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Culture studies in international business: paradigmatic shifts

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to unfold the path of how the complexity of culture issues leads to a rising pressure for paradigm changes in the research on culture in international management. In terms of academic debate about culture, the crucial paradigm shift has not yet happened. Research and writing are still dominated by a mechanistic-rational approach which does not quite know to handle cultural phenomena which by nature are mutable, often transient and invariably context-specific. Rising pressure is observed for paradigm changes through three main trends: integration of West-East dichotomy, coexistence of convergence and divergence; and dynamic vs static perspectives. It is argued that the unresolved debate on the culture construct and its measurement, the epistemological stance by researchers and associated methodological choices in culture studies reinforce these trends pressuring for a paradigm shift.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper reviews the knowledge based on culture studies to establish the contributions of culture studies in international business and the foundation of its knowledge base. The conceptual foundation of culture, its multi-level and multi-dimensionality and critical issues in research epistemology and methodology are analyzed to discuss emerging trends in the process of an imminent paradigm change.

Findings – By unfolding the nature of abstract and high-order definition of culture, the focus is on deciphering the complex construct and multi-level and multi-dimensionality in measurement, which, in turn, interact with the epistemology of culture researchers and the choice of methodology used to carry out culture studies. Eventually the interaction of the three studied elements drives the proposed three paradigmatic changes in the evolving business environment.

Research limitations/implications – The identified trends in existing culture research keep the importance of culture studies in international business management thriving as we point to their relevance for the envisaged paradigm shift.

Practical implications – The three paradoxes discussed challenge researchers who aim to contribute to the knowledge base of culture in international business. In addition, the debate cannot be ignored by international business managers as culture is a key informal institutional driver that influences international business performance.

Originality/value – The review of the knowledge base on culture studies in management contributes to a better understanding of the envisaged paradigmatic shift of the discipline. The debate on the complexity of culture studies is extended to three tendencies for potential paradigmatic change, with implications discussed to suggest future research.

Keywords Complexity, Paradigm shift, International business, Paradoxes

Paper type Literature review

Introduction

With business being increasingly internationalized, the culture involved in management has become more complex, and calls for further understanding. The purpose of this paper is to review existing culture studies and to identify the main streams and challenges for future research in the changing paradigm of international business.

Cultural issues have been the center of attention for scholars in management and international business (IB) for decades (Adler, 1983b; Trompenaars, 2006). They help us comprehend the apparent differences in approaching business among managers from different cultural backgrounds. A fit between cultural characteristics and management practices is also commonly seen as an important factor in the successful implementation of management practices (Holden, 2002; Trompenaars, 2006). The increasing relevance of international business also promotes interest in developing comparative culture studies, seeking better management understanding and knowledge transfers. Arguments from the cultural perspective often have a pervasive influence on modern management thinking and discourse, providing the dominant archetype in comparative organization studies (Child, 2002).

However, the upswing of culture studies is not all positive, and critical reflection on the influence of culture has received a new impetus with the growing number of comparative studies in international business, with non-Western countries gaining attention. Child (2002, p. 33) criticizes misuse of the cultural factor as a justification of low performance rather than for facilitating superior performance with a more comprehensive understanding of culture-sensitive management. Scholars such as Zhang and Lopez-Pascual (2012) suggest that cultural studies need to move forward by distinguishing dynamic and static perspectives. While a static comparative mode of cultural study provides an initial understanding of cultural differences between different cultural groups, a dynamic perspective of culture offers an alternative tool aiding practitioners to go through the acculturation process and integrate with management. Concerns are also raised regarding the rising economic power in Asian countries, and the incorporation of Eastern culture into mainstream management and international business theory (Chen, 2002; Meyer, 2006, 2007). In addition, existing literature has been debating tendencies towards cultural convergence versus divergence (Ohmae, 1990; Schwartz, 1994). Indeed, some have urged a paradigm shift in culture research, as there is reason to revisit the concept of culture (Fang, 2012, p. 29).

We trace how the complexity of culture issues has led to rising pressure for paradigm changes in researching culture in IB. In terms of academic debate about culture, the crucial paradigm shift has not yet happened. Research and writing are still dominated by a mechanistic-rational approach which does not quite know how to handle cultural phenomena which by nature are mutable, often transient and invariably context-specific. We observe a rising pressure for paradigm changes through three main trends: West-East dichotomy, convergence versus divergence and dynamic versus static. We argue that the unresolved debate on the culture construct and its measurement, the epistemological stance by researchers and associated methodological choices in culture studies in IB reinforce these trends, pushing for a paradigm shift.

