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How language power, white subalternity and compressed modernity frame highly-skilled non-Western migrants in an East-German company: insights from multi-sited ethnography

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper shows the benefits of multi-sited ethnography for global migration studies in management, in particular when cosmopolitan self-initiated expatriates meet a local setting.
Design/methodology/approach – The author conducted a multi-sited ethnography to trace how a local East German research organization's well-intended approach to integration becomes condescending.
Findings – Highly skilled non-Western migrant employees who represent English-language cosmopolitanism are framed as negatively "foreign" by corporate discourses and practices. This phenomenon can only be understood if one follows the interconnections of language power, White subalternity and compressed modernity and if one considers the immediate surroundings, the historical context of East German identity and wider migration frames in Germany.
Research limitations/implications – Multi-sited ethnography, if power-sensitive and historically-aware, is suitable for understanding the multi-level phenomenon of global migration and identifying limiting framing-effects on management and organizations. Researcher standpoint is both its strength and its limitation.
Practical implications – Managers and companies can "imagine otherwise" and move beyond the unquestioned dominant frames limiting their problem analyses and, consequently, their strategies and actions.
Social implications – Managers and companies are enabled to move beyond individual- and corporate-level approaches to managing migration at work and can thus take up full social responsibility in the sense of good corporate citizenship on a global level. Global mobility researchers can work towards an inclusive migration theory.
Originality/value – Multi-sited ethnography, in particular, one that is power-sensitive and historically aware, is an approach not yet applied to migration in the context of management and organization. By means of an example, this paper illustrates the value of this approach and enables researchers to understand its main principles. Compressed modernity and White subalternity are introduced as novel concepts structuring migration, and language power emerges as relevant far beyond the scope of the multinational corporation.

Keywords Self-initiated expatriates, Whiteness, Cosmopolitanism, Integration, Global South, Highly-skilled migrants, East Germany, Compressed modernity, Language power, White subaltern
Paper type Research paper

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Introduction

Migration has become an increasingly relevant managerial theme, yet remains insufficiently conceptualized (Hajro *et al.*, 2021). What is lacking are multi-level approaches that move beyond corporate and/or individual levels of analyses. As the sociology of migration has long since proposed, micro, meso and macro-effects are interrelated (Pisarevskaya *et al.*, 2020), as are subjective sensemaking and objective facts, and discourses and institutions (Levine, 1977). For global mobility research in management, it is thus essential to interpret individual and corporate levels (that is: micro and meso) in light of macro-level factors framing them (Delbridge *et al.*, 2011), and to consider how agency, performance and practice interrelate with the structural and systemic boundary conditions wherein they take place (King, 2018). However, whilst beneficial in theory, integrating micro and macro levels of analysis is methodologically challenging (Cowen *et al.*, 2022). It demands for an approach that is both "small" and "big", and that enables a multi-facetted interpretation of the thus gathered research findings. In summary, what is required, is a research design that integrates objective and subjective elements of social reality, and that is both "close up" and general.

This article proposes multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995) as a suitable approach. My argument is based on research conducted in an East-German research company hiring highly-skilled self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) from the non-West. When being analysed merely on individual or corporate levels, the company's approach to integrating this group exemplifies "worst practice", and one may wonder how management fails to see this. However, by widening the ethnographic analysis to social and local settings, and by including historical context and discursive media constructions, it becomes evident that these rationales and practices have not emerged "out of their own" but are also a product of larger discourses framing "integration" in Germany, such as the implicit privilege of Whiteness and the cultural alienness ascribed to those who are constructed as "non-White". These discourses and frames are systemic and linger on beyond single locations, actors and points in time. Furthermore, there is the need to consider the historical context, in this case: the compressed modernity and White subalternity experienced in a remote corner of former East Germany. *Compressed modernity* (Chang, 1999, 2010) describes an accelerated, highly conflicting modernization process in which local and foreign, traditional and modern aspects collide rather suddenly (Chang, 2022), as it was the case in post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe (Sinn and Sinn, 1992). *White subalternity* is a concept stemming from postcolonial studies; it describes those who should be nominally privileged for being "White", yet, who are symbolically made "non-White" by their inferior socio-economic capital (Fischer-Tiné, 2009). In this case, due to English language power effects, East German researchers are at risk of "becoming" non-White, in relation to a more cosmopolitan group of non-Western SIEs, and this explains much of the conflict between the two groups.

As multi-sited ethnography uncovers, discourses of Whiteness, compressed modernity and White subalternity cumulate in the negative framing of highly-skilled non-Western migrants in a specific organization, in ways that are both general and context-specific. The contribution of this article lies in uncovering these complex interrelations and in showing the benefits of multi-sited ethnography for studying global migration in management.

In order to make this contribution, I proceed as follows: first, I provide first insights to the primary fieldsite. Next, I identify framing effects in global mobility research and outline the development and suitability of multi-sited ethnography. I then provide details to my data collection and analysis. I exemplify the multi-sited ethnographic approach is by means of fieldsite impressions which are put into their wider context, both on general and specific levels, thus enabling the reader to understand how a small context and large frames cumulate in the devaluation of highly-skilled, cosmopolitan migrants from the non-West in a local environment characterized by a certain type of "compressed" modernity. Finally, I discuss the implications for global mobility research in management, and summarize and conclude.

Background: dominant frames and imaginative geographies in global mobility

In the global migration literature, one of the most common differentiations is the distinction between migrants and self-initiated expatriates (SIE) (Al Ariss, 2010; Brewster *et al.*, 2021). The mainstream differentiation implies that migrants are on a forced move on their own and that SIEs have made the decision to move voluntarily and are furthermore often supported by an organization (Crowley-Henry *et al.*, 2018). From a critical perspective, there is a second meaning to these terms: whereas the migrant is expected to originate from economically less developed, politically unstable or socially "traditional" regions of the world, the SIE is expected to be economically well-off and "modern", and to represent a politically stable country (Cranston, 2017). Thus, a distinction is made between what, in social reality, is a shared mobility experience (Beck, 2023). This distinction is rooted in what is commonly referred to as *Whiteness* (Grimes, 2001), that is: a combination of structural and interpretive effects that favour a White, Western identity (from the Global North) over a non-Western, non-White identity (from the Global South). The consequences are, for example, that highly-skilled SIEs from the Global South or the non-West are more likely to be perceived as low-skilled "migrants" instead of "global talents" (Al Ariss and Özbilgin, 2010; Al Ariss *et al.*, 2014). In other words, whereas some globally mobile individuals – due to their ethnic privilege and Whiteness – are positively framed as "self-initiated" expatriates actively marketing their considerable skills, others are framed as underdeveloped, passive, low-skilled "migrants" in need of help (Cranston, 2017).

