

## **'Multiculturalism' as a Key Methodological Challenge during In-depth Interviewing in International Business Research**

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## **'Multiculturality' as a Key Methodological Challenge during In-depth Interviewing in International Business Research**

### **Abstract**

**Purpose:** Although qualitative methods have now gained a stronger foothold in International Business (IB) research, they remain under-researched, especially regarding how researchers can overcome obstacles created when interviewers exhibit 'multiculturality' during international field research projects. This paper analyses how researchers' multicultural backgrounds create challenges and opportunities in data collection during in-depth interviewing, and how such backgrounds further impact on the power imbalance between researchers and interviewees.

**Design/Methodology/Approach:** The two multicultural co-authors of this paper draw upon their 141 in-depth interview experiences with expatriates and local staff across five separate field research projects in Mainland China, Hong Kong SAR, South Korea, Finland, and the US. Field research experiences are analysed through a Bourdieusian inspired 'epistemic reflexive' self-interrogation process between the two co-authors.

**Findings:** This paper suggests five strategies to cope with the power imbalance between the researcher and the respondent in terms of social categorisation and language: activating the 'favoured' ethnicity, putting the 'desired' passport forward, constantly reassuring of belonging to the 'right' social category, bonding in the interviewee's mother tongue and adopting a multilingual approach characterised by frequent code-switching.

**Originality/value:** This paper emphasises the relevance of exploratory, self-reflexive analysis, and uncovers how social categorisation and language influence the interviewer-interviewee power imbalance. Distinct methodological contributions are proposed accordingly for IB literature: placing 'multiculturality' as an important concept at the forefront of qualitative IB research; and identifying ethnicity and accent as key factors in terms of securing and conducting interviews.

**Keywords:** Multiculturality; International Business research; in-depth interview; expatriate; language; social categorisation; field research.

**Paper type:** Research paper

## Introduction

This paper aims to investigate how the specific methodological issue of interviewers' 'multiculturality' (i.e. individuals possessing a multicultural background) influence qualitative fieldwork, in particular the process of securing and conducting in-depth interviews in International Business (IB) research. Sub-elements of multiculturality encompass such overlapping aspects as nationality, ethnicity, gender, language and skin colour, and also how these elements interplay and perform as integral social phenomena. Qualitative research has gained a foothold in IB research in recent years, but it remains rather marginalised and under-researched in the discipline's methodology literature (Marschan-Piekkari and Welch, 2004; Birkinshaw *et al.* 2011; Doz, 2011). This paper focuses on the qualitative method of in-depth interviewing for two reasons. First, the qualitative research technique of in-depth interviewing is acknowledged as the most frequently utilised approach in qualitative research across the business school academe (Mehmetoglu, 2004; Yin, 2003). However, it is little employed in IB research as a whole (Marschan-Piekkari and Reis, 2004; Yeung, 1995; Yang *et al.*, 2006) – especially when moving beyond the deployment of the case study methodology (see Piekkari *et al.*, 2009). Second, interviewing as a method is associated with a powerful ability to develop theory through primary data collection (Daniels and Cannice, 2004) and to incorporate contextual factors (Marschan-Piekkari *et al.*, 2004). In this paper, in-depth interview is to be understood as the collection of data based on direct researchers-to-respondents conversations, in person or by phone (Daniels and Cannice, 2004).

By drawing upon 141 in-depth interview experiences with expatriates within and beyond corporate boundaries from five separate cross-national field research projects in a number of countries, the two multicultural co-authors seek to further advance the IB qualitative methodological repertoire. They discover that their unconventional multicultural profiles created profound implications for their abilities to secure and conduct in-depth interviews during fieldwork overseas. This paper proposes that multiculturality signals an important methodological issue which needs to be examined and problematised for IB researchers and subsequently integrated into mainstream qualitative IB methodology literature, in which objectivity has traditionally dominated as the aim of research (Buckley and Chapman, 1996a; Buckley and Chapman, 1996b).

This paper proposes to make two main contributions. First, multiculturality is identified as a key methodological issue to be considered by qualitative IB researchers during cross-national field research. The impact of interviewers' multiculturality on securing and conducting in-depth interviews is evinced by the experiential accounts of the two co-authors of this paper. This is achieved by coupling the transdisciplinary inquiry to advanced cultural theories from Sociology and Social Anthropology in the pursuit of 'unpacking' the social phenomenon of multiculturality and its implications for power relations with interviewees. There is a power relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee in every interview situation, as there are different hierarchies of power associated with the different sub-elements of multiculturality. For example, a power imbalance occurs when the interviewer and interviewee belong to different ethnic groups or speak different languages with accents. This imbalance transpires when a sub-

element, or a combination of different sub-elements, influences the process of securing and conducting interviews.

The second contribution relates to the self-reflexive approach (see Easterby-Smith and Malina, 1999), which serves in this paper as the methodological approach employed to analyse the two co-authors' interview experiences. The realisation of the importance of and the need to advance the methodological concept of multiculturalism emerged from the two co-authors' interrogating their own interview practices beyond critical reflection after having completed their respective field research projects. They draw upon sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's 'epistemic reflexivity' (Bourdieu, 2004; Bourdieu, 2003; Bourdieu, 1990; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). In the present paper, this was operationalised as follows: the two co-authors analysed their aforesaid interview experiences by turning the applied concepts and theoretical frames with which they had analysed the expatriate interviews towards themselves (King, 2000). Although Bourdieu's contribution to reflexivity is widely acknowledged to be at the forefront of the social sciences (Jenkins, 2002), there is a void concerning the actual deployment of his vast social theory in IB research (Prasad *et al.*, 2008). An augmented focus on methodological challenges in published papers would also assist in improving the internal validity, trustworthiness and credibility of studies undertaken (see Sinkovics *et al.*, 2008) through enhanced transparency and the self-reflexivity of interview practices. Here, through a self-reflexive analysis, the manner in which social categorisation and language influence this power relationship is uncovered. The analysis centres on how the two co-authors of this paper experienced and interpreted the conduct of interviews during their respective field research projects. Researchers with different cultural and social backgrounds may have different interviewing experiences with the same respondents. Further, as individuals respond and act based on their own interpretations of events, it is thus equally relevant to explore the two co-authors' respective interviewing experiences.

This paper first discusses and defines the key concepts in the context of methodological development. Second, it presents the theoretical framework. Third, it outlines what a self-reflexive analysis entails and how it can be practised. Fourth, it provides reflexive, synthesised accounts of interview experiences obtained with regard to social categorisation, language, and power relations. Finally, the implications for IB research, methodological and theoretical contributions, and limitations and future research recommendations, are proposed.

### **Theory: Multiculturalism as a Methodological Thinking Tool**

Multiculturalism is employed as an umbrella term for the integral social phenomena of social categorisation, culture, and language, where a power imbalance relates to the co-existence of multicultural backgrounds between interviewers and interviewees (Figure 1). More specifically, multiculturalism in this paper refers to individuals embodying diverse inherent cultural backgrounds. The concept of multiculturalism has been widely used in social studies as an equivalent to 'multiculturalism', referring to different cultures' co-existence within one society. It has been discussed to some extent in comparison with single cultures and interculturalism, which emphasises that cultures nevertheless understand and recognise each other, that is, it is

possible for different cultures to co-exist in one society (e.g. Welsch, 1999). In the context of conducting qualitative interviews in IB, this paper shifts the focus from the societal level to the individual level and defines multiculturalism as a phenomenon in which individuals have different cultural backgrounds, which can encompass languages, nationalities, ethnicities, skin colours, and gender. Different aspects, or boundary-markers, of multiculturalism are activated depending upon the particular situation as well as the physical location. By establishing multiculturalism as a key methodological issue in IB research, this paper scrutinises the cultural influence with the premise that no researcher's background can be neutral.

