MULTICULTURAL EMPLOYEES' PERCEPTIONS OF DIVERSITY IN SOUTH AFRICA

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Purpose: This research explored the in-depth meaning of how multicultural employees perceive diversity in South African formal sector firms. In doing so, it extracted the lived experiences of multicultural employees about the cultural differences perceived within the country. South Africa is characterised by cultural and linguistic heterogeneity and a relatively large formal sector economy by African standards. **Methodology:** For this cross-sectional study, data were gathered through a homogeneous purposive sampling of nine participants and conducting semi-structured interviews. This small sample size allows for a thorough investigation into each participant's lived experience to gather qualitative data. The specific phenomenological method used in this study is a novel interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), which seeks to extract data and discern meaning in the participants' narratives. **Results:** The findings were interpreted through the lens of social identity theory within an interpretative philosophical paradigm. These interpretations were leveraged to extract a central narrative that is grouped thematically. The main finding was identifying several factors that contribute to the spanning of cultural boundaries in South African formal sector firms. **Practical Implications:** The study identified how participants make meaning of their experiences within the formal sector of South Africa and how their interpretations shape their behaviour and attitudes. **Originality/Value:** The findings indicate that a significant amount of intra-country cultural diversity is perceived in the South African formal sector workplace, which can cause friction and reinforce cultural stereotypes.

PERCEPÇÕES DOS FUNCIONÁRIOS MULTICULTURAIS SOBRE A DIVERSIDADE NA ÁFRICA DO SUL

RESUMO

Objetivo: Esta pesquisa explorou o significado profundo de como os funcionários multiculturais percebem a diversidade nas empresas do setor formal da África do Sul. Ao fazer isso, extraiu as experiências vividas por funcionários multiculturais sobre as diferenças culturais percebidas no país. A África do Sul é caracterizada pela heterogeneidade cultural e linguística e por uma economia do setor formal relativamente grande para os padrões africanos.

Metodologia: Para esse estudo transversal, os dados foram coletados por meio de uma amostragem proposital homogênea de nove participantes e da realização de entrevistas semiestruturadas. Esse pequeno tamanho de amostra permite uma investigação completa da experiência vivida por cada participante para coletar dados qualitativos. O método fenomenológico específico usado neste estudo é uma nova análise fenomenológica interpretativa (IPA), que busca extrair dados e discernir o significado nas narrativas dos participantes.

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Resultados: As descobertas foram interpretadas pelas lentes da teoria da identidade social em um paradigma filosófico interpretativo. Essas interpretações foram aproveitadas para extrair uma narrativa central que é agrupada tematicamente. A principal descoberta foi a identificação de vários fatores que contribuem para a superação das fronteiras culturais nas empresas do setor formal da África do Sul.
Implicações Práticas: O estudo identificou como os participantes dão sentido às suas experiências no setor formal da África do Sul e como suas interpretações moldam seu comportamento e suas atitudes.
Originalidade/Valor: As constatações indicam que uma quantidade significativa de diversidade cultural dentro do país é percebida no local de trabalho do setor formal sul-africano, o que pode causar atrito e reforçar estereótipos culturais.

Palavras-chave: Funcionários Multiculturais, Diversidade, Diferenças Culturais, Contexto Sul-Africano.