Frames (based on Ridgeway, 2009) are dominant interpretive schemes and institutionalized practices which are projected upon a situation or individuals, *prior* to an engagement with the situation or the individual. Frames thus overshadow alternative interpretations and practices (Ridgeway, 2009, p. 145). As a result, highly-skilled employees from the non-West and Global South are devalued in their expertise and competencies *prior* to even being able to show their value and *despite* them acting to the contrary (Mahadevan and Kilian-Yasin, 2017). This underscores the relevance of investigating negative framing-effects in relation to non-Western SIE's work experiences (e.g. Al Ariss, 2010; Al Ariss and Özbilgin, 2010) and to reflect how dominant frames, such as "migrant", implicate global mobility research (Dahinden, 2016; Dahinden *et al.*, 2021).

The primary fieldsite

This paper emerged from longitudinal ethnographic research in a high-tech research company (the fieldsite) in former East Germany, at the Polish border, which was conducted pre-COVID several years ago (see Mahadevan, 2012; Mahadevan and Kilian-Yasin, 2017). The justification for using comparably old data for this paper lies in the insight that historical ethnographies (Fenske and Bendix, 2007), in particular, if they are multi-sited, put history into perspective and/or trace how the present has unfolded (see subsequent section on *multi-sited ethnography*).

The key contours of the relevant historical process to be considered are: Prior to 1990, the company had been a state-owned member of the Academy of Sciences of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). Next to being a top research institution, it was also *the* Eastern European manufacturer of a specific microchip manufacturing technology with more than 3,000 employees. The company is located in "Bridgetown", a city right at the German-Polish border. After the fall of the Berlin wall in autumn 1989, privatization began. This was part of the wider social, political and economic transformation which challenged people's sense of self and resulted in the formation of a specific, highly conflicting East German identity (Borneman, 1991; Foroutan *et al.*, 2023, details in section *multi-site 4*). Management decided to abandon microchip manufacturing altogether, to focus on a single core competency and retain only those researchers qualified in this area. Within the company, the fear of "Americanization" (both in

terms of culture and language) was omnipresent during these years (Mahadevan, 2012). Over the next years, the number of employees was downsized to around 100; yet, against all odds and overcoming numerous threats, the company survived on the international market and became the leading figure in a certain niche segment of the market again, out of its own initiate, as the mythical "organizational saga" had it (Mahadevan, 2012). From 2007 onwards, the company succeeded in enlarging its number of technical employees, from approximately 150 to 240. Most of these 90 new employees were hired outside Germany, mainly from Iran, Pakistan, Bangladesh, China, Indonesia, Serbia, Turkey and Poland. In this paper, I refer to them as "non-German employees", as they did not hold German citizenship. They worked in technical fields such as electrical engineering or computer science. As a minimum, they held a master's degree; about one-third held a doctoral degree; and about one-third were employed as doctoral researchers on partly state-funded projects.

Previously, qualified employees had mainly been hired regionally and selected through personal interviews. Now, the HR department had to shift its strategy towards hiring worldwide and through video-conference and telephone interviews. The latter also implied new and unfamiliar procedures of immigration to Germany. In the process, top-management felt that the previous HR department could not cope with these new demands; therefore, a new head of HR, originating from the former GDR, was hired from a (West-) German global player. Compared to the previous head of HR, who did not speak English well, had never been trained in HR (she was an engineer herself) and had never worked outside the former GDR or in another company, the new head of HR was perceived as cosmopolitan. However, she had never managed a non-German workforce before and had never worked outside of Germany, her only personal expatriation experience being a year of student exchange to the USA. Much of the requirements of her new position were unfamiliar to her, and, compared to the non-German employees, her career had been a very local, "East German" one.

The reason for hiring technical employees outside of Germany that was narrated to the ethnographer was that qualified German candidates were unavailable or unwilling to work at the company that – from an inner-German perspective – is located in a remote "hinterland" and cannot pay competitive wages compared to the metropolitan technological centres in (mainly former West-) Germany. Thus, what the company got were not the "positively international research engineers" from Western countries such as Great Britain, France or the USA that they had imagined, but engineers from countries of the Global South, most of them visibly non-White, and/or practicing a "non-Western" religion, such as Islam, which then also constructed the Serbian engineers as "non-Western". This process dramatically increased (unwanted) ethnic and racial diversity at work, in a previously "White" corporate context wherein management remained exclusively German by ethnicity and nationality. For instance, when a proportion of the newly hired "non-German employees" started to practice Islam in the offices, this created strong feelings of religious alienation amongst ethnic-German employees (Mahadevan and Kilian-Yasin, 2017).

English was the main *lingua franca,* or "chosen *foreign* language of communication" (Firth, 1996, p. 240, emphasis in the original) by means of which German and non-German employees communicated. English as the global language of science (see Abdumannonovna, 2022) was also the language that corporate research work is implemented, documented and disseminated. Still, "Americanization" held a negative connotation amongst those who had experienced corporate post-GDR struggles (Mahadevan, 2012).

Conceptual and methodological implications

In summary, the organizational field was undergoing a partially forced change in light of crisis, which required "opening up" to both the inside and the outside. The company, not out of its own will, was becoming more heterogeneous internally and more global externally, and

this put new, cosmopolitan and diversity-related, challenges on previously "local" management. Realities and perceptions of Otherness (Mahadevan and Primecz, 2024; Mahadevan, 2024), as related to global mobility effects, are thus central to this case.

Power is relevant on multiple levels. First, there is the institutional context that shapes the scope of action of those involved, such as labour market regulations (e.g. Mahadevan, 2015). Second, macro-level discourses, such as what migration and integration "mean" in the media and public, and the practices of how migration and integration are consequently managed, may frame organizational sensemaking and practice (Mahadevan and Kilian-Yasin, 2017). Third, corporate HR might be blind to the harm of their diversity initiatives, due to a lack of reflexivity regarding framing effects. For example, as Romani *et al.* (2018) show, Swedish organizations wishing to facilitate migrants' integration unknowingly perform benevolent discrimination instead. Furthermore, the specifics of the East German context and history of which the organization is a part, make it difficult to categorize the primary fieldsite in terms of Whiteness and with regard to the degree to which its (East) German employees are privileged or disadvantaged when compared to the non-White SIEs now employed. Finally, there is English as a lingua franca (ELF) which is inevitably linked to power-effects, as, for example higher fluency in ELF (language power) might distort expert and position power.

To unravel this complex phenomenon, one therefore needs a research approach (a "lens") that crosses and integrates micro-, meso- and macro-levels, and that pays attention to both objective and subjective elements of the social phenomenon under study. The next section suggests a power-sensitive, historical and multi-sited ethnography as such a "lens" by means of which management can conceptualize what otherwise remains beyond their imaginative scope.

Multi-sited ethnography for studying global migration

Ethnography is a research mindset and method which has undergone crucial developments since its original inception. This section provides an overview on these developments, outlining what differentiates a multi-sited ethnography from other ethnographic forms.

What is ethnography?