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Insert Figure 1 about here  
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This integral relationship between the above-mentioned elements (social categorisation, culture and language) reflects the transdisciplinary elements, Sociology and Social Anthropology, in this exploratory investigation: arguably, culture cannot be understood either by separate values and behaviour, or through biological and psychological processes and social existence, as all are in fact integral components in the development of human beings (Geertz, 1973). Investigating the role of multiculturalism is imperative because both parties partake in the mutual learning and meaning creation processes during in-depth interviewing. Interviewers' questioning and interviewees' answering to the questions are thus not merely the outcome of cognitive processes within one's own construct of social reality (Keesing and Strathern, 1998). The multicultural backgrounds of the interviewers may play a particular role in relation to how the interviewers and interviewees construct and perceive the meanings shared between them during the interview.

The role of culture at the interpersonal level also highlights the need for problematising multiculturalism as a key methodological issue in IB research. Research in the cross-over field of 'culture and business' has been preoccupied with cultural differences and distance (see Chapman, 1997, Kogut and Singh, 1988), and less on factors relating to the individual (Guttormsen, 2015, Luring and Guttormsen, 2010, McSweeney, 2002, Primecz *et al.*, 2011). Although interpretations and the existence of a Self and Other exist in qualitative interviewing, the methodological literature largely neglects the role of culture as integral to both the interviewer and the interviewee (see Johnson, 2002; Warren, 2002). When cross-cultural interviewing is discussed, it tends to focus on interpersonal aspects and on technical and translation issues (Chidlow *et al.*, 2014; Blenkinsopp and Pajouh, 2010), but not on the cultural aspects of the key players involved (see Ryen, 2002).

In addition to making sense of data by triangulation through participant observations and self-reflexive inquisition, the concept of *holistic* in-depth interviewing is used, in line with Moore's (2011) advancement of holistic ethnography, in order to draw upon interviewer-interviewee experiences beyond single, homogeneous types of respondents within the same organisations and cultural contexts. When conducting interpretivist qualitative research, the interviewer

inevitably becomes an intricate part of the research process – an ‘instrument’ of the analysis (Sanday, 1979). Consequently, as demonstrated in the two co-authors’ shared interview experiences, both the interplay between the researchers’ multiculturalism and how the interviewees perceive them in that role exercise a profound impact on the holistic process of securing and conducting the in-depth interviews. The pertinence of power imbalance relates to the fact that every cross-national interview is also an ‘intercultural encounter’ between the interviewer and the interviewee, and within a specific context.

This framework advances methodological inquiry in qualitative IB research towards incorporating the dialectical interplay of multiculturalism between the interviewer and the interviewee (Gubrium *et al.*, 2012; Kvale, 2007). In this setting, the innate existence of multiculturalism within both interviewers and interviewees cannot be isolated from the interview interaction. Thus, the role of multiculturalism and the contextuality of the interview and geographical and conceptual space (see Marschan-Piekkari *et al.*, 2004, Marschan-Piekkari and Reis, 2004) become unavoidable facets which need to be problematised. This paper focuses, in particular, on the interviewers.

### ***Social categorisation***

As interviewers, the two co-authors engage with ‘multidimensional perceptions’, reflect on the multiculturalism entwined with the role and multiculturalism of the researchers, and also on how the interviewees perceive the researchers and their multiculturalism. The ways in which these social processes transpire are mutually contingent on discursive cultural structures. The social processes of categorisation are multidimensional for both interviewers and interviewees. However, these processes are not identical because there are multiple social realities (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). A power relationship exists due to the different meanings attributed to the interviewer’s and the interviewee’s socio-biological background (Chapman *et al.*, 2004). For example, a ‘borrowed’ Caucasian ethnicity might give more power to an interviewer in a particular interview setting, as was the case with the second author. Due to being a native Norwegian speaker in addition to having a Norwegian surname, he was perceived as a Norwegian national. This association prevailed over his Asian physical features and made it possible for him to ‘borrow’ the Norwegian ethnicity. This can further contribute to an asymmetrical power relationship between the interviewer and interviewee during interviewing, in addition to the existing asymmetry created by a myriad of factors such as gender, age, stage of career, and the social setting of the interview. Through processes of social categorisation, people are labelled by others as belonging to different categories based on perceived characteristics (Jenkins, 1997; Maton, 2003). These categories are diffusing and interlinking social phenomena, such as skin colours, ethnicities, languages, and nationalities (Geertz, 1973). These characteristics can potentially influence the processes of securing and conducting interviews. Both the interviewer and interviewee are involved in learning processes during in-depth interviewing (Keesing and Strathern, 1998).

### ***Language***

Language skills determine research opportunities and what researchers are able to discover (Chapman *et al.*, 2004). Language is not merely a technical issue that can be easily addressed by

translations (Marschan-Piekkari and Welch, 2004). Instead, it is a fundamental factor shaping research processes in manners both subtle and obviously manifest – for example, to grasp “local nuances in the languages and cultures of their respondents” (Ryen, 2002:335). Language also has a strong and consistent connection to power (see San Antonio, 1987). Vaara *et al.* (2005) demonstrated how language skills become empowering or disempowering resources in organisational communication; how language skills are related to professional competence; and how these skills are associated with social network creation. Zhang and Peltokorpi (in press) further highlighted the multi-faceted and crucial role of language, in particular host country language, in terms of influencing the social categorisation between expatriates and local employees. Welch *et al.* (2005) also pointed out that language can be a powerful force, generating a sense of exclusion during key information processes and decision-making for those lacking the appropriate language skills, causing inevitable resentment. Language is further used as a means to express both ethnicity and to maintain a stratified social structure (Lauring and Guttormsen, 2010). Language is a central facet of a cultural analysis as it operates as a sub-system of culture and can neither be distinguished nor analysed detached from the cultural context and social conditions warranting the production and reception of the former (Keesing and Strathern, 1998).

The specific impact of language during interviews in a multicultural context depends on the forms of interviewing, such as survey-based interviews, in-depth interviews, life-story and focus group interviews (Marschan-Piekkari and Welch, 2004). Language also has a different impact depending on the various stages of the interviews, and can play an important role in creating rapport and trust between interviewer and interviewees, especially in the process of seeking to schedule interviews and gain access to individual informants. Researchers need to be aware that the wording of interview questions can have different connotations in different languages, especially in the case of conducting in-depth interviews in a foreign country when it is impossible to carry out the back-translating practice in advance of the potential follow-up questions (including probes and prompts) (Thomas, 2004). This perspective also raises the issue that words and concepts do not always have a corresponding meaning or content even in correctly translated (*grammatically*, not necessarily culturally) words in other languages. In this case, it is important to note how pilot interviewees react to the different wordings in various languages before conducting the actual interviews. Furthermore, whether the interview language is the interviewee’s mother tongue also affects how the interviewee answers the questions. Interviewees may provide slightly different answers depending on the language used to pose the questions (Wright, 1996, Wright *et al.*, 1988).

The issue of accent also becomes prominent when interviewers speak in non-native languages. The effect of accents has been researched in relation to a number of issues, for example customer service evaluation (e.g. Hill and Tombs, 2011) and job interview outcome (e.g. Purkiss *et al.*, 2006), but rarely has accent been analysed in the context of influencing interview processes. The non-standard, that is, non-majority accents tend to become unnoticed when interviews are transcribed, as it is not a standard practice to capture the mechanics of speech, such as depicting interviewers’ and interviewees’ accents, but rather to focus on the content of the interview (Olivier *et al.*, 2005). Accents were further considered to be unconventional and

not collectible (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes, 1997). However, accent can become an important indicator of ethnicity. Indigenous and colonial accents, as well as foreign accents can signify belonging to different social groups (Marx, 2002; Jenkins, 2005).

To summarise, the review above suggests that more research is needed to understand how social categorisation may occur and the role of language use in various types of interviewing settings. Collectively, the five field research projects conducted by the two co-authors of this paper provide further opportunities for advancing the methodological literature in IB by illuminating issues relating to the influence of multiculturalism on the power imbalance between interviewers and interviewees.

**Method: A Self-reflexive Analysis**

Self-reflexive interrogation serves as the methodological approach for the analysis of the interview experiences of the two co-authors of this paper across five cross-national field research projects (Table 1 below).