PERCEPCIONES DE LOS EMPLEADOS MULTICULTURALES SOBRE LA DIVERSIDAD EN SUDÁFRICA

RESUMEN
Propósito: Esta investigación exploró en profundidad el significado de cómo los empleados multiculturales perciben la diversidad en las empresas sudafricanas del sector formal. Para ello, se extrajeron las experiencias vividas por los empleados multiculturales acerca de las diferencias culturales percibidas en el país. Sudáfrica se caracteriza por su heterogeneidad cultural y lingüística y por una economía del sector formal relativamente grande para los estándares africanos.
Metodología: Para este estudio transversal, los datos se recopilaron mediante un muestreo intencionado homogéneo de nueve participantes y la realización de entrevistas semiestructuradas. Este pequeño tamaño de la muestra permite investigar a fondo la experiencia vivida por cada participante para recopilar datos cualitativos. El método fenomenológico específico utilizado en este estudio es un novedoso análisis fenomenológico interpretativo (AFI), que busca extraer datos y discernir significados en las narraciones de los participantes.
Resultados: Los hallazgos se interpretaron a través de la lente de la teoría de la identidad social dentro de un paradigma filosófico interpretativo. Estas interpretaciones se aprovecharon para extraer una narrativa central que se agrupa temáticamente. El principal hallazgo fue la identificación de varios factores que contribuyen a la superación de las fronteras culturales en las empresas del sector formal sudafricano.
Implicaciones Prácticas: El estudio identificó cómo los participantes dan sentido a sus experiencias dentro del sector formal de Sudáfrica y cómo sus interpretaciones conforman su comportamiento y actitudes.
Originalidad/Valor: Los resultados indican que en el lugar de trabajo del sector formal sudafricano se percibe una cantidad significativa de diversidad cultural dentro del país, lo que puede causar fricciones y reforzar los estereotipos culturales.

Palabras clave: Empleados Multiculturales, Diversidad, Diferencias Culturales, Contexto Sudafricano.

1 INTRODUCTION

This research study was primarily concerned with finding meaning within the lived experiences of employees in the formal sector of South Africa. Specifically, this study focussed on the perceptions of multicultural employees. Multicultural employees are those individuals who identify and internalise more than one culture. The rationale for this article focusing on multicultural employees' perceptions is that it seeks to address the call for more research to build a corpus of generalisable understanding of cultural diversity within a nation's borders and on an individual level (Kirkman et al., 2017; Vora et al., 2019). The general goal is to provide further research into multiculturalism in management sciences.

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To achieve this, the focus of this work was to gather and analyse the lived experiences of multicultural employees as they perceive diversity in the formal sector of South Africa. This study also seeks to potentially contribute by investigating individual-level multiculturalism without an assumption of cultural homogeneity within the borders of South Africa (Beugelsdijk et al., 2014; Tung, 2008).

The term **'**multicultural employees' refers to a demographic of employees "who identify with two or more cultures and have internalised associated cultural schemas" (Fitzsimmons, 2013, p. 525). Research on multicultural employees points generally to their ability to bring a variety of perspectives, ideas, and experiences to their workplace (Brannen & Thomas, 2010; Fitzsimmons, 2013; González & Campbell, 2018).

Multiculturalism at an individual level is defined as "the degree to which someone has knowledge of, identification with, and internalisation of more than one societal culture (Vora et al., 2019, p. 499), whereas 'multicultural' is conceptualised as "individuals with more than one cultural identity" (Hong & Minbaeva, 2022, p. 97). This phenomenon has become a fact of life, and organisations that do not embrace diversity risk falling behind in the global marketplace (Lücke et al., 2014). Multiculturalism is an important aspect of diversity and inclusion, which has been shown to have numerous benefits for organisations, including increased creativity, innovation, and profitability (Luiz, 2015; Jang, 2017). However, managing multicultural employees requires different skills than managing a homogeneous workforce. Multiculturalism can also present challenges in managing conflicts and misunderstandings (boundaries) arising from cultural differences (Levy et al., 2019). A further rationale for this study is to consider effective strategies for resolving conflicts and promoting cross-cultural communication. Multiculturalism raises legal and ethical considerations, such as ensuring equal opportunity and preventing discrimination.

This approach serves as a springboard to deliver new insight into the elements and intricacies of the existing boundaries, new boundaries that might arise, and the factors that influence the multicultural employees' ability to span these boundaries, concentrating on the critical role of culture.

With the continued expansion of globalisation, certain commentators have recently pointed to the "overestimation of the extent to which cultures and identities have become post-colonial and cosmopolitan" (Flew, 2020, p. 20). Businesses and society have also assumed that the trend of rapid globalisation, the so-called "crystallisation of the world as a single place," will continue (Sobol et al., 2018, p. 340). However, recent works have pointed to

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deglobalisation (Farndale et al., 2021) and localisation (Yen & Abosag, 2016) as significant elements that affect global business and management. Also, certain events, such as the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom (UK), have primarily questioned whether this trend will continue at the same pace (Madiès, 2018).