Ethnography is a holistic method of approximating other peoples' realities that makes the researcher the main tool of research (Mahadevan and Moore, 2023). For example, the ethnographer might experience being dominated while studying top-management. With power thus emerging as relevant, the researcher should give their ethnography a power-focus (Mahadevan, 2012). Or, English as a lingua franca might be found to be highly contested (Lauring and Klitmøller, 2015), which then requires a language-focus.

All ethnography is about the deduction of meaningful patterns, thus: a relevant reduction of complex reality in ways that are determined by those studied. In that sense, ethnography shares certain elements with other qualitative methods, such as grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), but also differs from them in the sense that ethnography, due to its rootedness in experience, is much more "messy" and "surprising" than standardized and step-by-step qualitative approaches, such as "the Gioia methodology" (Mees-Buss *et al.*, 2022). For example, the ethnographer often does not know where they will end up when following those studied through their lived experiences. What makes a research ethnographic is thus not a specific research design, but rather the reflexive "frame of mind" from which it is employed, and the research experience by which insights shall be gained (Mahadevan and Moore, 2023).

From "local participation" to "following the phenomenon": benefits and contributions

Ethnography in its traditional sense of "participant observation" Malinowski (1922) requires immerses into the community studied (overview in Spradley, 1980) and approximates

another "lifeworld" (Marcus, 1995). Traditionally, anthropologists study small, local fields outside of their own society. However, management and organization are embedded into and often contingent upon wider boundary conditions, and they are made up of people who live parts of the lives outside of the organization. Therefore, longitudinal participant observation might no longer be the best choice for achieving ethnographic goals (Bate, 1997). Migration and migration experiences are examples of how present phenomena are both emerging from a specific fieldsite but at the same time cannot be understood without moving beyond the local.

To solve this methodological dilemma, US-American anthropologist George Marcus (1995) came up with the concept of "multi-sited ethnography". With this, he means an approach to ethnography that starts at a single site but does not confine the researcher's process of "learning culture" (understood as approximating the lifeworlds of those studied) to this single site. The research is thus "phenomenon-based" (migration) not "fieldsite-based" (the specific corporate case). This means that people's lived experiences are still at the forefront of the ethnographic investigation but, at the same time, the ethnographer is prepared to follow the phenomenon wherever it might lead them, and to also investigate other types of material – media, public discourse – in the process. Thus, via tracing a certain phenomenon across sites, the researcher engages in a reflexive heuristic process initiated by their research experience, thus constructing "the field" (in the sense of the phenomenon under study, see Amit, 2000) beyond single actors, locations and points in time.

The idea is to choose a phenomenon that is larger than a single site, to investigate it in-depth at a single site, and then to follow the phenomenon to larger arenas and other contexts, so that larger insights and cross-sectional connections can help interpret the field. Essential to the process is the researcher's willingness to follow the phenomenon associatively, thereby co-constructing the field based on where the phenomenon leads them (Marcus, 1995).

What underpins multi-sited ethnography is the need for researcher reflexivity and power-sensitivity throughout, namely as related to small, intersubjective power in context, and large, systemic power inequalities, which are brought together by discursive and institutional frames and specific practices. Garsten's (1994) ethnography of Apple world and Ho's (2009) ethnography of Wall Street are examples within management and organization studies that employ this approach: to configure both objects of study as phenomena, not as sites. For instance, Wall Street is as much a general system of thought and meaning as it is a specific location in New York City, and "Apple" is as much a culture as it is a product label.

How exactly the phenomenon is followed, depends on the primary fieldsite's configurations and how this site is then experienced by the ethnographer relating to the field (Mahadevan and Moore, 2023). This implies that the researcher's persona and how they relate to both field and object of study is central to this path. Marcus (1995) suggests, for example to "follow the people", to "follow the thing", to "follow the metaphor", to "follow the plot, story, or allegory", to "follow the life or biography", or to "follow the conflict" – depending on what happens when a specific fieldsite and a specific ethnographer relate to each other. My own suggestion is to furthermore consider history as a relevant multi-site.

Details to data collection and analysis

Combining historical, multi-sited and novel ethnographic material

The data for this paper firstly originates from ethnography in the primary fieldsite which helped the researcher to identify (not yet: understand) the phenomenon. The researcher's original accessed stemmed from her expertise as intercultural trainer, and it was understood that she could translate between non-German and German perspectives and bridge differences. After it became clear that I was fluent in German, I was identified as "West-German with a migration background" (see section *multi-site 2*) by German employees. When

my international lived experiences became visible, I was identified as "cosmopolitan" and a person one could relate to by non-German employees.

Second, I employed participant observation outside of the corporate field for 30 days (experiencing the immediate environment). As part of my family history lies in former East Germany, I could relate to the immediate surroundings. However, this identity facet was not visible to others, if not voluntarily disclosed. This means that I was categorized as non-ethnic German due to my name and looks by those whom I met. Together, this generated relevant insights and further questions.

Afterwards, I thirdly compared these experiences within the fieldsite and in its immediate surroundings to other ethnographic experiences which I have had in other local context and companies since then and before. This enabled me to contextualize these findings over time. Forth, out of my own general interest in this topic, I traced migration discourses and institutionalized rules and regulations for several years (following the phenomenon).

Two previous papers have been published on the first and inner-organizational part of the data (the "historical" material). Paper one focused on the perspective of the receiving organization and how German employees narrated an organizational change that was identity-challenging and sometimes painful (Mahadevan, 2012). Paper two described how a large portion of the non-German employees were stereotyped as negatively Muslim (Mahadevan and Kilian-Yasin, 2017). Both perspectives are insufficient to explain *why* the organization cannot reflect upon certain limitations when facing migration challenges. In this paper, I therefore take a wider perspective from a temporal, discursive and spatial distance and ask what the whole of the organizational phenomenon might *mean* in relation to the migration and expatriation literature, but also in relation to its historical context and wider boundary conditions. This novel material from the multi-sites that are related to the fieldsite allow for considering previously unused inner-organizational empirical material in its social, local and historical context, with regard to its power-implications and as related to wider frames.

Details to data analysis

To analyse my interactions and observations in the primary fieldsite, I documented them in a field diary which was reread and commented upon in weekly intervals. I kept both short and expanded field-notes, as well as a field-diary; formal interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. I also collected texts, documents, media reports and e-mails.

The quality criteria of research pursued were the ones proposed by Mahadevan and Moore (2023) for International Business Studies, namely plausibility and intersubjectivity. For interpreting the data, I thus followed the multi-step ethnographic process outlined by Spradley (1980): First, I started holistically with an object of interest, for example: what is the specific category of social identity into which actors categorize themselves in relation to others? Second, I identified the domains into which this perception was categorized. Next, I carried out a taxonomic analysis in order to find out what the different types of a specific domain might be. Fourth, I conducted a componential analysis in order to find out how these categories are related to each other and to the respective opposing category.