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In practical terms, the two co-authors wrote retrospective diaries about their interviewing experiences, and exchanged these diary entries and field notes from the various research projects with each other. The two co-authors then interrogated and reflected upon each other's experiences. This methodological approach presents one of the important contributions of this paper. Reflexive deliberation, devised as a method for IB research (and beyond), is advantageous as it enlightens any researcher about his or her own experiences in the field, enhances the researcher's position when critically assessing the research undertaken, and unveils the potential to make changes in the methodological approach and make scientific knowledge claims (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). The self-reflexive analysis draws upon sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's 'epistemic reflexivity'. This approach was operationalised as follows: in accordance with King (2000), the concepts used to analyse the expatriates during interviews in the field were directed towards the authors when analysing their experiences of interviewing the above-mentioned research subjects. Furthermore, within this approach, the researchers ought to scrutinise not only the relations between the researcher and the researched, in this case expatriates, but also the relationship between the researcher and purported knowledge claims and that between the researched and the knowledge claims (Maton, 2003). For example, when the two co-authors deliberated on their interview experiences, they critically analysed not only the existence and absence of multiculturalism when they interviewed expatriates, but also how their multiculturalism might influence the interview scheduling process, as well as the knowledge that they claimed to produce in their respective field research projects.

The extended self-reflexive interrogation, beyond merely reflecting on one's relationships with interviewees, is particularly beneficial in relation to the problematising and sense-making of the



role of multiculturalism: 'epistemic reflexivity' substantially aids in exploring the role and influence of interviewees with multicultural backgrounds. Subsequently, as demonstrated in this paper, important research experiences relating to securing and conducting interviews in interplay with the performativity of multiculturalism can be further scrutinised. Reflexivity, arguably, ought to be incorporated into any qualitative research endeavour, as it plays a crucial role in the ability to make knowledge claims (Johnson and Duberley, 2003, Leander, 2006). It serves as self-analysis for the researcher as a cultural producer through research conducted within socio-historical contextuality (Wacquant, 1990), and enables the exercise of more cultural sensitivity (Shapiro *et al.*, 2008).

In their respective projects, the two co-authors used a semi-structured interview format, where 'in-depth' relates to eliciting answers by also applying probes and prompts (Thomas, 2004). Collectively, the five projects entailed conducting interviews in six different languages with interviewees from ten countries. Each interviewer displays a specific and different multicultural background, which reflects the multi-faceted nature of intra-national diversity in terms of ethnicity and generational difference (Tung and Verbeke, 2010). The first author is a Finnish national, an ethnic Chinese who emigrated to Finland in her late adolescence as a first-generation immigrant, and speaks Mandarin, Cantonese, English, and Finnish fluently. She speaks Finnish with an accent, but one which native Finns cannot easily identify, unlike the familiar foreign accents from neighbouring countries, such as Russia or Estonia. The second author is a Norwegian national and was adopted from Indonesia when he was a baby. Thus, he is a native speaker of Norwegian. Native Norwegians tend to categorise him differently from other forms of migrants, such as first- or second-generation immigrants, refugees or asylum-seekers, or economic migrants, because they most probably would not have Norwegian sounding names, and would speak Norwegian with limited proficiency and non-native accents. He also has an excellent command of the other Scandinavian languages (Danish and Swedish) as well as being fluent in English.

Although the five field research projects were conducted with different themes, theoretical anchoring, and research questions, they are highly comparable for the purpose of the present paper. Combining the interview experiences of two multicultural interviewees thus creates considerable potential for further advancing understanding of the role of multiculturalism in IB methodology. In this endeavour, the two co-authors identified those social phenomena which collectively had an influence on the process of accessing and conducting the interviews, such as social categorisation and language, with regard to the overarching inquiry into power relations. The two co-authors also scrutinise how multiculturalism operates *dialectically* during in-depth interviewing. Dialecticality denotes that the perceptions and socially constructed multiculturalism of the interviewer, and of the interviewee, can neither be isolated nor detached from each other. Inversely, they rather remain diffused and mutually contingent on context-specific factors during the in-depth interview processes. This research perspective emerged when the authors realised that what constitutes 'normality' (multiculturalism) to them offered a fruitful perspective into problematising and making sense of 'power relations' during interviews.

**Findings: Strategies employed to establish and maintain interviewer-interviewee relationships challenged by multiculturalism**

As a result of the analysis, the two co-authors identified a number of strategies for the establishment and maintenance of successful interviewer-interviewee relationships in the context of multiculturalism. Table 2 below summarises the empirical evidence provided in this section, and Figure 2 depicts the strategies employed in order to achieve a successful relationship between the researcher and the respondent. The strategies emerged as a result of the data analysis and are grouped into two categories – social categorisation strategies and language strategies.

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***Social categorisation strategies***

Three strategies relating to social categorisation were identified. Firstly, the two co-authors activated the ‘favoured’ ethnicity and, secondly, they put the ‘desired’ passport forward. By doing so, they were categorised as part of the desired social groups, which proved to be more helpful for conducting a successful interview. A third strategy that the two co-authors adopted was to take a holistic approach and constantly assure the interviewees of their belonging to the ‘right’ social category. Each of these strategies is discussed below:

***Activating the ‘favoured’ ethnicity***

Both authors of this paper serve as relevant examples of how social categorisation in terms of multiculturalism plays a role in securing and conducting interviews, in addition to how interviewers and interviewees co-exist at the intersection between physicality and meaning construction. The second author has brown skin due to his Indonesian ethnicity, which is sometimes categorised lower in the ‘racial hierarchy’ in Hong Kong, as similarly brown-skinned immigrants from the Philippines are usually domestic workers. However, he felt that his Norwegian nationality engendered authority and respect when seeking interviews with local Hong Kong Chinese. This was because he could borrow some of the ‘esteemed currency’ of ‘whiteness’ (due to his aforesaid native Norwegian language skills as well as Norwegian surname and nationality), which in Hong Kong is often equated with wealth and knowledge supremacy. In this context, “whiteness”, that is, having white skin, was given specific meanings and significance. As such social categorisation provided him with elevated “prominence”, the advantage of this borrowed ‘whiteness’ often increased his chances of securing interviews with the local staff. It was necessary for the more tacit characteristics reflecting his Norwegian identity, such as his Norwegian family name and nationality, to be articulated explicitly in introductory emails when inviting people to partake in the study. In addition, references from

Scandinavian expatriate managers also made it difficult for an expatriate's local colleagues to turn down the interview request.

For the same reason, he felt the need to employ a similar approach with other Scandinavians. This approach was partly a result of him looking very much like the locals. It became necessary to 'justify' his national and cultural background, as his interviewees could easily and understandably perceive him as being neither Norwegian nor Scandinavian. In effect, the aspect of 'ethnicity' needed to be explained explicitly as there was no relation between the researcher's skin colour, ethnicity and cultural background. He did not grow up in the Indonesian culture, but was often assumed to have done so. This is by no means implying that Scandinavians would reject participating in research carried out by a non-Scandinavian researcher, but the sentiment was that more interviews were secured because he was perceived to be an insider.

Interviewee: So...you are from Norway. I can see there is something else there...

Interviewer: Yes, I was adopted from Indonesia when I was a baby.

Interviewee: \*somewhat more relaxed\* Ah! So you are Norwegian...you should contact people in the different Scandinavian societies – there are plenty of them!

[Hong Kong Project, Interviewee 013. This interview was conducted in Norwegian<sup>1</sup>.]

In essence, it created more balance in the power relations from the evident collective spirit of helping out a fellow countryman, and in one way resulted in accumulated capital that could be strategically used in this regard. His experience was similar in the South Korean field research project, but he found it diminished as an influential factor when carrying out his field project in the US, a country made up of immigrants where ethnicity and other social and biological traits are secondary to prevailing characteristics such as 'political values' and 'individuality' (Lipset, 1996, Huntington, 1997; De Tocqueville, 1840). However, in the US, the Norwegian nationality still assisted the second author in securing interviews as local interviewees seldom receive requests from a researcher travelling from such a remote and small country.