Within the academic and theoretical realm, research on multiculturalism within business and management literature has a largely outward-facing prism (Tung, 2008). This means recent studies have focused mainly on inter-country or cross-national issues rather than intra-country or within-country diversity (Barnard et al., 2017; Dow et al., 2016; Tung, 2008; Venaik & Midgley, 2015). This viewpoint reinforces the criticism stemming from the award-winning work of Shenkar's (2001) academic interpretation aimed explicitly at the concept of cultural distance (CD). What Shenkar (2001, p. 525) poignantly calls the "illusion of spatial homogeneity" is partially addressed in this study. More recently, Tung (2008, p. 41) reverberates these concerns and refers to the "fallacious assumption of cultural homogeneity" in her work on French- and English-speaking groups within Canada. Indeed, Tung and Verbeke (2010, p. 1266) further argue that "growing intra-national diversity in many countries has highlighted the problems, both conceptual and methodological, associated with assuming cultural homogeneity among people within a given nation-state". International business (IB) researchers have equated cross-cultural considerations with cross-national issues (Fitzsimmons et al., 2017). This is a blind spot that researchers have either failed to consider or ignored entirely.

Because CD issues generally remain prevalent in contemporary management research, the need for innovative and, somewhat counterintuitively, "inward-looking" theoretical contributions can contribute to the enlightenment of the current literature (Dow et al., 2016; Luiz, 2015; Tung, 2008; Zaheer et al., 2012). Consistently evaluating conventional business research from different theoretical and methodological perspectives helps to dissolve barriers between schools of thought and aids in phenomenological progress. Therefore, this study argues the importance of explicitly considering within-country cultural diversity in business studies and seeks to understand the lived experiences of a multicultural employee in South Africa.

Research on management and multiculturalism needs more theoretical focus and precision, especially regarding individual-level diversity (Caprar et al., 2015; Leung & Morris, 2015; Tung, 2008; Vora et al., 2019). This article will be concerned with perceptions of diversity, specifically among multicultural employees, in the formal sector workplace in South Africa. In this context, the formal sector is defined as the established and duly incorporated section of the economy, as opposed to the informal sector, largely dominated by informal

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trading, such as street-side vendors and markets. If management practitioners and theorists fail to fully grasp and measure the extent to which intra-national diversity is conceptualised and understood, it can have wide-ranging implications. Therefore, this work addresses and expands on the interpretative approach to culture that may "offer insight not captured by positivist approaches" (Leung & Morris, 2015, p. 1046).

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Conducting an interpretative literature analysis often requires investigating different fields of study to span various academic disciplines, especially multiculturalism. Throughout the literature review process, the researchers consistently refined the research question to ensure it was clear and focused. This was done with the help of previous studies by Cornelissen and Durand (2014) and Gill (2014).

2.1 SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY

Social identity theory states that individuals self-categorise according to perceived social groups (Cannella et al., 2015). The basic tenets of social identity theory had their genesis within the psychology discipline, focusing on self-categorisation as found in the works of psychology theorists Tajfel and Turner (1979). Social identity theory (SIT) has also been widely utilised in management research, particularly in organisational behaviour, human resource management, and leadership (Fitzsimmons, 2013; Pan et al., 2019; Reiche et al., 2015). SIT has also been used to explore the impact of diversity and inclusion initiatives in organisations and the role of leadership in shaping group identities and promoting positive intergroup relations (Fitzsimmons et al., 2017). An organisation is arguably one of the dominant social groups an individual can belong to, the "situated human self" (Pan et al., 2019, p. 213), and this article seeks to focus partly on the relationship between company and social culture.

Within psychology, the fundamental mechanism that underscores social identity theory and the preference for one's own in-group is homophily (Currarini & Mengel, 2016; McPherson et al., 2001). Social identity theory has also been frequently examined in relation to affiliation with social groups and national cultures (Leung et al., 2005). Thus, SIT provides a lens through which a researcher can view how individuals (employees) can arrive at an identity of self, especially about other social categorisations or groups, such as business organisations. Social

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identity can also influence individual actions and conduct, as elaborated in the study by Ashforth et al. (2008), in which a strong identity connection with the organisation can result in generally positive or beneficial behaviour towards the company.