Beyond that, qualitative insights emerge from the researcher interpreting experience in light of theory, while continuing to collect the empirical material. For example, I did not enter the primary fieldsite with the idea of a multi-sited ethnography in mind, but deduced the approach as suitable from the experience. It is a common dilemma when representing qualitative research that one cannot fully adhere to quantitative paper conventions, such as a separate findings and discussion section. Thus, also in this article, the storyline is a somewhat artificial re-structuration of what, in ethnographic reality, is an inductive-deductive circular process of patterning reality via interpretive reduction (see Mahadevan and Moore, 2023).

Exemplifying a multi-sited ethnographic approach that considers history and context

Multi-sited ethnography requires the ethnographer to conceptualize the field "inside-out", for example, by following relevant elements from the central nexus of research, in order to make culture unfold and to be able to "tell the whole story". Thus, in line with the idea, the findings section presents puzzling impressions from the primary fieldsite which can only be fully understood when being related to other multi-sites.

Fieldsite 1: an obligation to care and how it is expressed

How things are spoken about is often central to how social reality is ordered. In the company studied, the group of "non-German employees" was referred to as *unsere ausländischen Mitarbeiter* (our foreign employees) by German management and employees. The term *Ausländer* (foreigner) carries a specific meaning in the German language, as the literal translation would be "out-lander", implying that a foreign person also is an "outlandish" person who does not know German culture and customs. Furthermore, there is a possessive element to the phrase ("*our* outlandish employees"). I also noticed that older employees who had worked for the company for longer and since GDR days, sometimes spoke of "our foreign guests" (*unsere ausländischen Gäste*), and this points to an understanding of them being a non-permanent presence, but also an obligation to "care" (because guests have to be welcomed and cared for by "hosts") (see Mahadevan, 2012). This strong sense of obligation was evident throughout the company. It mainly manifested via two practices, both of which are linked to language as well, namely "the integration course" and "Children's book in the library".

The integration course. First, the company offered a German language course to non-German employees which was referred to as an integration course (*Integrationskurs*). The "integration course" is a national institution which has been made mandatory for non-EU citizens applying for residence, work permits or citizenship in 2005 (Butterwege, 2005b). Its double goals are to teach German language and to transport German culture, society, history and the country's political system. Language-wise, the goal is reaching B1-level based on the European Frame of Reference (EFR) which constitutes the threshold to independent language proficiency (see Council of Europe, 2011). Culture-wise, the idea is that the course transports "Western" values, such as: what democracy is and German culture to "foreign" newcomers who might need education in this area (Bade, 2017). Thus, there is an implicit connotation of non-EU citizens being culturally alien and "uneducated", for instance, when it comes to democratic principles in a developed society (Mahadevan and Kilian-Yasin, 2017).

For the non-German employees of this case, passing an integration course was not mandatory: as they only worked in English language and did not seek permanent residency, they had been granted an exemption. It is therefore relevant that the company offered an integration course nonetheless and expected the non-German employees to attend voluntarily.

Because the company modelled its voluntary organizational integration course after the mandatory societal integration course, it also copied the implicit interrelation between language, culture and customs. For example, the company's managing director explains the course's purpose as follows: "Through learning German, they will understand our culture", and the former head of HR explains her rationale as "caring" for "our foreign employees": "It must be horrible to live in a country and to not know the culture. Therefore, it is our responsibility to care for our foreign employees so that they can learn German". Again, there is a possessive element to "our" foreign employees who require help to "integrate" themselves (also see Mahadevan, 2012), and this can be linked to the previously identified dominant differentiation between "Western and White SIEs" and "non-Western and non-White migrants" in the global migration literature (see section *Background*).

Children's books in the library. Being a research-oriented "think thank", the organization was equipped with a scientific library which provided the researchers with access to all relevant English language journals and reference books, such as Nature, Science or several IEEE transactions and other academic titles were on display. As I have reflected upon in another paper (Mahadevan and Kilian-Yasin, 2017), I was thus surprised to find a row with German language illustrated children's books, recommended for children between the age of four and eight. There were famous German fairy tales and adventures for children. When I asked questions about these books, a German manager told me: "We wanted to take care of our foreign employees and to help them to learn German. Therefore, the German colleagues brought their old children's books to work". Whereas German employees generally viewed these books as a positive sign of "helping people to integrate", non-German employees – if they were aware of these books at all – felt rather mocked by them, and I never saw anyone reading them. From the perspective of German employees and management, this was a question mark at best, and a sign for a "lack of willingness to integrate" at worst: they had intended to help non-German employees "feeling at home in the language", and now this offer was rejected.

To me, it was unfathomable how German management, and the organization at large, could not see how condescending the expectation to learn German via children's books might seem, in particular against the background of this being a scientific, university-level research library used by researchers with a post-graduate degree, and this kept me puzzling with the empirical material for many years. Even though the corporate wish to "care" was meant well, the framing of non-German employees seemed clearly discriminatory, and the question emerged how such an approach might ever become organizationally "normalized". To investigate how this might have happened despite best intentions is the purpose of this paper. This requires considering other multi-sites.

Multi-site 1: the legal framework

The link between language and cultural integration in the sense of "assimilation", as evident from the integration course, is nothing which the company has invented on its own. Rather, it is a general term for those German language courses which are required for obtaining a residency or work permit for Germany. These integration courses were introduced together with the first German immigration law in 2005. The full name of this law, commonly known as Zuwanderungsgesetz (immigration law) is "law to steer and restrict immigration and to regulate the residence and integration of EU-citizens and foreigners" (*Gesetz zur Steuerung und Begrenzung der Zuwanderung und zur Regelung des Aufenthalts und der Integration von Unionsbürgern und Ausländern)*. This means that, legally, only non-EU-citizens are (outlandish) "foreigners" in the sense of the law, and that an implicit sense of having to restrict immigration has been written into the legal system. It is also relevant to note that, in German, there are two words which can be translated as "immigration", namely *Einwanderung* and (as used in this law) *Zuwanderung.* The latter term has the connotation of "additional" or "surplus" immigration, and one would also use if for groups, less for single individuals. Therefore, *Zuwanderung* is not a neutral word: it bears the danger of becoming "too much" and thus has to be regulated and restricted. For example, paragraph eight, section three, of the law specifies that a foreigner who has not fulfilled its obligation to "orderly participate at an integration course" risk not having his residency permit issued or extended (BMI, 2024). But where does the mistrust towards the "foreign" immigrant (also see Mahadevan, 2024) come from?

Multi-site 2: visible difference and "cultural alienness" as markers of foreignness

Historically, Germany is a country in which citizenship is based on ancestry, and this might explain why "visible difference" is a relevant marker of "foreignness" in the sense of not being

accustomed to German language and culture. Legally, the right to German citizenship is rooted in the tradition of *ius sanguinis* (Latin: law of the blood), which constructs citizenship as ancestry-based. The opposite is *ius soli* (Latin: law of the soil) which is commonly practiced in countries that perceive themselves as "immigration countries". Until 2000, a child who was born to parents with non-EU citizenship in Germany had no right to citizenship (BMI, 2023). In 2000, a law was passed that allowed for *ius soli* citizenship for children of parents with non-EU citizenship, but only if parents and child had been primarily residing in Germany for at least eight years (BMI, 2023). However, until 2014, these newly created "*ius soli* Germans" (BMI, 2023) only gained citizenship until the age of 21 when they then had to apply for a permanent German citizenship and give back the citizenship of their parents' country of origin (BMI, 2023). If they failed to do so – and many were not aware – they lost German citizenship (BMI, 2023). Double citizenship was thus, in fact, made impossible for those with roots outside of the European Union, with only very limited exceptions. This then underscores the idea that one needs to be "fully" (not partially) "loyal" to Germany: integration becomes a cultural either–or.