Social categorisation also occurred for the first author during the interview process with local Chinese. Surprisingly, when she approached Chinese employees working in Nordic MNCs, who frequently interacted with Nordic expatriates, the majority of Chinese interviewees refused to let her initiate any contact with their expatriate colleagues.

Interviewer: Can I interview him (the interviewee's expatriate colleague)?

Interviewee: No, no, no, no.

[Finland and China Project, Interviewee 02, Interview conducted in Chinese<sup>2</sup>.]

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<sup>1</sup> The original interview transcript in Norwegian:

Interviewee: Så...du er fra Norge. Jeg kan se at det er noe anderledes der...

Interviewer: Ja, jeg ble adoptert fra Indonesia da jeg var tre måneder gammel.

Interviewee: Ah! Så du er jo norsk da...du burde kontakte andre i de ulike skandinaviske organisasjonene – det er mange av dem!

<sup>2</sup> The original interview transcript in Chinese:

Interviewer: wo ke yi cai fang ta (shou fang zhe de wai pai tong shi) ma?

Interviewer: So this expatriate you mentioned, can I interview him?

Interviewee: \*shaking her head\* No point.

[Finland and China Project, Interviewee 05. This interview was conducted in Chinese<sup>3</sup>.]

Both interviewees knew that the first author had been away from China for a long time and was only in China temporarily for the research project, which was supported by research foundations in Finland and was introduced to interviewees as primarily a research project concerning expatriates. The purpose of interviewing local employees was communicated to them as providing a different perspective about expatriates' work life in China. Therefore, the first author was considered by the host country interviewees to 'work' primarily for the interests of expatriates. One reason why the first author was constantly refused might well have been that local employees did not want the interviewer to talk to their expatriate colleagues or supervisors in general. However, this also occurred with those host country interviewees who held high positions in the MNCs and were supervisors to expatriates. Therefore, another explanation was that the first author was socially categorised as an external 'Westernised' outsider working for a foreign institute, as opposed to a fellow countrywoman, even though sharing the same characteristics ethnically and linguistically. Thus, in this particular context, her role as an 'outsider', that is, not from inside the company, and the attributed meaning of 'whiteness' (being grouped into the 'white' expatriate group), were more dominant than the more salient characteristics of the shared skin colour and native language proficiency and accent. This demonstrates that social categorisation cannot always be placed on a continuum; the perceptions being played out and held by the interviewees do not correlate to which socio-biological traits are more salient than others and are thus context-dependent.

The activation of the 'right' ethnicity is also subject to context and relationality. For example, having the same dark skin colour as the locals could result in the authors being treated as both 'insiders' and 'outsiders' in different field research projects, depending on the context. It is also a result of how the other social and biological characteristics played out in that given context. In the US project, the second author found that multiculturalism as a whole played a less significant role during the interview process, as could be expected when operating in a country characterised by a high degree of diversity. Cultural reference points became more of an issue. For example, the second co-author experienced a decreased ability to use relevant metaphors and to make small talk to establish rapport, and to some extent also a decreased ability to pick up on cultural reference points.

#### *Putting the 'desired' passport forward*

Another strategy that the authors employed in order to be grouped into the same social category as the respondents, was to make their less salient nationality known. The Nordic nationality has helped both authors gain access to expatriate interviewees through social clubs

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Interviewee: bu bu bu bu.

<sup>3</sup> The original interview transcript in Chinese:

Interviewer: nin ti dao de zhe wei wai pai, wo ke yi cai fang yi xia ta ma?

Interviewee: mei yong.

that are normally not open to people of other nationalities. Both authors approached Nordic expatriates via a Nordic country's governmental and commercial organisations, registering, for example, with the embassy and attending the Norwegian Constitution Day or the Finnish Independence Day. They also initiated and legitimised their memberships in the Nordic expatriate community. Their nationalities would have otherwise been overshadowed by the fact that they either do not sound like and/or look like a Nordic. This shows the importance of context and conceptual space: the particular cultural context might be weakened or even lost if located in a Nordic country where most are white. Hence, the meanings attributed to skin colour and ethnicity might become particularly salient and trump the 'borrowed whiteness', that is, not the actual skin colour, but the meanings inferred to it.

The nationality background also played a role when the authors attempted to understand the wider context of the expatriates' answers within their natural contexts of the interview. If the interviewees had not been aware of the researchers' nationalities, they might have altered their communication style and controlled the types of information they shared. Many expatriates reportedly do so when communicating with local Chinese staff; for example, exhibiting less straight-forward thinking, moderating their genuine opinions about their local colleagues, and avoiding 'typical' egalitarian attitudes.

#### *Constant reassuring of belonging to the 'right' social category*

The third strategy both co-authors found necessary to employ was to constantly reassure the respondents that the researchers belonged to the same social category and would therefore understand the interviewees better. When the first author interviewed the Chinese colleagues of expatriates in both of her projects, she was constantly evaluated by the interviewees with regard to her ethnic and cultural background. Interviewees would pose questions about her life experience in the middle of their accounts of their Finnish expatriate colleagues:

Interviewee: \*in English\* ... How much do you remember about China? ...

\*switched to Chinese<sup>4</sup>\* ... You are Chinese, so you would understand it if I say this...

[Finland and Mainland China Project, Interviewee 08. This interview was conducted mainly in English with occasional conversations in Chinese]

The interviewees were trying to decide whether the first author could be treated as one of 'their own nationals'. They tried to bond with her and sought her sympathy with their viewpoints when expressing discontent and exclusion by the Western expatriates – a common social categorisation process where similarities are accentuated by creating a more distant 'enemy' Other (here, Westerners) (Hansen, 2006):

Interviewee: \*in Chinese<sup>5</sup>\* Some expatriates like sticking to their own ideas. Maybe they are a bit conservative...oh... I don't know; how long have you lived in Finland?

[Mainland China Project, Interviewee 12. This interview was conducted in Chinese.]

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<sup>4</sup> The original transcript in Chinese:

... ni shi zhong guo ren, suo yi ni hui dong wo shuo de...

<sup>5</sup> The original transcript in Chinese:

Such reassurance is constantly needed partially because there are non-cultural factors, such as the interviewees' position in the firm and their educational background, in addition to their perceptions of the researchers. In the Mainland China project, the first author had rather different experiences of interviewing local employees in the two companies because these MNEs were at different stages of business development. Furthermore, one of the case companies operating in China was experiencing a rather turbulent environment. The company was not performing well and there was uncertainty in the air. The top management decided to control the information flow and opted to avoid sharing too much information with their subsidiary employees. When the research group interviewed the local staff in China, some Chinese interviewees were very open, especially to the Chinese researchers in the project team<sup>6</sup>. They took the opportunity to express their discontent by seeking additional information since they knew the research group was also interviewing the top management at the headquarters in Finland. Some of the other Chinese interviewees, especially those with shorter tenure, felt rather threatened by the researchers' questions in relation to what was happening regarding their on-going projects with Chinese partners. In this context, the first author was elevated to a much higher position (hence, attributed more power in the interviewer-interviewee relationship) in the organisational hierarchy – despite not formally being part of it.

### ***Language strategies***

Relating to the specific languages adopted during the interviews, the authors found it helpful to bond with interviewees by speaking their mother tongue, as well as to adopt a multilingual approach and switch between languages whenever needed.

### ***Bonding in the interviewee's mother tongue***

Alongside the aforementioned experiences during in-depth interviewing, the authors encountered the influence of languages in their research throughout the different stages of the interview process. When the first author scheduled her interviews, she made an extra effort in conducting all the correspondence in Finnish. The first author also attended expatriates' own gatherings and initiated small talk with expatriates in Finnish. Her willingness to converse in the expatriates' mother tongue assisted her in building trust with the interviewees, even though both her written and spoken Finnish has a 'foreign flavour' and interviewees could also easily tell that she is not native Finnish by her name.