Furthermore, individuals arrange themselves and others into collectives classified as in-groups and outgroups (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Taijfel, 1970; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Several examples of such social arrangements exist, but a key component in a review of 180 articles by Kirkman et al. (2017), across the disciplines of management and international business, included the consequences of culture within various strata of the organisation. Indeed, the researchers "strongly encourage research investigating the cultural identity complexity within many of us. Many fascinating research questions arise when considering how these affiliations interact and are activated" (Kirkman et al., 2017, p. 22).

Applying social identity theory allows for the use of an established theoretical lens to investigate under-researched phenomena in South African firms. This is largely because social identity theory has its foundations in sociology (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) as a major theory of "collective identity" (Ashmore et al., 2004, p. 83). It is, however, substantially important to note that although social identity theory studies investigate collective identity, it can also be a prism through which to investigate individual identity, as is the case with the experience of the individual participants in this study. Correspondingly, management literature has been described as being "interdisciplinary in nature" (Colquitt et al., 2007, p. 1287) and is therefore enhanced and supplemented by not only accommodating but also utilising social identity theory extensively (Cannella et al., 2015; Fitzsimmons, 2013; Pan et al., 2019). Further discovery and application of the social identity theoretical paradigm, especially in the workplace context (instead of sociological contexts), allows for additional perspectives.

3 METHODOLOGY

This research is predominantly concerned with finding meaning, what Neubauer et al. (2019, p. 93) refers to as the "universal essence" of a phenomenon. The meaning of objects or events is often interpretative and seen within the context of social encounters with other individuals (Lücke et al., 2014; Munoz & Bohen, 2018). Congruently, interpretative phenomenological research communicates that reality, as an element of meaning, is socially derived and subjective (Bøllingtoft & Ulhøi, 2005). The basic ontological assumptions are also deemed to be socially constructed, meaning that realities are phenomena sensed via a

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constellation of narratives, categorisations, schemas and procedures of sensemaking, all situated within the galaxy of "—a way of being in the world—where we are always embedded in an intricate flow of complexity (that is) entwined relationally" (Cunliffe, 2011, p. 657). Thus, a research methodology that explores individuals' subjective experiences, feelings, and meanings attached to particular phenomena was considered the most appropriate for this study.

Indeed, recent research calls for further scholarly investigation into the invariably inexplicit concept of what it means to be considered "local", especially within a social and cultural context (Kipnis et al., 2014). This is called the "cognitive theory of meaning" in psychological anthropology. Furthermore, culture is said to evolve following environmental changes (Kipnis et al., 2014). This study sought to determine the lived experience of employees in South Africa who reflect the attributes of within-country multiculturalism. Furthermore, an attempt was made to discern the ability of these multicultural employees to act as boundary spanners. To achieve this, the study utilised an interpretative, qualitative research methodology (Yagi & Kleinberg, 2011).

The research was designed to facilitate the incorporation of questions that focus on the essence of an experience of a specific phenomenon, i.e. What is it like (lived experience) to be a multicultural employee in South Africa? How do multicultural employees experience diversity in the workplace? Further, what is the lived experience of multicultural employees who know, internalise, or identify with two or more local cultures? Thus, to determine if an employee in the formal sector fits the selection criteria, they were asked an initial screening question: Do you internalise and/or identify with other local culture(s) or identities?

Creswell et al. (2007) suggest that method (and, to a degree, methodology) flows from the research question(s). The research design of this study was an extrapolation of the phenomenological underpinnings in terms of research questions and philosophical considerations (Berglund, 2015). Because of this study's qualitative, interpretative, and phenomenological nature, specific propositions have not been outlined. Instead, the research design was largely formulated throughout the progression of the data analysis process (Rodham et al., 2015). This approach also allows the researcher to maintain a level of objectivity and to avoid any a priori interpretation of the data before the analysis stage (Gentles et al., 2015). Furthermore, analysing a specific proposition in the hermeneutic tradition can be described as being "iterative and not linear" (Crist & Tanner, 2003, p. 202). Lastly, unlike other methodological approaches focusing specifically on validity and reliability, hermeneutic

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phenomenology focuses especially on the integrity of the narratives that emerge from the transcribed interviews (Crist & Tanner, 2003).

