and development. Thus, the meaning-attribution is not identical and the explanations for why and how a particular emic concept has been shaped vary across cultures. Without understanding the why, it becomes difficult to comprehend a complex phenomenon, and to strategize your response. As such, the *jeitinho brasileiro* is, for instance, deeply anchored in the absence of social ties between the immigrant groups, a strong stratification of Brazilian society due to colonialism and institutional instability (Da Matta, 1984; Prestes Motta and Alacdipani, 1999). Therefore, individuals rely on personal relationships to circumvent heavy and slow bureaucratic structures. Furthermore, *estrangeirismo* resembles to the term known as *gweilo* in the Cantonese language in Hong Kong. Its contemporaneous meaning relates to signaling a 'white, western (European) foreigner'. Historically, the term was considered derogatory ('ghost'; as the foreigner) and thus signifying a sense of negative Othering. Thus, albeit a very similar concept to *estrangeirismo* in a Brazilian cultural context it contains a nuanced difference to *gweilo* contemplating on that the socially constructed meaning of *estrangeirismo* contains an appreciation of the 'foreignness', which can be linked to Brazil's particular history, as the nature of Portuguese colonization and import substitution policies in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Caldas and Wood Jr, 1997).

## 5.2 *Methodological implications of emic concepts for qualitative IM research*

The (mis)consideration of emic concepts may then have serious implications on IM research and knowledge production: first, depending on the researcher's background and degree of intercultural sensitivity, certain elements and cultural characteristics will be either seen or overlooked, and consequently considered (or not) for categorization in qualitative data analysis, thus influencing theory building processes and the produced knowledge. Recognizing and considering emic concepts through interculturally sensitive and reflexive approaches then

enables to decipher underlying systems of meaning, which have the potential to revise and enhance ‘standardized’ IM theory. Thus, theories can be enhanced or made to fit the realities of non-Western context, leveraging their explanatory power on a global and local scale. For example, the importance of personal relationships as in the *personalismo* or the *emocionalidade* may revise the validity of rational choice theory, transaction cost theory or models of intercultural negotiation in such contexts. Similarly, the emic concept of *ambiguidade brasileira* challenges the validity of dichotomic cultural value dimensions that suppose a binary logic rather than the coexistence of contradictory value orientations in a given society. Emic concepts have then the power to alter the categories in existing theories, challenge the ground assumptions of positivist, Western management theory, and create novel theories that explain management phenomena in context. Emic concepts do therefore not only enrich contextualized research (Bansal *et al.*, 2018; Welch *et al.*, 2022) from an interpretive paradigm, but also back alternative, e.g., indigenous and critical perspectives on IM research (e.g., Jackson, 2013; Van de Ven *et al.*, 2018).

Second, by consciously reflecting on the impact of emic concepts on the research process and the symbiosis with the research subjects and the field, researchers can identify how these emic concepts shape the course of the research, e.g., the access provided, the data obtained by research subjects and the sense-making processes of the data (if the researcher stems from another culture) – in short, how their person, personality and positionality, in symbiosis with the research subjects, influences the raw material obtained for data analysis. For example, knowing about the effects of the *estrangeirismo* can help to explain why certain data is obtained or not; or why foreign researchers may obtain more data than local researchers. (Self-)reflections and intercultural sensitivity give valuable insights into potential subjective and attribution biases of data collection and analysis, supporting more contextual validity and appropriateness of methods in IM research (Bansal *et al.*, 2018). We therefore argue that



intercultural sensitivity and a (self)reflexive use of emic concepts (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2017) can enhance research findings' uniqueness, transparency, trustworthiness, candor, and authenticity.

Third, considering emic concepts has, as well, consequences for the further consideration of alternative, among others, indigenous perspectives and explanations of global management phenomena. By actively engaging with, acknowledging, and integrating emic concepts in IM theory, scholars can counteract the critique of epistemic and methodological colonialism, still widespread in management and organization research (Chowdhury, 2023; Ibarra-Colado, 2006; Thambinathan and Kinsella, 2021), and contribute to more epistemic and methodological plurality in the field. This would not only diminish power differentials of knowledge contribution between the developed and developing world, but fundamentally enrich the academic landscape and possibly generate novel business best practices.

### 5.3 *Research recommendations*

Based on our findings, we further highlight eight suggestions for intercultural research in Brazil. We argue that the research process needs to be managed as an integral dimension of any form of international fieldwork.