In the case of the second author, speaking native Norwegian provided him with easier access to his respondents. Norwegian is similar to the other Scandinavian languages, so he could communicate with Swedes and Danes in their mother tongues. He had little difficulty scheduling interviews despite the fact that the majority of his interviewees were organisational expatriates in senior positions with hectic schedules. He gained his interviewees' trust despite the unbalanced power relationship between a junior researcher and senior corporate elites.

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You xie lao wai hen si ban. Shen zhi bao shou...o...bu zhi dao nin zai fen lan dai le duo jiu?

<sup>6</sup> Apart from the first author, there is one other Chinese researcher who has worked for this project team.

The 'Scandinavian-ness' reflected in his Norwegian name also aided him in building an advantageous rapport with his interviewees.

The second author consistently used Norwegian with Norwegian expatriates, as a means to 'counter' his Indonesian skin colour and ethnicity. When interviewing Swedish and Danish expatriates, he subtly encouraged interviewees to respond in their own languages. He wanted to capture the nuances reflected in interviewees' talking in their own mother tongues, as his ethnographic project in Hong Kong was very much premised on individuals' own construction of 'social reality' regarding their lived experiences. Emotions and perceptions are best captured in one's mother tongue, especially with respect to the use of metaphors. For example, the Norwegian word 'festning' ('fort' or 'fortress' in English) might not have been mentioned at all if interviewees had answered in English in the second author's Hong Kong field research project. The usage of this strong metaphor signified evident boundaries between 'us' as expatriates and 'them', in other words, the 'unknown' local Hong Kong Chinese. The level of command of English also varied across interviewees. Thus, for the sake of the research, the second author had to tactfully encourage those wanting to be interviewed in English to do the opposite and be interviewed in their native language. He employed a pre-emptive approach and stated this very explicitly when requesting the interview. He also informed his interviewees about this preference, and the reason behind it, prior to the interview. On some occasions, the second author nevertheless had to subtly push for the native language to be used. However, he felt that caution had to be exercised in such cases, in order to avoid offending people who took pride in communicating in English.

Interviewee: \*Swedish middle manager asked in English\* "Not sure if you want to do this in English or Swedish – probably best to do it in English as we are here in Hong Kong..."

Interviewer: \*replied in Swedish, somewhat pretending he had not quite "heard" the above query\*  
Sure, we can speak in Swedish, no worries.

\*The interview ensued in Swedish<sup>7</sup>\*

[Hong Kong Project, Interviewee 027. This interview was conducted in Swedish with occasional conversations in English.]

The above conversation also exemplifies the fact that the power imbalance does not always solely relate to culture, and the balance can also be a result of tactical concerns and social etiquette; for instance, most respondents would not feel comfortable insisting a second time on being interviewed in English.

#### *A multilingual approach characterised by frequent code-switching*

During the interview process, both researchers adopted a multilingual approach (Marschan-Piekkari and Welch, 2004) and adjusted their use of language according to the situation. In the Mainland China project, the first author used English as the main interview language, supplemented by Finnish with expatriates. Although she began talking with expatriates in

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<sup>7</sup> The original transcript in Swedish:  
Jodå, vi kan jo också tala svenska, inget problem.

Finnish, most of her expatriate interviewees asked her in different ways – either hinted or directly – whether she would like to conduct the interview in English. The reasons behind this could be that Finnish interviewees have a common understanding that IB research is rarely conducted in Finnish. All these interviewees have international experience and believe there is little use for their mother tongue outside Finland. It could also be that Finnish interviewees sensed her foreign accent and wanted to alleviate potential linguistic challenges for her, since they were all very accustomed to communicating in English.

When interviewing host country nationals, the first author predominantly used Chinese in the Mainland China and Finland projects. However, she employed a different strategy and used English with some of the Chinese interviewees in the Mainland China project due to the particular circumstances of the research context. One case company's management was very confident and proud of the competence centre members' English skills. All of the members were in their late 40s, and it is quite uncommon in China for their generation to speak fluent English. When she conducted interviews with the competence centre members, she could tell that some members were indeed very fluent in English during daily office situations and had rich international experience as a result of working in the MNEs' subsidiaries in Europe. Other members clearly spoke much better English than the average Chinese manager. However, their English proficiency was inadequate for them to express themselves, and they struggled in the interview. In such cases, in order not to embarrass the interviewees and to let them demonstrate that they could communicate in English, she conducted the interviews in English, but used simple English and talked slowly. She also announced ahead of schedule to the interviewees that she had finished all her questions and suggested free discussion in Chinese. She acquired valuable information in the lengthy free discussion carried out in the interviewees' mother tongue without harming the interviewing atmosphere. It would have been awkward and face-threatening for the interviewees if she had not given them the opportunity to be interviewed in English in this particular situation.

In the Hong Kong field research project, the second author felt that he gained power when conducting interviews in English with host country employees because speaking in the shared foreign language levelled out the formal, hierarchical power difference between a young Western scholar and a senior Asian manager. He interviewed Hongkongese managers in English. Given Hong Kong's colonial history, Hongkongese in general take pride in being able to speak English. The second author speaks English with a European/British accent, which further strengthened the 'borrowed whiteness' – as opposed to having a non-Western accent. Several Hongkongese interviewees expressed great appreciation for having been invited to partake in the study when the second author thanked them:

Interviewee: Oh... no need to thank me, it is an honour for me to be interviewed by you.  
[Hong Kong Project, Interviewee 045. This interview was conducted in English.]

The multilingual approach that the researchers adopted also allowed them to balance the various power relationships between them and their interviewees. When the first author interviewed Finnish expatriates about their work life in China, the shared non-native English



interview language assisted her in balancing the power relationship with informants: a junior, female Asian scholar speaking non-native Finnish is rather powerless compared to a senior native Finnish expatriate. Her proficient English helped her to gain power during the interviews when Finnish expatriates struggled to find the right English expressions from time to time. In contrast, during the first author's interviews with host country employees in the Mainland China project, she struggled to balance the power relationship with Chinese interviewees because they shared a common mother tongue. In this case, the interviewees gained much more power over her by posing aggressive information-seeking questions in their shared mother tongue. She went to the company's subsidiary in China twice during the following two years, when the company's situation was deteriorating. It was challenging for her to switch back to English, as her interviewees could tell from her Chinese accent and name that she was born and raised in China. She was considered to be one of them, not one of the 'vicious Finns' who 'deliberately made them suffer from a lack of information'. The fact that she is a native speaker of the Chinese language was interpreted by the interviewees that she was there to help them improve their company situation by acting as a bridge between the headquarters in Finland and the subsidiary in China and by sharing more information with them. The first author therefore conducted interviews in English in some situations, in order to maintain some distance between her and host country employees, and not to strengthen the assumed role that she was there to help the subsidiary instead of conducting independent research (see Fan, Köhler and Harzing 2012).

## **Discussion and conclusion**

### ***Summary of the findings and implications for IB research***

This paper has focused on the research method of in-depth interviewing from the perspective of the multicultural interviewer. Multiculturality is here deconstructed as social categorisation and language, both of which can influence the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee. This, in turn, has a significant impact on the interviewer's ability to secure and conduct in-depth interviews. The authors compared their field research experiences regarding interviewing expatriates and host country nationals across five field research projects in Mainland China, Hong Kong SAR, South Korea, Finland and the US through an exploratory, self-reflexive analysis. The specific multicultural perspective makes the authors' experiential accounts interesting in their own right (Thomas, 2004). Reflexivity in IB research has predominantly been limited to interrogating the social background of qualitative field-researchers (see Jenkins 2002). This paper has employed a Bourdieusian-inspired 'epistemic reflexive' approach to analyse the authors' field research experiences. As this paper demonstrates, 'epistemic reflexivity' provides new insights on the securing and conducting of in-depth interviews in IB research by taking into account specific multicultural backgrounds in a particular conceptual and geographical context.