The participants' views were collected and analysed to establish what participants have in common in terms of experience of the phenomenon (Van Manen, 1990). This study incorporated some of Van Manen's work and his proposed research activities (as well as their interaction) as a roadmap for the design of this exploration. A phenomenon, i.e., multiculturalism in South African firms, was identified.

Some questions posed during the sessions are: How do you experience or make sense of cultural diversity in the workplace? Would you say that you work better with people from the same culture as you? Can you interpret multiple cultures in the workplace because you belong to more than one local culture?

3.1 POPULATION AND SAMPLE

A purposeful sampling technique was employed in which it was possible to identify participants who self-identify as multicultural in their place of work. This part proved more technical than originally anticipated, as many candidates fit the bill about being multicultural. However, only certain candidates could expound upon their lived experiences coherently. Thus, nine semi-structured interviews were conducted in total. However, only four were considered instances where a strong identification as a multicultural employee emerged along with the concomitant lived experience of experiencing diversity in the workplace.

It was also necessary to determine that individuals were employed in the South African formal sector, i.e., a duly registered company, of which they were not the company's owner but an employee. This stood to reason that a multicultural employee was by definition an employee and not an entrepreneur. It also had to be established that the participants were comfortable providing answers in English. The identified individuals were interviewed in a semi-structured way.

The participant samples were drawn from two cities in South Africa to ensure adequate variation (Thomas & Bendixen, 2000). Data gathering took approximately six months and was carried out in Pretoria and Johannesburg, two cities in the Gauteng province of South Africa.

Ethical Considerations The researchers have obtained ethical clearance in writing from Stadio Multiversity to conduct this research project. All participants have signed a consent letter

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to participate, and their identities will remain anonymous. Additionally, participants could opt out at any research stage if they felt uncomfortable.

4 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Data analysis in this study was performed in two phases. First, an orientation to and perspective of the phenomenon under scrutiny, i.e., multiculturalism, as developed by reviewing the literature and interviewing multicultural employees. Second, gathering descriptions of the phenomenon commenced with semi-structured interviews conducted with the participants while closely observing them and keeping field notes. Ultimately, contextual interpretation through applicable scholarly literature employed thematic extrapolation and first-order meaning-making. One emerging challenge is that employees can interpret the same phenomenon differently (Berglund, 2015). Thus, a phenomenological analysis will have an array of likely experiences of the phenomenon being studied (Berglund, 2015).

An independent co-coder also analysed the collected raw data (interviews) without the concomitant investigation of the relevant literature that undergirds the study before commencing the data coding. The co-coder did not have access to the a-priori codes and provided separate data coding. Accordingly, thematic identification by the co-coder seemed to veer slightly from the codes identified by the researcher, indicating a useful verification of the hermeneutic, Heideggerian philosophical framework coming to the fore about bracketing of inclinations, notions, and theoretical interpretations. It also provided some semblance of triangulation and intercoder reliability (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). In other words, the independent (or perhaps more aptly, the impartial) co-coder did not have the background of being immersed in this study for three years before coding the collected data.

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4.1 PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS AND CULTURAL IDENTITY DIMENSIONS

Table 1

Select information on demographics and self-described cultural orientation of participants. Cultural identity dimensions and multicultural patterns adapted from Fitzsimmons' (2013) model based on participants' introductory responses.