Due to its troubled past, Germany is also a country wherein race or ethnicity are not measured or assessed, for instance, by means of self-identification and census, as it is common in other countries. East Germany is a specific context in the sense that it was always narrated that "the other Germany" was the national-socialist, "guilty", country, and that the former GDR was the "good", "socialist" Germany. Nonetheless, in both countries, race and ethnicity as markers of visible difference have always been silent, not explicit (Lentin, 2008).

Still, there are mechanisms by means of which ethnicity and race emerge nonetheless: the so-called "migration background" (*Migrationshintergrund),* this being the only "racial" category that is actually measured in Germany. It applies to a person, also to those holding German citizenship, if they themselves or at least one of their parents have been born outside of Germany. However, as German sociologist Aladin El-Mafaalani (2020) has pointed out, this migration-*background* is only ascribed if it involves a migration-*foreground,* that is: a visible, discernible Otherness in terms of race, ethnicity and/or religion. This relates back to an idea of a national identity that is rooted in ethnic homogeneity and ancestry (El-Mafaalani, 2020).

Overcoming those visible differences that point to migration foreground is a known strategy of "integration". For example, there is also the category of the so called "Russian-Germans". These the descendants of German farmers who emigrated to Russia during the time of Katharina the Great and were relocated to Siberia or Kazakhstan by Stalin. If they can prove German ancestry, they are allowed to immigrate to Germany and to gain citizenship immediately (regardless of language abilities, as, implicitly, their "cultural Germanness" is already proven by ancestry). However, "Russian-Germans" are encouraged to change their ethnic Russian names into ethnic German names upon gaining citizenship, and many of them do so (see Mahadevan and Zeh, 2015).

In the past and present public debate on "integration" in Germany, language as related to "migration foreground" is an important issue, also in light of history: In the 1950s and 1960s, West Germany actively sought low-qualified workers from other nations such as Greece, Turkey, Spain, Portugal and former Yugoslavia to work in German production, the so called "guest workers". In the former GDR, individuals from socialist brother-states, the so called "guests of socialism", received education and training in East Germany (Butterwege, 2005a, b). It was expected from both sides that these groups would leave the respective countries again (Butterwege, 2005a, b). Nowadays, it is felt that former guest workers are not integrated because they do not speak the language and have remained "foreign" to German culture and values (Bade, 2017), and this a how the "integration course", cumulating in an "integration test" to be passed for obtaining citizenship, came into being.

There is no doubt that migration realities in Germany have evolved over time, in particular in light of a lack of qualified workers that increasingly drives immigration policies (SVI, 2023).

Still, the integration course, and its underlying assumptions, remain firmly in place. As of 2024, the website of the German Federal Agency for Migration and Refugees (BAMF, 2024) defines the content and purpose of the integration course as follows:

> If you would like to live in Germany, you should learn German. This is important if you are looking for work, if you need to complete application forms, if you would like to support your children in school or if you would like to meet new people. There are also certain things that you should know about Germany, for example about its history, culture and its legal system.

Furthermore, some of the inequalities of how immigrants are treated remain structured along the lines of Whiteness and dominant frames of who is "culturally foreign". For instance, Ukrainian refugees are granted immediate access to the German labour market and to German social benefits upon arrival, whereas all other "foreign" (non-EU) refugees need to pass several institutional hurdles, such as the integration course, first (MID, 2022). One can therefore understand visible difference and "cultural alienness", functioning as interrelated markers of "foreignness", as general migration frames that linger on over time.

Multi-site 3: the immediate surroundings

The company studied is located in a provincial East German town located directly at the German-Polish border. The town calls itself "Bridgetown between Poland and Germany", yet, as I could observe, this border is seldom crossed in practice. I also entered the immigration and local residency offices pretending to be one of the clients, with and without corporate help. As the researcher can tune up her ethnic Otherness in the eyes of others (e.g. by her choice of hairstyle, dress or demeanour) and has used this as a research method before (Mahadevan, 2015), these excursions delivered relevant insights into how the non-German researchers must have felt in this context. Also, I took the same cable cars as the company's employees and observed how, in an overcrowded cable car, no one would ever sit next to a bearded male doctoral researcher from Iran. On all twelve occasions which were observed, the seat next to him was never taken. "Visible – racial and/or ethnic – difference" is thus a relevant major marker of otherness in the immediate surroundings, and Whiteness, as I could experience myself when tuning down my own Whiteness in the eyes of others, is a strong requirement for belonging.

The respective region of Germany is also comparably under-developed, unemployment is high (more than 20%) and highly-qualified work is virtually non-existent, and there is a rather strong right-wing radicalism when compared to other, more cosmopolitan parts of Germany. Thus, it is also questioned in general why migrants should obtain jobs when "Germans" seek employment. What is not considered in this frame, however, is that the thus constructed "inferior migrant" might be more cosmopolitan, or, simply: better qualified.

This makes Bridgetown not the best place to live in when one is visibly ethnic non-German or speaks German with an accent. As Polish employees with excellent German language skills also told me, for them, the situation only changed when they spoke the local German dialect and could thus completely blend in. However, if one is visibly non-ethnic German, even if one holds German citizenship, as many told me, one inevitably gets questions regarding ancestry and country of origin. Thus, the corporate wish to "care" and to "help integrate" also stems from the firm commitment to speak up against racism and right-wing radicalism in the local surroundings.

Due to this town being a rather "closed" environment, most highly-qualified German employees do not live in Bridgetown, but in Berlin, and commute to work on a daily or weekly basis. The reasons given are that Bridgetown is too provincial and does not offer any leisure or culture activities. Yet, and here dominant framing comes into place, if a non-German employee states that they do not want to live in Bridgetown, for the same reasons, this is viewed as a lack of willingness to "integrate".

If one considers the immediate surroundings of the company, then the dominant frame of "integrating via language" might actually make sense: this is a local environment in which people do not speak English well and in which the "non-White-migrant" suffers devaluation, discrimination and exclusion. As management frequently told me, it was a major goal for corporate management to ""do better" than their surroundings, to be a "forerunner in overcoming racism" and to show that one is "open to the world", for instance, by organizing inclusive corporate events. However, because one aspect of the dominant frame – visible difference as a marker of "foreignness" – is not reflected upon, tensions cannot be resolved and are then projected upon the migrant who becomes a person who is "unwilling to integrate".