#### **Suggestions for researchers**

Suggestion #1: Spend sufficient time and financial resources in the field to establish the necessary relationships to gather 360° data.

As we secured access and collected data, the *personalismo* demonstrated the importance of spending sufficient time and financial resources to stay in the field to make data collection effective and understand interviewees from the inside. We argue that these investments are essential to establish the necessary relationships to gather 360° data. Moreover, we experienced that

Suggestion #3: Be aware of and critically reflect on your nationality, gender, appearance and experience, which may impact how interviewees respond to your person and your questions.

the *jeitinho* can be used beneficially to access organizations and managers and build personal relationships before starting data collection. Given that Brazilian society is considered a “relational society” (Da Matta, 1997, p. 25), we advise engaging in open and honest conversations about personal experiences, rather than solely seeking information from interviewees.

During data collection, especially the *estraneirismo*, defined as a tendency to overvalue what comes from abroad, showed that a researcher’s background significantly influences the research situation and research subjects’ actions and reactions and, as such, the research process and outcomes (i.e., gathered data and produced knowledge). We found that the researcher’s nationality, skin color, gender, age, education, language and accents, and social status influenced the type of responses, the trust and openness encountered, and the amount of and type of data collected. The findings suggest that a researcher's identity and image are significant factors when entering research sites, potentially creating barriers between the researcher and interviewees. Thus, appearance, personality and emotional reciprocity can fundamentally influence social interaction between researchers and research subjects, their responses, the level of trust, and hence the gathered data (Zhang and Guttormsen, 2016). Researchers should therefore be aware of and consider their otherness in all spheres relative to research subjects. They can be perceived as positive, negative, or both and generally dictate the research process from the very beginning.

Suggestion #4: Reflect on the symbiosis between your personality and background and those of your interview partners. You might (not) perceive or understand certain concepts due to cultural distance or proximity.

Yet, this influence is by no means unidirectional. Vice versa, a researcher not only influences interview subjects with his or her person but is also influenced by them. The researcher also has certain perceptions or stereotypes of interviewees and may consciously or

unconsciously judge and/or respond to the interviewee based on personal traits. Thus, a foreign researcher may influence and change relationships with research subjects during the research process. A research situation is therefore influenced by and results from the dynamic symbiosis between researchers and research subjects.

Further, the same holds true for the perception of the emic concepts which can be experienced more intensively if differences between researcher and interviewees are greater. For example, a researcher from another Latin American country would probably experience the *estrangirismo* to a lesser extent than a European. Similarly, researchers from cultures with linear time orientations might experience the circularity of interviewing (*fluidéz*) more intensively.

Suggestion #6: Collaborate with local researchers to deal with personal, structural, and temporal differences in intercultural research situations.
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statements at face value, maintain a critical stance, and ask whether situations are as positive as portrayed.
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Researchers from such cultures should be aware that statements may be more credible if repeated throughout the interviews, and that an initial enthusiasm to participate in the study does not necessarily mean that people show up. As the *cordialismo* and the *emocionalidade* revealed, researchers should refrain from taking interview statements at face value, maintain a critical stance, and ask whether situations are as positive as portrayed. Consequently, the perception of emic concepts may come to the forefront through greater cultural distance. Collaborating with local researchers in bi- or multicultural research teams (Barmeyer and Davoine, 2021; Cowley and Kelliher, 2023) may provide a solution to personal, structural, and temporal differences in intercultural research situations.

Regarding data analysis, the *ambiguidade brasileira* challenged us to classify data excerpts and transcripts along pre-defined categories as required by well-established literature (e.g., Gioia *et al.*, 2013). We repeatedly encountered the co-existence of mutually exclusive categories of cultural values and behaviors as paradoxes and ambiguities. Similar traits can be found in Asian logic of Yin and Yang (Fang, 2012), which reveal the union of opposites in one and the situatedness of truth as a construction in momentum. Unlike in Asia, Caldas and Wood (1997) attribute this to the adoption of dynamic, circular, and mutually exclusive categories, which can be attributed to cultural plurality, hybridity, and (racial) fluidity. Foreign, non-autochthonous researchers used to adopt binary concepts may be limited to recognizing certain (cultural) concepts in the data by applying pre-defined concepts to the culture under investigation. This may limit the discovery of novel or unique concepts with the potential of questioning and broadening established knowledge. As a solution, the emic concept of *ambiguidade brasileira* can impact how data is conceptualized along established categories. A fair reflection of its effects may open novel perspectives on the data and eventually challenge existing theory. We therefore encourage researchers to look less at evidence of well-established concepts and theories and to embrace the consideration of contradictions and ambiguities in data analysis. Moreover, to further carry the definite meaning of novel concepts and phenomena, we also recommend leaving the concepts in their original language, as we do in this article.