Interviewee 1 pseudonym	John
Age, Gender	29, Male
Cultural orientation	Afrikaner / South African
Cultural identity dimensions	Prioritise (Afrikaner then South African)
Industry, Occupation, Seniority Level and Education Level	Building and Development, Civil Engineer, Junior Manager, NQF 8
Interviewee 2 pseudonym	Matthew
Age & Gender	41, Male
Cultural Orientation	Zulu / South African
Cultural identity dimensions	Prioritise (Zulu then South African)
Industry, Occupation, Seniority Level and Education Level	Building and Development, Civil Engineer, Middle Management, NQF 7
Interviewee 3 pseudonym	Jane
Age & Gender	31, Female
Cultural Orientation	South African / Zulu / Xhosa
Cultural identity dimensions	Hybridize (multiple local cultures equally)
Industry, Occupation, Seniority Level and Education Level	Education, Administrator, Junior Manager, NQF 8
Interviewee 4 pseudonym	Jess
Age & Gender	44, Female
Cultural Orientation	South African / Portuguese
Cultural identity dimensions	Hybridise (South African and Portuguese equally)
Industry, Occupation, Seniority Level and Education Level and Education Level	Automotive, Purchaser, Branch Manager, NQF 7
Interviewee 5 pseudonym	Joe
Age & Gender	23, Male
Cultural Orientation	Afrikaner / South African
Cultural identity dimensions	Prioritise (Afrikaner then South African)
Industry, Occupation, Seniority Level and Education Level	Tourism, Guide and professional hunter, Manager, NQF 4
Interviewee 6 pseudonym	Jaco
Age & Gender	54, Male
Cultural Orientation	South African / German-South African
Cultural identity dimensions	Prioritise (South African, then German)
Industry, Occupation, Seniority Level and Education Level	Hospitality, Restauranteur, Senior Manager, NQF 7
Interviewee 7 pseudonym	Jocelyn
Age & Gender	33, Female
Cultural Orientation	South African / Venda
Cultural identity dimensions	Hybridise (Venda and South African)
Industry, Occupation, Seniority Level and Education Level	Retail, Receiving manager, Junior Manager, NQF 4
Interviewee 8 pseudonym	Johan
Age & Gender	46, Male
Cultural Orientation	Afrikaans / South African
Cultural identity dimensions	Prioritise (South African first then "Afrikaans")

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Industry, Occupation, Seniority Level and Education Level	Automotive, Technician, Junior Manager, NQF 5
Interviewee 9 pseudonym	Janice
Age & Gender	52, Female
Cultural Orientation	South African / British
Cultural identity dimensions	South African (British ancestry of little or no consequence)
Industry, Occupation, Seniority Level and Education Level	Finance, Trader, Senior Manager, NQF 8

Even though this research consisted of a relatively small sample size of nine, as is the case with other phenomenological approaches in the hermeneutic Heideggerian/Van Manen tradition (Van Manen, 2020), the interviews that were conducted nonetheless yielded a substantive amount of data about the lived experiences of multicultural employees within the South African formal sector. The social identity theoretical lens employed within this study provided further unique perspectives on various levels of analysis.

Themes and sub-themes were reinforced by verbatim transcripts or quotes, supplemented with notes from the field. Of great import is the fact that the emergent themes were viewed through the prism of SIT. In the process, valuable institutional knowledge regarding multicultural employees as a cultural boundary spanner was extricated.

Throughout the interview sessions, participants' answers regarding their lived experience of culture identification in the workplace alluded to disparities in local cultures. This contrasted sharply with the general lack of mention of cultural similarities between co-workers, except for the emergent similarities in culture about being "South African". This reinforces friction that emerges in what Dow et al. (2016) referred to as divergent information flows and elements of cultural distance (CD), a much-studied construct, especially in international business (IB) (Shenkar, 2001). It represents an element of cultural interaction as a source of conflict, which can lead to transaction costs. The difference, however, is that most of these studies focused on the inter-country element of cultural friction, i.e., between countries, as is the case in multinational corporations (MNCs).

4.2 EMERGENCE OF THEMES AND THE CENTRAL NARRATIVE

The emerging themes, which can also be interpreted as meaning units (Gentles et al., 2015), were identified through qualitative analysis of the transcripts and fieldnotes gathered during data collection (Spiers et al., 2016). Specific themes emerged from the coded data through interviews, fieldnotes and self-reflection. As mentioned in this study's population and sample section, the candidates were identified through purposeful sampling, seeking only

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individuals who identify as multicultural employees. During the interviews, it became clear that certain participants strongly identified with intra-national identities, which qualified them as multicultural employees, while others did not. This resulted in much less robust data from five of the nine participants interviewed, especially about boundary-spanning roles. This, however, did not preclude their inputs from being incorporated but allowed only supplementary data reinforcement towards the emerging themes.