Multi-site 4: the specifics of the East German context and its history

In a previous publication, I have reflected upon the general postcolonial implications of this case (Mahadevan and Kilian-Yasin, 2017). In this paper, I ask the question of what is specifically "East-German" about it, thus specifying how Whiteness interrelates with the field. The first insight is that there is a general consensus that there was no distinct East German identity before in 1989/90. Rather, East German identity emerged as a consequence of German reunification, and was formed by real-life hardships, shared experiences of disadvantage, lack of appreciation and media stigmatization (BPB, 2020). In a 2016 survey, 63% of the East German population expressed a "strong connection" to the former GDR, which involves pride in overcoming dictatorship, nostalgia, and a desire to preserve *and* let go of unique cultural aspects. The relation of this identity to historical legacies is thus contradictory (Ganzenmüller, 2020). Nonetheless, being "East German" serves as an identity anchor for many: In a 2023 survey, more than a fifth of the population of former East Germany self-identified as "East German" (not German), while only one-ninth of the inhabitants of former West Germany identify as West German (Foroutan *et al.*, 2023). Also, objective disparities are numerous: On average, employees with equal qualifications earn 17% less in East Germany (Hans-Böckler-Stiftung, 2022). Distribution of wealth is unequal: 95% of the wealthiest percentile reside in West Germany, and only 5% in East Germany. 39% of those that earn less than 60% of the average income for multiple years reside in East Germany, a region with only about one-fifth of the German population (Hans-Böckler-Stiftung, 2022). These statistics can, for example, well explain why the organization is perceived as an "unattractive employer" by the high-status, "Western" SIEs which it seeks to employ, and why it "merely" succeeds in attracting candidates from less affluent countries of the Global South. With these insights, one can link the different multi-sites back to nexus of the primary field.

Fieldsite 2: losing German culture to the English language

The question why the non-German researchers should learn German *at all* is a relevant one to be asked: The company is part of a highly international industry; English is the global language of science, and every research employee regardless of their origin must possess adequate ELF skills. Generally, English language is highly profitable in Germany. For instance, the average salary of German employees (aged 25–64) who could do their job in the English language was thirteen percent higher than of those without such English language proficiency (Hahm and Gazzola, 2022). Legally, no non-German employee of this case is required to learn German unless they seek permanent residency in Germany beyond this employment, which they did not.

For the non-German employees – all of them highly-skilled in their scientific field and most of them originating from the cosmopolitan centres of their respective countries of origin – German was merely a language to get along in daily life, not a language to work in or identify

with wholly. For example, two engineers from Iran argued that they "would never work technically in Farsi but always in English language, also in Iran". For others, such as a Chinese engineer who did his master's degree in Sweden, English is "simply the language you need to know to make a career". An Indian engineer stressed the point that "it is normal to have different languages in parallel and very strange that [German employees] cannot master this".

The implicit link between language and integration in the sense of cultural assimilation was not evident to the non-German engineers: To them, "*the* integration course" was simply "*a* German language course". As most SIEs were bi- or multi-lingual anyway, there was no sense of loss or the idea that identity could be endangered because of English language. Thus, the major reason for not attending the course was its being a boring waste of precious research time, as it tried to teach a language that was professionally irrelevant, and explained concepts, such as what a "parliament" is and how it is elected, that – as I observed myself – mocked the educational level and lived experiences of its participants. However, because the integration course was so normally-laden from the German side, non-attendance was not interpreted as a mis-fit in offer and demand but as a signal of an "unwillingness to integrate".

However, some local requirements of "how to show willingness to integrate" cannot be easily explained by general findings on how integration is framed in Germany. For example, Polish employees were the only ones who originated from the province of their home country, and they were also the only group who learned to speak German with a local dialect. When doing so, they affirmed local identity over the English-language cosmopolitanism of science, much like the cosmopolitan West-German employees did when stressing the relevance of non-German employees learning the German language: A strong sign of "local integration" and "single loyalty". This strategy might even overcome visible difference. For example, there was also a Mongolian researcher who had originally come to East-Germany as a "guest of socialism": He had settled with his wife, learned to speak the local dialect, sent his children to local schools, and was generally perceived as a "very well integrated" despite visible difference. Thus, what is added by the specific East German context is the need to be "local" and not cosmopolitan (which, in other parts of Germany would most likely have signified positive internationalization). This strongly suggests that one needs to "play the local" and to downplay English-language cosmopolitanism to blend in.

Thus, the specifics of East German identity further contribute to how global migration effects take shape: This is a situation in which the past, for instance, the company's legacy of being *the* most renowned research institute and the only high-technology manufacturer of its kind in the whole Eastern bloc, has been erased from public discourse, in which the company struggles for survival, and in which English-language cosmopolitanism has become the dominant way of how research excellence needs to be shown. Previously, this had been a company one aspired to be employed at. Nowadays, no one seems to want to work there. Those who come, are English language cosmopolitans who are visibly "foreign" and who seem to wish to remain "different" (because they reject offers to "integrate"), and this further threatens the status of East German employees. Thus, accepting this "foreignness" as the "new normal" and letting go of the idea of a local "East German" identity is not an option.

Discussion: language-power, white subalternity and compressed modernity

Firstly, power emerges as relevant in various facets. Language power, as related to German and English as a lingua franca (ELF), is central to understanding this case. It is known that English as a lingua franca (ELF) creates "power-authority distortions" at work (Harzing and Pudelko, 2013), because those with higher ELF proficiency are often perceived as more competent, regarding both their expertise and their leadership abilities (Barner-Rasmussen *et al.*, 2014; Neeley and Dumas, 2016; Steyaert *et al.*, 2011). Yet, previous studies focused on

ELF mainly in existing or merging MNCs (e.g. Vaara *et al.*, 2005), and even the sole multi-sited ethnographic approach to ELF by Lauring and Klitmøller's (2015) confines itself to the perspective of different corporate sites. However, as this case suggests, one needs a multi-sited ethnography beyond the business sphere to truly understand language power, in this case: why the company is so focussed on "integration via German language" that employees bring fairy tales to work so that they be read by scientific researchers.

The East German organizational majority is historically disadvantaged in terms of their access to English language cosmopolitanism but privileged in terms of ethnicity. The issue is therefore not that some are more fluent in ELF than others but rather that the whole system of power of how migration is ordered becomes contested if a migrant who is visibly "foreign" can successfully claim English language cosmopolitanism over local German identity, with the ensuing risk that West German employees now choose this side as well, and, that ultimately, there will be no more "East German bosses" and "East German organizational identity".

In line with Magee and Galinsky's (2008, p. 361) definition of power as "asymmetric control over valued resources in social relations", ELF related to migration has much wider power-effects than commonly acknowledged by global migration studies in management. It is not only that proficiency in the relevant language(s) allows key employees to function as corporate language nodes (Marschan- Piekkari *et al.*, 1999) or linking pins (Harzing *et al.*, 2011) or that they have privileged access to information, which they can exploit or use to take up various intermediary roles (Barner-Rasmussen *et al.*, 2014). Rather, language competency, and how it is institutionalized and made sense of, allows people to order migration realities in ways that favour their own identities over other groups, also beyond the corporate field.