The authors of this paper are not suggesting that their experiences are unique or superior; rather, this paper seeks to present relevant experiential accounts of actual international field research with interviewing as the principal data collection method. Thus, alternative

interpretations and explanations might be equally credible, and fellow researchers are likely to interpret or experience similar scenarios differently because of their different compositions of multiculturalism. Furthermore, the same person, in different contexts, during different field research projects, may experience very different effects from their embodied multiculturalism. Belonging to the same social category provides access to understanding nuances, and researchers benefit from grasping cultural reference points – where other researchers (from other cultures/countries) tend not to be privy to such ‘inside information’. This paper also emphasises that the issue of multiculturalism is becoming more relevant in a wider area beyond expatriate research within the IB field and Management disciplines. With the great increase in numbers of research students completing their PhD in other countries, the ‘stage’ of international research is becoming increasingly diverse and mobile. An increasing number of researchers, especially in the field of international business and international management, are also becoming ‘multicultural’, with greater academic mobility (Richardson and Mallon, 2005; Richardson and McKenna, 2003).

This paper suggests important implications for interview practices that involve multicultural researchers. First, researchers need to make their self-reflexive deliberations explicit and visible in their research outputs, such as journal articles, book chapters, and consultancy reports. The decision-making of every element of the research design and analysis must be evaluated against possible influences stemming from the researcher’s own multicultural background. An account of this interrogation should be presented in relevant sections, particularly the sections on theoretical framework, methodology, and analysis. For example, it is relevant and important for readers to know how researchers working on multiculturalism have been influenced by their own cultural backgrounds in their research (Zhang, 2015).

Second, the self-interrogation that this paper calls upon can be further enhanced by including a colleague as a ‘reflexive interrogator’. The role of the ‘reflexive interrogator’ is to question the researcher. The aim is to force the researcher to re-evaluate theoretical, methodological, and philosophical decisions, and to examine whether the researcher’s personal biases, cultural background or unconsciously made assumptions might have influenced these decisions. A key question to pose relates to the potential impact on the knowledge claims which the researcher proposes (see Maton 2003). This process should commence at the very beginning when designing the project and should be followed up consistently during data analysis and theorisation.

Third, how researchers interpret information relayed by interviewees is not only a question of how interview transcripts have been coded, but also how the interviews have been conducted and how the researchers’ own backgrounds have influenced the research design. The quintessential question in ‘epistemic reflexivity’ relates to *also* scrutinising whether multiculturalism impacts upon the knowledge claims made by the researcher. Achieving this would position IB researchers at the forefront of reflexive and methodological research, both in Business and Management as well as in the wider Social Sciences. Such an achievement relates to moving beyond what Bourdieu refers to as the ‘sociological gaze’, where knowledge claims are only based on researchers’ own interpretive lenses without scrutinising the intellectual

foundation of such claims (Jenkins 2002:68; Maton 2003; Wacquant 1989). This approach holds the potential to meet in a more rigorous manner the call for more credible and trustworthy research that has been put forward by Sinkovics *et al.* (2008).

Fourth, the exposure of the important role of multiculturalism also provides significant implications beyond the methodological for IB research. Effective performance in global multicultural teams needs to take into account that group members are not necessarily monocultural. A group member might behave, communicate, and strategise in particular ways due to the varying emphasis of the different aspects of the cultures he or she embodies. Such multiculturalism needs to be treated with caution and sensitivity. Misunderstandings which may impede work performance can be prevented when the multicultural profiles of team members are well understood. Furthermore, multiculturalism may not necessarily be an obstacle but a rich source to capitalise on. For example, if part of an expatriate's multicultural background is shared with host-country nationals, the expatriate is more likely to be considered as 'in-group' and receive more support from local staff within the organisation (see Olsen and Martins 2009; Fan, Köhler and Harzing 2012). Multicultural expatriates are particularly suitable for roles such as cultural carriers in MNEs, transferring norms and values across national and cultural boundaries within the organisation's various subunits (see Harzing 2002). These expatriates are plausibly inherently used to 'translating' between cultures, and they tend to have a deep understanding of how the activation of various identities might relate to the social categorisation imposed by others (see Oakes 1987).

### **Contributions**

This paper proposes three key contributions to the IB methodology literature. First, the two co-authors' experiential accounts reveal the importance of comprehending the background of interviewees during interviews, in their conceptual and geographical contexts, and how these aspects have implications for the process of and ability to secure and conduct in-depth interviews. The authors' proposition to analyse the interviewing process from a dynamic and dialectical perspective is not fixed. Instead it is dependent on the research contexts and the different elements of both parties' multiculturalism. Multiculturalism is both the process and the result of the co-construction between interviewees and interviewees when various boundary-markers of multiculturalism are played out differently within a specific context. The authors identify multiculturalism as a particularly fruitful area for further inquiry due to the limited focus on ethnic diversity in IB research (Freeman and Lindsay, 2012). Extending the above, this paper demonstrates that 'borrowed identities' within multicultural teams deserve further research. More research effort is required as the mainstream understanding of individuals working in multicultural teams has typically been to assume that they ascribe to a certain 'national culture'. Individuals may activate different identities depending on the specific cultural configuration of the team in different settings, regardless of the 'visibility' of their multiculturalism. Identities related to team members' previous expatriation destination(s), past work and life experiences all contribute to their 'borrowed identities'. In particular, multicultural expatriates have been identified as relevant cultural carriers in MNEs. More research is needed to investigate whether a more sensitive approach towards multiculturalism would lead to more effective cultural navigation within multicultural teams.

Second, the authors have contributed to the understanding of the role of 'powerful versus powerless' relationships between interviewers and interviewees by proposing that researchers could improve interview qualities by carefully addressing the power imbalance. The paper illustrates how the specific aspect of multiculturalism relates to the dynamic meaning construction of skin colour and ethnicity, and their influence on the power imbalance between researchers and interviewees. This discovery serves as the basis for a symbolic boundary switch, in which fixed, inherent, physical traits take on different performativity. This switching mechanism relates to, for example, how an ethnic trait such as 'skin colour' can make it easier (or more difficult) to secure and conduct interviews. Furthermore, the switching also shows how such a trait is socially categorised, hence creating opportunities and disadvantages in this regard (beyond the control of the interviewer). Being reflexively and consciously aware of this also enables the interviewer to strategise and use this to his or her advantage.

Third, this paper has taken the approach of self-reflexive analysis beyond critical reflection and brought it towards 'epistemic reflexivity' by drawing upon sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. The relayed in-depth interview experiences provide an opportunity for fellow researchers to learn from the two co-authors' interview projects (as they themselves do from other colleagues) in addition to reflecting upon their own experiences. This may provide a better understanding of personal experiences when reflected through Others. By acknowledging the influence of an interviewer's multiculturalism during the process of securing and conducting interviews, the two co-authors emphasise the role of subjectivity, and that the researcher is indeed an 'instrument of analysis' (Sanday, 1979).

### ***Limitations, future research and recommendations***

The analysis offered in this paper is limited to the field research experiences (and the interpretations) of two particular researchers. The findings of this paper should be interpreted in a contextualised manner taking the features of the specific field research projects into consideration. The performativity of multiculturalism could be investigated in different contexts, and the salience of as well as relationality between the conceptual boundary markers of interviewers' multiculturalism should be further problematised and theorised (see Luring, 2007). More scholarly understanding on multiculturalism is also warranted from the interviewee perspective. Furthermore, IB research tends to study ethnicity only as a fixed trait and concerns itself primarily with its effect on firm behaviour (see Jiang *et al.*, 2011). Future research could also explore multiculturalism in terms of ethnicity among interviewees as Tung (2008) and Tung and Haq (2012) have demonstrated that the interplay of race and gender can play a salient role in expatriate management.

To engage in self-reflexive deliberations is of utmost necessity during the planning and conducting of research in terms of fulfilling the appropriate goals of transparency, trustworthiness and credibility of research endeavours (Sinkovics *et al.*, 2008). Researchers are recommended to become more aware of their own multiculturalism before approaching their research subjects. Before conducting the actual rounds of interviews, it is worthwhile reflecting

upon both interviewers' and interviewees' social, cultural, ethnic and professional backgrounds during the pilot interviews. The importance of such reflections could be compared to that of impression management during the entry phase of interviews. By reflecting on multiculturalism, interviewers would be better aware of the potential power dynamics during interviews and be able to handle face-threatening situations appropriately; thus, they are likely to collect richer data, as interview data is gained by the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee (Klein and Mayers, 1999).