Suggestion #7: Look less at evidence for well-established (binary) concepts and theories, but instead at contradictions and ambiguities in your data.

In general, our findings show that awareness and a (self-)reflexive use of emic categories can place the research process and the findings in a new perspective and shed light on previously less or non-considered elements or categories. Their consideration is important because they influence all phases of the research process. We argue that the appropriate use of emic categories can be achieved through intercultural sensitivity, defined as a person's ability to develop a positive attitude toward accepting, understanding, and appreciating cultural specificities, thereby supporting effective behavior in intercultural research (Bhawuk and Brislin, 1992). Intercultural sensitivity is vital in dealing with emic categories because it helps raise awareness of the effects of the researcher's and foreign cultures on the research process and helps the researcher to question sense-making processes and their role as a knowledge producer.

Suggestion #8: Do not let the data speak for itself, but critically question how the data emerged from the interaction between the researcher and the field.

In contrast, the absence of intercultural sensitivity may lead to distorted conceptualizations of the phenomena under study and ultimately lead to unconscious bias and non-appropriate conclusions, especially with cultures that are more distant from the researcher's culture. In foreign fields, do not let the data speak for itself (Mees-Buss *et al.*, 2022), but critically question how the data emerged from the interaction between the researcher and the field. Relying exclusively on interviews may give researchers only one possible perspective on the social dynamics in organizations, and other realities or truths remain hidden. As such, intercultural sensitivity affects what we 'see' and 'what we do not see' and, as an extension, what we *think* we 'see' and what we 'do not see.'

## 6 Limitations and Future Research

This study shows limitations that future researchers should consider carefully. First, the researcher's background limited our data analysis and reflexive capabilities, and the findings therefore carry a definite sociocultural, linguistic, and gendered bias. For example, interviewees may have answered the interview questions differently if the researcher was an organizational insider, but at the same time would possibly be more hesitant to reveal certain critical issues as they could be reported to the headquarters. The findings might be transferable regarding the perspectives of other researchers with similar sociocultural backgrounds but may contradict the findings of researchers with other backgrounds (Zhang and Guttormsen, 2016).

Second, we may self-critically question whether researchers from developed economies are able to submerge themselves into an emerging-economy context such as Brazil from a real emic perspective, especially when the foreign language is not a native one. We derive that future research could address these issues from a reflexive perspective by conducting research in multinational research teams (Barmeyer and Davoine, 2021; Cowley & Kelliher, 2023). Besides cultural reflections, such teams can also critically reflect a researcher's linguistic background and uncover differences in meaning systems.

Third, although our findings provide rich insights into the culture under investigation, emic categories have limitations as they may provide a description of only a section of reality expressed by a group of people. The relevance of emic categories should therefore not be overestimated but assessed consciously and critically. In line with other scholars, we advocate that emic concepts should be used complementarily with etic categories (Buckley *et al.* 2014).

Fourth, we make our main contribution from an interpretative paradigm, describing the local nuances and their impact on the research process, and we do not consider power differentials and dynamics of involved groups. Yet, our findings may also be of value for critical and postcolonial studies who could push further the impact of power in emic concepts on the

research process, and argue for a stronger consideration of conceptual, epistemic, and methodological plurality in research (Ibarra-Colado, 2006; Thambinathan and Kinsella, 2021).

Lastly, our findings are also limited to the collected data within the three Brazilian subsidiaries of German MNE. As such, the list of encountered emic concepts is bound to the context in which they emerged. This list can be extended by future research.

Future studies could address the following issues: one avenue may be to compare the findings from other emerging economies to our findings from Brazil. Moreover, there is more need to explore the impact of language differences on the research process and outcomes. Although we know about language's general impact on qualitative research, little has been published about culture-specific contexts in high-ranking international business or management journals, especially on emerging economies with a great language diversity. Another avenue might be to investigate the appropriateness of management concepts and methods, research ideals and frameworks from the Global North for data collection and analysis (e.g., categorization) in the Global South. Emerging markets such as Brazil can provide novel insights into how researchers can conduct research to create new knowledge in these contexts. To sum up, we find searching for the emic key for making our studies richer; therefore, it is important to act on Delios' (2017) encouragement to be more creative and curious about the contextualities surrounding the research fields in which we situate our research.