In this case, there is a real danger that East German identity might be reduced in status due to the cosmopolitan SIEs now employed. For example, the more cosmopolitan West German employees might stop inadapting to East German corporate culture, and the Polish employees who, today, "play the local" and learn the local dialect, might change sides and ally with the English language cosmopolitanism of the other SIEs. Therefore, this case sheds contextual light onto a study by Abdumannonovna (2022) who found that German scientists are proficient in the English language, but not always willing to accept its cultural status as the language of German science (also see Barner-Rasmussen *et al.*, 2014): Local identity endangerment might be a root cause.

From this standpoint, it then makes organizational sense to demand that cosmopolitan SIEs learn German and to uphold the image of German being essential at work. In this local context, the SIE's migration foreground is therefore less relevant than their internationalization privilege and English language cosmopolitanism. Thus, what the SIEs of this case need to show to be trusted is that they give up their English language internationalization privilege and learn the local dialect. However, from the SIEs perspective, "German identity", in particular the non-Englishized, local version of it, is inferior and undesirable, and this is why it makes no sense to lose status to gain access to local East Germanness. Rather, one endures seemingly "strange" local people and conditions and seeks to build the competencies and skills for moving on. Rejecting the "integration course" makes this resistance visible, which leads to German employees bringing children's books to the library in a last, final act of offering "help to integrate".

Secondly, one can understand the East German employees' position as what Fischer-Tiné (2009), in his analysis of Colonial India, has called the "White Subaltern". Subalterns, in postcolonial theory, are those who are systemically disadvantaged to such a degree that they have no "voice" or the power to act upon their group's interests (agency), such as indented labourers or slaves, or, in modern terms: housemaids from the Global South and low-cost offshore factory workers. "White" subalterns are those individuals who *should* be at the top of the racialized social stratification pyramid (of the British Empire), because they are nominally

"White", but who are factually not, because they are – culturally, politically, socially and/or economically – made "non-White". In the English colonial society, for example, it seems likely that an Irish person aspiring to move up the ladder is more subaltern than the well-educated Indian public servant: the Irish identity then becomes the "White subaltern". In this case, "White subalternity" explains why local East German identity needs to be upheld in light of the non-White SIEs entering the company: it is endangerment, not privilege, that causes what is perceived by the recipients as condescending practice.

Third, this case exemplifies what Chang (1999, 2010, 2022) has called "compressed modernity" as highly relevant to understanding migration. Drawing from postmodernism, post-colonialism, reflexive modernization and the idea of multiple modernities, the concept describes modernization processes which have taken place in a comparatively short period of time and represent an intensified and accelerated version of the socioeconomic and cultural changes which have typically been observed in Western societies. Chang (2010, p. 446) defines compressed modernity as

> a civilizational condition in which economic, political, social, and/or cultural changes occur in an extremely condensed manner in respect to both time and space, and in which the dynamic coexistence of mutually disparate historical and social elements leads to the construction and reconstruction of a highly complex and fluid social system.

Such an intense and fast paced transformation, which is often driven by factors such as technological advancements, globalization and external influences, may inevitably spark cultural and political backlashes, as local and foreign, traditional and modern aspects collide rather suddenly (Chang, 2022). For Chang (2010, p. 548), the Eastern European post-socialist modernity experience is compressed in many ways, and, referring to Sinn and Sinn (1992), he states that "East Germany, of course, provides the most direct example of this phenomenon due to its wholesale economic and social incorporation into West Germany". In the organization studied, too, there are rapid and paradoxical developments which exemplify modernity, globalization and Englishization at large and which also put those who are subjected to them at risk of becoming the White subaltern. If one uses Chang's idea of compressed modernity as a starting point to relate the general to the specific, then children's books in the library suddenly make sense, and the different multi-sites can be ordered along the lines of a compressed migration modernity in light of an East German White subalternity. This links this site to other global effects, such as Englishization in Indian call-centres (Boussebaa *et al.*, 2014): even though the specifics differ, the intersecting themes of language power, Whiteness and subalternity, and compressed modernity are equally relevant to both, albeit in different ways.

Implications

Managerial implications

As this paper suggests, migration is not as simple as nations competing on the global marketplace for attracting global talent (Angell and Mordhorst, 2015), and individuals at work being globally mobile (Al Ariss *et al.*, 2014): it takes place in and across compressed modernity sites, with often contradicting effects. There are always specifics to be considered, and one cannot unify, for example, "the German migration experience". This brings about the question as to whether managers and organizations are free to choose their strategies and actions when trying to meet global migration demands. As this paper suggests, this is not the case, because what managers and organizations do is framed by context, and both best and worst practices emerge from it. What is required, is thus a more reflexive managerial practice. For achieving reflexivity, managers need to widen their view beyond the corporate setting and identify those who are made or feel as "White subalterns". Managers should also consider compressed

modernity effects, as these must be assumed to characterize many migration localities today. This enables managers to assess who is privileged and who is disadvantaged in more intersecting and complex ways. Also, it prevents management from looking down on those who seem to "resist internationalization" and to be limited by a local mindset that is too often stereotyped as "traditional" and "narrow". By assessing the specific privilege-disadvantage ratios of certain identities in relation to each other, managers may overcome the often held assumption, maybe their own stereotype, that "being cosmopolitan" is the "better identity" in today's globalized world. Managers can then better relate to the *real* needs of locally rooted organizations, in light of local context and history, and may devise better and more fitting "integration" strategies.

As global migration increases, new expatriation categories emerge (Guttormsen, 2018). As more SIEs emerge from the Global South, and as more find themselves outside of the cosmopolitan centres of the world, in immediate interaction with a local workforce and a population with a locally rooted mindset, compressed modernity and its potential backlash effects will gain in relevance. Remaining in a comfortable cosmopolitan expatriation bubble then ceases to be an option, and it becomes a managerial responsibility to also care for globally mobile employees' wellbeing outside of work.

Furthermore, those who are globally mobile might come from a more local mindset as well. They are thus likely to "re-traditionalize" when faced with the need to modernize in a compressed manner at their new location. For managers this brings about the need to train and develop both local and migrant workforces and organizations in such ways that they are better able to cope with their various compressed modernity experiences.

Understanding that people might "mean well" but find inadequate and potentially even hurtful solutions, as it is in this case, is key to empathizing with and engaging with perceived difference and Otherness. The goal might not be to unify global migration experiences and to create more harmonious relations, but simply to understand that conflict is inevitable in compressed modernity sites, and that all involved need to be willing and motivated to engage with it in constructive and relevant ways (also see Mahadevan, 2024).