We structure the rest of the paper in accordance with the following schema (Figure 1). First, we depict the evolution of the definition of culture from other social science disciplines to management. The abstract and high-order definition of culture brings complexity for further culture construct and measurement, as well as providing space
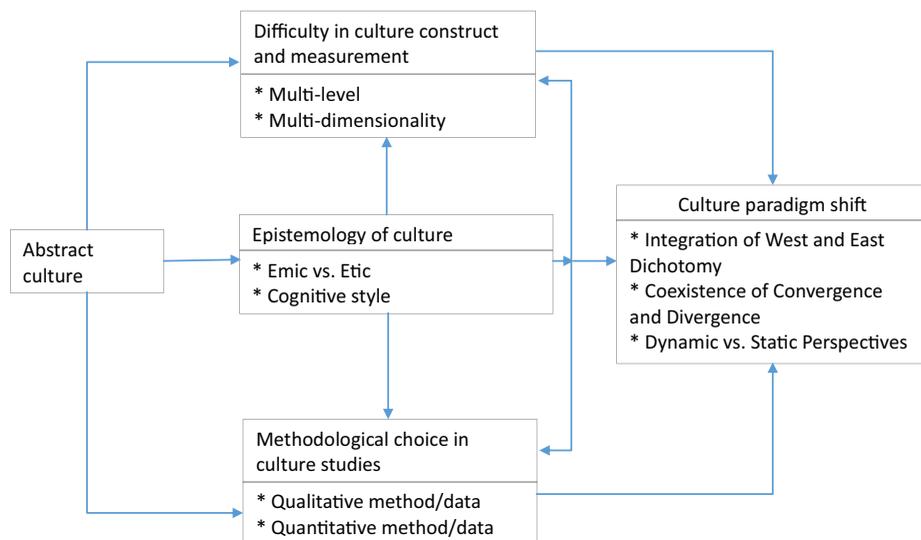
Figure 1.
Implications in
culture studies and
paradigm shift

for interpretation by the epistemological stance of culture researchers, and the choice of methodology in carrying out culture studies in the field of management and international business. The epistemology of researchers also influences the choice of culture construct and methodology, while the latter two interact. These three elements drive the culture paradigm to shift toward the three aforementioned trends. Finally, we extend the debate with the implications discussed to suggest future research.

Culture definition: abstract and complex
Management researchers have borrowed the concept of culture from other disciplines such as anthropology and psychology and redefined it according to their research interests. Consequently, management literature offers a wide range of definitions, and the culture concept is often seen as being vague and hard to grasp. These variations can be traced back to Kroeber and Kluckhohn's (1952, p. 182) extensive work, which compiles 164 definitions of culture, highlighting that the concept of culture "[…] defies a single, all purpose definition". Decades later, Roberts and Boyacigiller (1984) could still observe that the most fundamental problem in cultural studies was the lack of an exhaustive and generally accepted definition.

Some of the frequently cited classic definitions of culture indicate it is highly abstract and complex: "Culture uses and transforms life to realise a synthesis of a higher order" (Lévi-Strauss, 1969); Tylor's (1903, p. 64) "[the] complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society"; Weber's (1904/1949, p. 75) "'cultural sciences' […] which analyse the phenomena of life in terms of their cultural significance"; and Kroeber and Kluckhohn's (1952, p. 357):

> […] culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiment in artefacts […].

In recent decades, the national level of culture has emerged and become a principal paradigm in organizational studies, especially with the upswing of interest in international business. The landmark work of Hofstede (1980, p. 25) is probably the most influential in this sense, presenting a generic definition of culture:

> […] the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another […] the interactive aggregate of common characteristics that influence a human group's response to its environment.

People are simply seen as being from different cultures if their way of being and acting as a group differs significantly from the others. This broadly defined culture has been popularly employed in management studies, with special emphasis on level of organization and nation, though the original definition provides for the possibility of other levels such as industry, professional and regional, among others (Zhang *et al.*, 2009).

This recognized definitional diversity and its lack of agreement has been an asset as well as a liability in IB in the development of culture studies into a more unified and cohesive field of academic study. While the use of different definitions permits scholars to frame and investigate their culture studies in novel and creative ways, this eclectic orientation has the undesirable effect of bringing unnecessary fragmentation to the field, and hinders the systematic accumulation of knowledge. In addition, a high-order and highly abstract definition of culture brings ambiguity in interpretation for research design, depending on the epistemological stance of the researchers, opening up diverse possibilities of defining constructs and measures and the choice of research methodology. Indeed, we observe a non-linear, fragmented progress in respect to culture constructs and measurement and the assumptions and perceptions that scholars of culture studies adopt.