The transcriptions were uploaded to Atlas.ti where the coding process was performed. As the process of code-grouping processed, two dominant themes and several sub-themes emerged. These themes contained distilled information about the lived experiences of employees in the formal sector in South Africa about within-country cultural differences. The themes are the experiences of employees who identify and internalise more than one local culture, i.e., multicultural employees. An analysis of the coded data that emerged from the categories of culture, cultural boundaries/conflict, and the workplace yielded themes summarised in the table below.

4.3 THEME 1: DIVERSITY PERCEPTIONS IN SOUTH AFRICA

In South African formal sector organisations, the theme of intra-national cultural dissimilarities emerged as a complex and persistent phenomenon. Employee opinions highlighted multifaceted aspects, leading to crystallised sub-themes. Participants identified cultural differences as a source of workplace friction, with stereotypes persisting despite nation-building efforts. For instance, participant Matthew highlighted how stereotypes, such as associating Zulu individuals with violence, led to clashes affecting business. While not a standalone sub-theme, the geographical disparity between urban and rural cultural stereotypes was observed, contributing to clashes within the larger theme of workplace cultural challenges.

The data revealed inter-country cultural stereotypes causing tension. Participants, such as Jess and Jane, shared experiences of navigating diverse cultures in the workplace, highlighting misunderstandings and beliefs affecting interpersonal dynamics. Participants also reported unhealthy curiosity and apprehension regarding cultural practices, creating tension. Matthew, for example, faced inquiries about his Lobola negotiation, a significant aspect of marriage unions in Southern Africa. Jaco's experience indicated cultural separation during formative years, contributing to friction when individuals from diverse backgrounds enter the professional realm.

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Participants discussed cultural differences in work quality and quantity approaches, revealing recurring punctuality issues and long work hours. Matthew and John highlighted the impact of varied work ethics on collaboration and project outcomes. Cultural approaches towards gender roles in the workplace emerged as a recurring sub-theme. Participants, including Jane and Jess, described significant friction linked to a co-worker's culture influencing gender-related behaviour.

Participants shared experiences of bribery in business, indicating a lack of trust and adherence to rules, leading to increased workplace friction. Jess and John provided insights into how bribery influenced collaboration and work dynamics, revealing cultural disparities.

4.4 THEME 2: CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN THE WORKPLACE

Participants expressed scepticism about identifying with a single culture, emphasising a boundary-less approach to their identities. South African black participants often identified with a broader "black" identity, fostering mutual understanding within their community. Though challenging to define, a distinct "South African" culture emerged as a unifying force. Language was crucial in establishing a South African identity, particularly using commonly understood terms.

Social activities, such as the tradition of braai (barbecue), helped bridge cultural gaps. Understanding and accommodating different cultural perspectives, especially during challenging personal times, facilitated smoother interactions.

Participants believed that higher levels of education mitigated the impact of cultural differences. Education was a key factor in cultural negotiation, transcending cultural boundaries and fostering a sense of colleague equality. Language, often influenced by the geographical location of work, plays a role in understanding and engaging with diverse cultures. Overcoming language barriers contributed to a more cohesive work environment. Some participants associated being "modern" with a boundary-less approach, emphasising a progressive, inclusive mindset.

In conclusion, the study sheds light on how cultural diversity is experienced in the South African workplace, highlighting the significance of individual identities, social activities, education, and language in fostering cross-cultural understanding and collaboration.