Ultimately, this then points to an increased managerial responsibility for global migration: It is no longer sufficient to simply "mirror" what is considered societal best practice – such as an "integration course", as these practices might be limited by dominant discourses and institutionalized frames (also see Mahadevan and Kilian-Yasin, 2017). Rather, organizations need to drive how societies approach global migration and seek to improve upon this approach. How management conceptualizes and approaches global migration conflict is thus key to achieving wider societal goals such as avoiding re-traditionalization and neo-conservatism which easily tend to emerge when people's identities are felt to be endangered by the experience of Otherness (El-Mafaalani, 2020).

Methodological and conceptual implications

Studying global migration in management requires a research design that integrates objective and subjective elements of social reality, and that is both "close up" and general. Multi-sited ethnography is highly suitable for bringing the complexities and power-implications of the global mobility experience, as involving both general and specific effects across many multi-sites, into focus. When being applied to studying migration, multi-sited ethnography can increase research relevance (King, 2018), as it delivers are more precise and wider picture of what is at stake. For finding inspiration for how to interpret global mobility experiences in management, researchers should therefore consider insights from ethnography outside of the organization and associate and interconnect the local and the general.

This paper furthermore suggests that "old data" needs to be questioned for its being "old" by those studying global migration in management: Also, in this case, the phenomenon

studied has not much changed over the past decade. Rather, discourses and practices associated with Whiteness and cultural alienness, while changing in details, linger on in general. Thus, some implications were not yet visible during the time of the actual research, as they only manifested when the immediate field was re-examined from a (temporal) distance. Adding to Marcus (1995), this paper thus proposes that multi-sited ethnography needs to be historically aware, in order to establish a path to be followed not only across multiple sites, but also across points in time.

For example, historical ethnography can helps establish links between macro and micro and answer questions as to how much agentic power (agency) individuals have in light of larger, historic and/or systemic frames (Fenske and Bendix, 2007). In structuralist anthropology, the interlinkages between history and anthropology have been highlighted by Evans-Pritchard (1950, 1961), and Blok's (1974) ethnography of the Mafia in a Sicilian village exemplifies the interplay between ethnographic analysis and historical material for identifying interconnections and for thus densifying interpretations. However, this approach is not yet firmly established in organizational ethnography, most likely to its being rooted more in North American cultural anthropology than in the British school (overview Moore and Mahadevan, 2020; Mahadevan, 2020), and this paper underscores the relevance of employing it.

Bringing local history in seems particularly relevant in light of compressed modernity sites such as East Germany in which established categories (White and non-White, centre and periphery) are distorted and inverted, and in which identity is under pressure (e.g. Borneman, 1991). A power-sensitive multi-sited ethnography of global migration that acknowledges the historical context may therefore increase the rigour and generalizability of qualitative migration research (also see Vives, 2012). For the study of global mobility in management, this is a novel contribution, and this paper has exemplified such an approach.

Reflexive considerations

The researcher of this case is a German citizen by birth who identifies as German, who experienced global mobility and Englishization, whose "German" roots lie in former West and East Germany, and who is also linked to the experience of non-Western SIEs by growing up on many expatriate sites as a skilled non-Western SIEs daughter. Researcher identity is also fluid in the sense that the researcher can play with her cultural identity, e.g. tune up or down her ethnic otherness in the eyes of others, and she has pursued this as an ethnographic research method before (Mahadevan, 2015). From this researcher's perspective, with her points of access, the most astonishing and deepest experiences when becoming part of this organization and trying to empathize with it, was this discrepancy between people's meaning "so well" and doing it "so badly", and multi-sited ethnography disentangled the knot. Most likely, another researcher would have identified something else as the nexus of the phenomenon. This is both the limitation and strength of this study.

Consequently, the need for researcher reflexivity when doing multi-sited ethnography emerges as a key implication: there is no neutral standpoint from which to write global migration stories, as multi-sited ethnography is about the lifeworlds a specific researcher has access to and can co-construct: This researcher – whose lived experiences are informed by global mobility, Englishization, East German identity and history, and the non-Western, non-White SIE experience in Germany – was not in the position to interpret the field otherwise, yet, also found herself in exactly this position to gain relevant insights on exactly this phenomenon. Thus, the higher the diversity of those doing migration research in management, the more multi-facetted and relevant insights they will gain. The ultimate goal is therefore a collaborative and collective reflexive disciplinary engagement with multi-sited ethnography across space and time.

Summary

Multi-sited ethnography allows researchers and managers to identify and trace the connections between otherwise seemingly isolated and paradoxical phenomena, and this paper has exemplified such an approach. Multi-sited ethnography starts with identifying the nexus of a relevant phenomenon – where it seems to be the most "densified" or "puzzling" – and to work one's way through multiple temporal and spatial sites from there. In the specific case of an East German research company facing the influx of mainly non-Western SIEs, this nexus could be identified by the practice of the integration course and via children's books in the library. From there, one can establish a link to the legal framework for citizenship in Germany, which is underlined by ideas of ethnic homogeneity and of integration as cultural assimilation. Visible difference then emerges as a marker of foreignness. This is evidenced by the implicit relevance of "migration foreground", a migration frame that has not much changed over time. Together, this points to a problematic interrelation between language power (Germanness versus Englishization), "integration" (in the sense of cultural assimilation) via language, and notions of a "perpetual foreignness", as originating from visible markers of difference. Finally, there is the local context and the history of East German identity to be considered. As local East German identity is under pressure, English language cosmopolitanism is rejected as the "foreign" employees' unjustified claim towards superior status. Whiteness in global migration is therefore a multifaceted, contested practice "in-the-making", not a unified and finite "order of things". The two relevant conceptual principles by means of which the findings of this multi-sited ethnography can be ordered are the compressed modernity faced by this organization and the White subalternity experienced by its East German employees, and their combined effects promote an inadequate managerial and organizational response to migration. While this might explain why corporate practice is what it is, namely condescending despite benevolent intentions, it does not free corporate actors from taking responsibility for the dominant frames which they perpetuate. At the same time, and this is the crucial finding for the study of global mobility in management, it becomes equally impossible to "judge" the organization and its managers as incompetent, because, as multi-sited ethnography informs us, the phenomenon under study does neither begin nor end here. Thus, core assumptions need to be re-considered to include multi-sited, contextual and historical factors, or, ideally, a combination thereof, to imagine and, consequently, act otherwise.

Conclusion

By employing and further developing the concept of multi-sited ethnography, this study traced the multi-level processes through which dominant migration frames manifest in context. As it is increasingly common that cosmopolitan SIEs who are disadvantaged in some, but also privileged in other aspects, meet local organizations and individuals who are partially advantaged and partially marginalized, compressed modernity and White subalternity seem relevant beyond this case. What global migration researchers have to do, is to conceptualize the field "inside-out", and across multiple sites and points in time, to uncover and tell "the whole story". Migration as related to management and organizations, with its multi-local, multi-level, multi-temporal and multi-perspective implications, clearly requires such an approach, to be employed collaboratively from multiple reflexive standpoints.

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