Culture constructs and measurement
Based on their definition of culture, scholars decide the structure to which culture pertains to make it tangible for further empirical investigation. Two principal structural elements used are level and dimension. Management researchers generally agree on the nature of culture as being multi-level and multi-dimension.

The multi-level nature
The multi-level nature of cultural studies has long been modeled in management research, and refers to the exploration of culture variables at different levels, such as regional (supranational), national, regional (subnational), organizational, group and individual (Fischer, 2009; Gerhart, 2009). In the view of Erez and Gati (2004, p. 587), culture is a shared meaning system that can be formed at each level, and a dynamic interplay between the various levels is commonly assumed. Their dynamic multi-level model of culture encompasses structural and dynamic dimensions. The structural dimension presents the hierarchy of nested individual, group, organizational, national and global cultures. The dynamic dimension consists of a bi-directional cultural process suggesting an interrelationship of both top-down and bottom-up.

To date, most multi-level modeling and research has been carried out in the field of social psychology and anthropology. The issue, however, should not be neglected by cross-cultural management research, as many management practices are "culturally dependent". Fischer (2009, p. 26) illustrates exemplarily that the multiple levels of

culture can have a distinct influence on concrete management practices in various areas although they are often neither explicitly discussed as such nor are their overlaps considered. It remains a substantial challenge to re-think at both micro- and macro-level, to incorporate multiple levels simultaneously (Taras *et al.*, 2009).

In spite of the necessity of multi-level studies, the limited generalizability of relationships found at one level to other levels (i.e. ecological fallacy) has been known for decades. Hofstede (2006) repeatedly warns that his dimensions are meaningless as descriptors of individuals or as predictors of individual differences because the variables that define them do not correlate meaningfully across individuals. Schwartz (1992) asserts that two value theories are necessary, as his originally individual-level value model did not perfectly replicate with aggregated data, and therefore the alternative seven-factor level framework was developed. Similarly, the GLOBE project examined the inter-relationships between multiple levels (House *et al.*, 2004). When exploring the factor structure of GLOBE data at different levels, Hanges and Dickson (2006) found that the final list of dimensions replicates only with the national- and organizational-level data, but not with the data representing individual responses.

The difficulty in researching the multi-level concept of culture has been noted by Schwartz (2011a), confirming that, until very recently, he has avoided discussing his individual- and national-level theories in the same forum or writing about them in the same publication. Recently, Schwartz (2011b) has directly contrasted the two levels and describes how they fit together, probably as a desperate response to the continuing misuse of and confusion with individual- and national-level concepts in academic research.

The multi-dimensionality of culture

The multiple dimensions that make up culture have also been widely addressed by scholars (Leung *et al.*, 2005), as the constructed structure used for measuring culture. Over decades, scholars have made efforts to identify the principal framework for constructing culture. In this subsection, we examine dimensions of three of the most popular national culture scholarly frameworks in management studies (i.e. Hofstede's, Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner's, and Schwartz's), referencing them with elements that were originally identified by Kluckhorn and Strodtbeck (1961), i.e. time, relation, ecology, human, space and function (Table I).

Kluckhorn and Strodtbeck's (1961) value framework suggests six common underlying elements that different societies have faced throughout time by analyzing hundreds of ethnographic descriptions of worldwide cultures conducted by researchers from different backgrounds. These six elements correspond to six types of issues to be solved by any society: time orientation (i.e. on what aspect of time should we primarily focus?), man-nature orientation (i.e. what is the relationship between humanity and its natural environment? – ecology), relation orientation (i.e. how should individuals relate with each other?), activity orientation (i.e. what is the prime motivation for behavior?), human-nature orientation (i.e. what is the nature of the human being?) and space orientation (i.e. how do we think about space?). In spite of an apparent difference in constructing and developing culture research frameworks by scholars, the six-dimensional framework seems to be a universal pattern, while the specific terms used vary in accordance with the focus and angle of studies.