Researchers are also advised to be aware of the need to conduct interviews in different languages and be more mindful when selecting the specific interview language. Researchers are further alerted to the need to be aware and critical of their own accents in speaking different languages, and of the possible social categorisation consequences caused by speaking non-native languages with accents. It is also recommended that researchers pay greater attention to the subtle power relationships implied by different language choices and understand the role of language as an integral facet of culture. In sum, this paper suggests that researchers and managers in MNEs alike should devise strategies to accommodate multicultural and multilingual issues during research and business projects in culturally diverse contexts.

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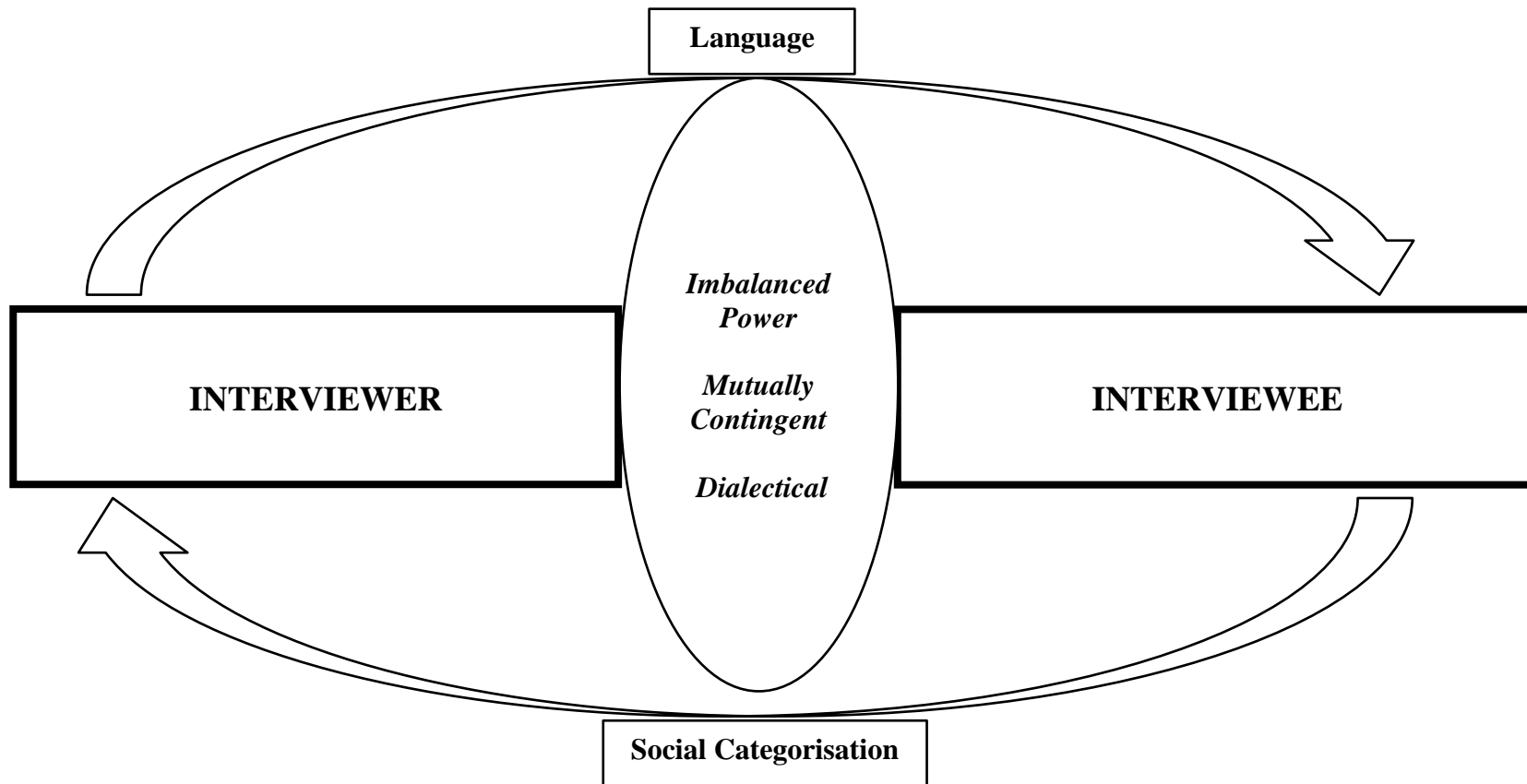
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Figure 1: Multiculturalism as a methodological thinking tool



**Table 1 – Interviewer and interviewee multiculturality and demographics of the five field research projects**

Study	Year	Interviewer	Interviewees	Interviewees' Organisations	Language
Hong Kong Project: Scandinavian expatriates in Hong Kong, SAR China	2008-2010	Indonesian ethnicity and skin colour, Norwegian nationality and Norwegian native speaker	48 Expatriates  (47 Organizational Expatriates [OEs] and 1 Self-initiated Expatriate [SE]; 8 Danish, 12 Norwegian, 26 Swedish, 1 Norwegian Finnish and 1 Norwegian Japanese);  10 Host Country Nationals (HCN)	26 Scandinavian MNEs, 12 non-corporate organisations (including international school, universities, NGOs, embassies)	Norwegian (with Swedish/Danish words), English with locals and two conducted in Scandinavian
South Korea Project: Norwegian expatriates in South Korea	2012-2013	Same as above	5 Expatriates  (All OEs and Norwegian)	5 Norwegian MNEs	Norwegian
US Project: European and Asian academic expatriates working in non-governmental think tank	2011	Same as above	6 Expatriates  (All OEs; 1 British-French, 1 Dutch-American (US), 1 Norwegian, 1 Canadian-Chinese, 1 New Zealander and 1 Canadian)	5 non-governmental, not-for-profit public policy institutions (think tanks)	English (except one interview conducted in Norwegian with the Norwegian interviewee)
Finland and Mainland China Project: Finnish and Swedish expatriates and their Chinese colleagues	2012-2013	Chinese ethnicity and skin colour, Finnish nationality and native Chinese speaker	30 Expatriates  (13 OEs, 17 SEs; 22 Finnish, 2 Swedish, 6 Finnish Chinese);  14 HCNs (1 US American-Chinese)	12 Nordic MNEs, 4 non-corporate organisations (including Taiwanese small and medium sized enterprise, Chinese International School, Chinese University and NGO)	English with Nordic expatriates (Finnish for small talk);  Chinese with local employees (with English words)



Mainland China Project: Expatriates and their Chinese colleagues working in Finnish MNCs' subsidiaries in China	2006- 2007	Same as above	11 Expatriates (All OEs, 8 Finnish, 1 Swedish, 2 US Americans),  17 HCNs	2 Nordic MNEs	English with expatriates.  Chinese with Chinese interviewees (with English words).
TOTAL			141 interviewees: 100 Expatriates (82 OEs, 18 SEs) 41HCN		

**Table 2 Strategies distilled from the interviews**

<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Sub-strategy</b>	<b>Illustrative Examples /Description of Interview Encountering</b>
Social Categorisation Strategy	Activating the ‘favoured’ ethnicity	Being an ethnic Chinese, the first author emphasised her ethnic origins on occasions when they were appreciated more. The second author highlighted his Norwegian nationality in order to “downplay” his ethnicity (brown-skin) in two different ways: to make it easier to find him when interviewees might be looking for a ‘white’ interviewer; and to borrow an esteemed position (through nationality) with local interviewees.
	Putting the ‘desired’ passport forward	When approaching Nordic interviewees, the first author communicated with the Nordic community as a ‘Nordic Researcher’. The second author benefited from his Norwegian nationality to access social events for Norwegians/Scandinavians.
	Constant reassuring on belonging to the ‘right’ social category	The first author repeatedly evaluated the interviewing environment before and during the interaction with interviewees. Once she sensed the tension caused by the possibility that she was categorised into the ‘opposite’ group, she tried to conduct small talk in order for her to be re-accepted into the same group for a richer interview. The second author was able to gain trust and thus more in-depth information from interviewees due to being categorised as an “insider” due to a sense of shared belonging.
Language Strategy	Bonding in the interviewee’s mother tongue	The first author conducted small talk with Finnish interviewees in Finnish, and with Chinese interviewees in Chinese, on occasions when the main interviews needed to be conducted in English for specific reasons. The second author used Norwegian with Norwegian expatriates, as a means to ‘counter’ his Indonesian skin colour/ethnicity, and benefited from this approach in terms of understanding cultural reference points which aided him in the analysis process.
	A multilingual approach characterised by	The first author interviewed expatriates and host country employees, whose language proficiencies (English, Chinese, and Finnish) varied widely. She tried to follow the flow of