## **7 Conclusion**

Following the call for more culturally sensitive and contextualized research in IM, we focused on emic concepts' influence on the research process and knowledge production in intercultural research. We contribute to the methodological debate regarding context-sensitive qualitative research by revealing how the consideration of emic concepts under a culturally sensitive lens may yield novel insights into contextualized IM research. Moreover, we argue that not only the researcher influences the research setting but also the symbiosis between the

researcher and the involved research subjects in the field. Our article makes this context-specific contribution by providing a nuanced emic perspective on qualitative research in Brazilian organizations, thereby advancing studies centered in a Latin American context. By this, our findings also support the lens of critical and postcolonial perspectives who argue in favor of theoretical, epistemic, and methodological plurality in management research. We also contribute to research practice by giving recommendations and guidance for reflexive intercultural fieldwork. We argue that not only the researcher influences the research setting but also the symbiosis between the researcher and the involved research subjects (the field), which may reveal a particular fit or misfit depending on their backgrounds and behaviors. With our “outsider’s insights from the inside,” we highlight the need for more intercultural sensitivity and reflexivity throughout the research process to consider emic concepts and argue that a reflexive handling enhances the theory building process in context. With this paper, we want to encourage qualitative researchers to reflect on culture-specific attributes in intercultural research. In line with Bansal *et al.* (2018), we therefore plead for a more engaged scholarship that offers “new ways of seeing.”

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**Table I. Collected data**

<b>Source</b>		<b>YM</b>	<b>BT</b>	<b>RW</b>
<b>1</b>	Interviews	28	22	13
<b>2</b>	Focus groups	5	2	None
<b>3</b>	Documents	15	13	8
<b>4</b>	Field notes	Observations on-the-site and off-the-site between June 2018 and March 2019, e.g., meeting notes, factory tours, joint lunches, dinners, coffee breaks and (self-)reflection notes by the researcher		

Source: Authors' own work



**Table II. Research experiences and emic cultural concepts**

<b>Research phase</b>	<b>Experience during fieldwork</b>	<b>Applicable emic concept</b>	<b>Explanation of the emic concept</b>
1. Securing access	Using long-lasting personal relationships between German and Brazilian managers to access subsidiaries.  Building trust through first telephone calls and extensive email exchange.	<i>Personalismo</i>	Importance of interpersonal relationships and networks.  Valorizing of personal relationships over tasks.
	Maintaining a harmonizing relationship and giving little presents to secretaries as gatekeepers to managers.	<i>Jeitinho brasileiro</i>	Reaching goals by bypassing the official way or law, using favors, courtesies, and (personal) networks.
2. Collecting data	Great enthusiasm and interest in participating in the research project and in the researcher's person.  Physical appearance, the researcher's "whiteness".	<i>Estrangeirismo</i>	Valorizing people, products, and practices from abroad while depreciating what is Brazilian.
	Pronounced cordiality despite being an outsider.	<i>Cordialismo</i>	Exaltation of cordial values shown to outsiders.

	<p>Indirect communication style: not talking about problems and challenges.</p> <p>Interviewees present the subsidiary and their work from the best side.</p>		<p>Focusses on avoiding conflict and upholding harmony in the social realm beyond immediate personal relationships.</p>
	<p>Repetition of interviews.</p> <p>Circular response style: Recurring themes and conversations.</p>	<i>Fluidez</i>	<p>Fluid nature of cultural profiles.</p> <p>Unstable environment triggers absence of planning, short-term changes in projects.</p> <p>Flexible, rapid, and creative problem solving.</p>
3. Analyzing data	<p>Contradictory values complicate data analysis with binary concepts.</p> <p>Western “either-or” logic does not fit Brazilian “both-and” logic.</p>	<i>Ambiguidade brasileira</i>	<p>Conflicting and mutually excluding cultural values lead to ambiguous behavior.</p>
4. Presenting findings	<p>Exaggerated initial enthusiasm vanishes, and interview partners show no interest in the findings.</p> <p>No feedback on findings.</p>	<i>Emocionalidade</i>	<p>Rapid enthusiasm due to optimism, emotionality, and affectivity.</p> <p>“Emotio over ratio.”</p>

Source: Authors' own work