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5 SUMMARY OF THEMES

Table 2

Summary of identified themes and sub-themes within the research findings

Themes	Aligned sub-themes	Relevant codes
Theme 1: Multiple perceptions of diversity exist in South Africa. (Addresses research question 1, RQ1)	Within-country cultural differences exacerbate boundary-forming Boundary-forming experiences about cultural approaches to work Cultural concepts about gender/sex of co-workers Experiences of cultural norms with regards to bribery and corruption.	- Cultural stereotypes - Punctuality - Time management - Unscheduled Absence - Adherence to Deadlines - Bereavement and burial policies - Sex/gender cultural approaches - Corruption and cultural norms - Cultural misunderstanding - Unschooled - Bribing - Language boundaries - Rural versus urban - Cultural differences between industries - Gender biases - Disrespect toward women - Lack of cultural sensitivity
Theme 2: Several factors contribute to cultural boundary spanning. (Addressed research question 2, RQ2)	Identification with multiple local cultures Identifying with South African culture and language Engaging with co-workers of a different cultural background can aid boundary-spanning Levels of education among other employees in the organisation can lessen the scale of influence that cultural differences have in the workplace.	- Identify as South African and another local culture - Identification with multiple local cultures - Identify as South African and another local culture -Communicating cultural practices - Accommodating difference in culture - Levels of education - Education similarities - Training - Trust over time - Goal orientation - Adapting to working within a team - Progressivism - Modern approach to life - Cultural skills - Linguistic skills - Bilingual - Multilingual - Workplace behaviour over cultural background - Humour - Team building - Food and drink

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6 CONCLUSION

This article significantly enhances our understanding of multicultural employees within South African firms. Through qualitative interpretative phenomenological analysis and the application of social identity theory, the study establishes a foundational conceptualisation and definition of "multicultural employees." This term, previously overlooked in recent academic studies in business management, gains theoretical clarity and practical relevance. The novel use of social identity theory in this context offers fresh insights. It advances the field of management sciences, contributing to the academic and practical recognition of multicultural employees in the contemporary South African management landscape. A practical contribution this study makes is that it facilitated the collection of narratives containing in-depth and nuanced accounts of the lived experience of employees who internalise more than one local culture. This collection of captured experiences, as well as the subsequent analysis thereof, enabled a deeper understanding of how these employees perceive cultural issues in the workplace and how their status as a multicultural employee allows them to straddle the boundaries that form as a result. This study helps academics and practitioners understand how these employees cope with and otherwise manage the friction that arise within their work environments by leveraging their cultural skills. Data that were gleaned from the interviews with these participants can be used by managerial practitioners, not only in South Africa, but globally, to understand some of the friction that form within their organisations as a result of within-country cultural differences. By emphasizing the subjective nature of experiences and recognizing the role that individual interpretation plays in shaping perceptions and experiences, this IPA study can help to challenge and expand traditional assumptions and perspectives in the field of management studies (Thomas & Bendixen, 2000). The implications can be far-reaching, such as possible negation of recurring cultural friction within the organisation. Therefore, the practical applicability of this academic study can guide the design and implementation of interventions and programmes aimed at improving organizational practices.

LIMITATIONS

The limitations include a response bias where participants in this IPA study may not have been truthful in their responses for various reasons including that they feared that their answers might become attributable to them and have repercussions in their place of work or career. All

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available steps were taken to minimise these concerns, but a measure of reticence was still noticeable in some of the comments that were made by participants. This can affect the validity of the results.

The results may also not be generalisable to other populations or settings, especially in economies where cultural homogeneity is more prevalent. A limited sample size of interviewees was selected who identified with and internalised two or more cultures found within the borders of the Republic of South Africa. Therefore, participation was constrained to purposively sampled employees within the *formal* employment context. Even though this IPA study and its limited sample size (9 participants) provided nuanced insight into specific participants experiences, it can affect the reliability and validity of results.

RECOMMENDATION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

There is a possibility of other academic disciplines replicating parts of this qualitative exploration of the phenomena of culture in international business, management, organisational behaviour, human resources, and marketing. This would be an important step towards better understanding individual-level multiculturalism as an academic concept as well as a practical reality. It would also provide further fascinating insights on how culture affects business and management within a country without necessarily looking towards immigration or intra-country differences. On the matter of vertical integration there is room for methodological application of this study towards studies which seek to gain a greater understanding of the confluence of company and employee culture, not as separate or conflicting ideas, but as one being a possible symbiotic augmentation of the other.

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