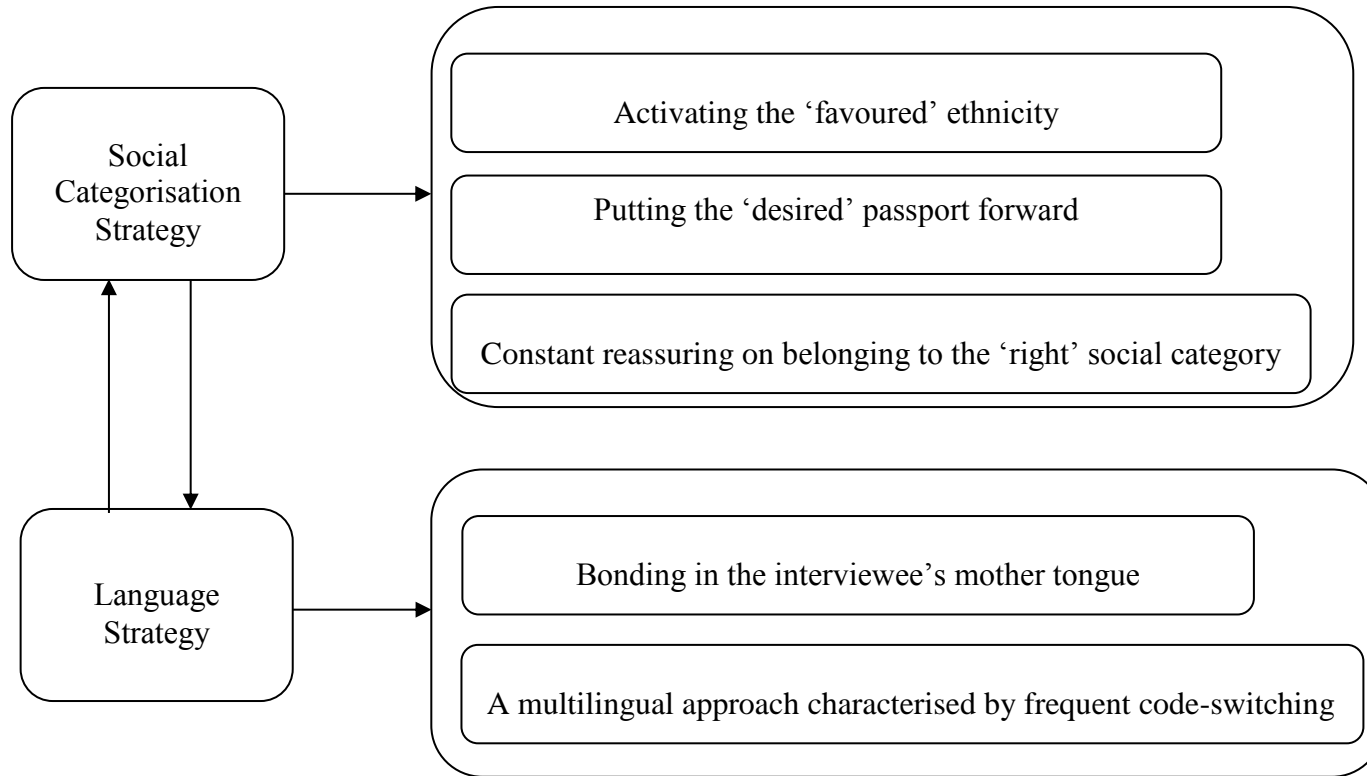
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frequent code-switching the interviews and constantly switched languages. For example, when interviewing a Finnish expatriate who was proud of being able to speak Chinese, she conducted a small part of the interview with him in Chinese.

The second author felt that he was gaining power when conducting interviews in English with host country employees, because speaking in the shared foreign language levelled out the formal, hierarchical power difference between a young Western scholar and a senior Asian manager.

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**Figure 2: Summary of strategies employed**



### **Appendix A: Excerpts of diary entries of the first author**

*On an early spring morning in Beijing, I was cheerfully preparing for a scheduled interview with one Finnish expatriate. Being aware of the spontaneous tendency in China, I packed a few more interview guides for both expatriates and their host country employees, just in case I could score a few more interviews. I was actually hoping so, as this expatriate was the office head. The interview with this expatriate went well, although it took quite some time before we established what the main interviewing language was. During the e-mail communications with this expatriate earlier on, I first tried to email him in Finnish, knowing that he is ethnically Finnish despite the fact that he has spent a lot of time in China. I also heard from other Finnish expatriates during social events that some find him more Chinese than Finnish. He has been responding to my emails in English, and very fast, almost immediately, and such a tendency doesn't strike me as a typical Finn writing, or perhaps it was adjusted behaviour given the fast speed context in China. It was a mixed feeling that I got during the limited email communication. It was awkward in the first few minutes after we introduced ourselves to each other. I tried with Finnish. He responded partially in Finnish and partially in English. After some time, he surprised me by suggesting in Chinese "Wo men shuo zhong wen ba (Let's speak Chinese)". We then switched into Chinese for the rest of the interview. However, it was unavoidable for me to mix in English terms as I have been studying in English only after high school.*

*The interview with this expatriate went well in the end, although he was unexpectedly brief in providing answers in Chinese. Towards the end of the interview, I asked boldly whether it would be possible to interview some of his Chinese subordinates. I explained at length why I needed to do so for my research. He answered "Hao de (Okay)" without even hearing me to the end. I was quite surprised by this. He asked me to wait and left the room. I wasn't sure whether he meant that he would get one Chinese interviewee come to the room exactly right then. A few minutes later, he came back with a Chinese subordinate, whose face I found familiar. I had probably seen her at one of the Independence Day Receptions organised by the embassy. I was pleasantly surprised by this efficiency. I introduced my research to her and why I would like to interview her, to give another perspective to expatriate adjustment. She seemed relaxed. However, after about ten minutes, she said "Excuse me" and then she left the room. A few minutes later, the Finnish expatriate came back apologetically. He told me that she didn't want to be interviewed. Then he managed to get another Chinese subordinate to enter the 'interviewing' room. She didn't look very happy as she sat down. When I told her that the interview might take an hour, she immediately said that "No, that won't work with me. I have a meeting soon." It was close to lunch time then. So she also left. In the end, this Finnish expatriate managed to let me interview a third subordinate on the phone.*

### **Appendix B: Excerpts of diary entries of the second author**

*In my interviews, I tried to humbly and subtly have people respond in their own languages, because my studies are very meaning-construction based, and nuances might disappear if discussing in English. Many Scandinavians are not as good at English as they think they are; hence, in order to understand their social construction, speaking in their native languages*

*was very desirable for me. This played a major role in analysis, especially in relation to the use of metaphors and their analysis. For example, the use of 'fort' (or fortress in English) might not have been used if they answered in English; hence, I would have missed out on the opportunity to make an argument that the usage of this strong word signified some the evident boundaries between "us" as expats and "them" as local Hong Kong Chinese. Speaking of metaphors and images, it is good to understand the nuances when doing mere interviews because – on a more humoristic note – most of the metaphors which cannot be easily translated into other Scandinavian languages tend to have a sexual connotation. This is good to understand so you don't misunderstand your interviewee!*