Element	Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck	Hofstede	Schwartz	Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner
Time	*Time orientation*: An orientation towards past, present or future determines present actions; as well as the use of specific units of time	*Long-term/short-term orientation*: Can be interpreted as dealing with society's search for virtue and relates to the time horizons that people in different cultures are oriented towards		*Attitudes to time*: The way in which societies consider time: are past achievements important or matter plans developed for the future? Does time pass in a straight line as a sequence of disparate events or does it move in a circle with past, present and future interconnected?
Relation	*Relation orientation* refers to hierarchical, equal or individualistic relations and is concerned with issues of power and responsibility: What responsibility do people have for the welfare of others? Who has power over us? Over whom do we have power?	*Individualism/collectivism*: Indicates the degree to which individuals are integrated into groups	*Egalitarianism*: A cultural emphasis on transcendence of selfish interests in favor of voluntary commitment to promoting the welfare of others (equality, social justice, freedom, responsibility, honesty)	*Individualism/communitarianism*: Do people regard themselves primarily as individuals or primarily as part of a group? *Specific/diffuse*: It deals with the degree of involvement individuals are comfortable with in dealing with others
Ecology	*Man-nature orientation*: Human activity depends on its relationship to the natural environment; mastery, harmony or subjugation	*Uncertainty avoidance*: Indicates the degree to which people in a culture feel anxious or threatened by uncertainty and ambiguity and create institutions and rules to avoid them	*Harmony*: A cultural emphasis on fitting harmoniously into the environment (unity with nature, protecting the environment, world at peace)	*Attitudes to the environment*: Some cultures see the major forces affecting lives and the origins of vice and virtue as residing with a person. Others see the world as more powerful than individuals, with nature to be feared or emulated
Human	*Human-nature orientation*: The belief about basic human nature reflects one's belief about the inherent character of the human being; are people easily controlled and not to be trusted, or can they be trusted to act freely and responsible?		*Affective autonomy*: Encourages individuals to pursue arousing, affectively positive personal experience (pleasure, exciting, varied life) *Intellectual autonomy*: Encourages people to pursue their own ideas and intellectual directions independently (broadmindedness, creativity)	*Neutral/affective (emotional)*: Orientation that describes the extent to which feelings are openly expressed by individuals

(*continued*)

Table I.
Cultural dimensions
in different
frameworks

Element	Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck	Hofstede	Schwartz	Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner
Space	*Space orientation* reflects an orientation toward surrounding space: How does one view its use, especially the sense of ownership of space relative to others? It relates to ownership of whatever is in the space (information, resources)	*Power distance:* The extent to which the less powerful members of organizations and institutions expect and accept that power is and should be distributed unequally	*Hierarchy:* A cultural emphasis on the legitimacy of an unequal distribution of power, roles and resources (social power, authority, humility, wealth)	*Achievement/ascription:* Status is accorded on his-her recent accomplishments and records (achievement) or is ascribed to an individual by birth, kinship, gender or age
Function	*Activity orientation: being, thinking, doing:* The point of life is to live and experience an understanding (being); to think and feel, seeking becoming and to control yourself (thinking); or to do things, be involved and accomplish things (doing)	*Masculinity/femininity:* In a masculine culture dominant values are advancement, ambition, assertiveness, performance, the acquisition of money/ material objects. A feminine culture stresses values such as quality of life, personal relationships, care for the weak/ the environment. *Indulgence/restraint:* Indulgence stands for a society that allows relatively free gratification of basic and natural human derives related to enjoying life. Restraint stands for a society that suppresses gratification of needs and regulates it by means of strict social norms	*Embeddedness:* A cultural emphasis on maintain the status quo and restraining actions that might disrupt in-group solidarity or the traditional order (social order, obedience, respect for tradition) *Mastery:* A cultural emphasis on getting ahead through active self-assertion (ambition, success, daring, competence)	*Universalism/particularism:* In particularistic cultures greater attention is given to the obligations of relationships and unique circumstances; less attention is given to abstract societal codes

Table I.

In comparison, in Table I, we show that in spite of apparent differences and focuses, the underlying themes addressed in culture research are based on a similar knowledge structure, i.e. universally focusing on the dimensions of time, space, inter-personal relationship, humanity, ecology and the way of functioning, from different angles. Considering for instance Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner's (1997) framework, attitudes to time is clearly a time dimension, individualism/communitarianism is seen as relation, attitude to the environment is a man-nature ecological issue, neutral/affective orientation is a human factor, achievement/ascription refers to a social space created by achievements or an ascription and universalism/particularism is a way to function. All six elements of Kluckhorn and Strodtbeck's (1961) culture are addressed by Hofstede and colleagues, and by Schwartz's framework (except for time).

Although the focal constructs of individual dimensions are not necessarily the same, at a more latent level, there exist similarities and dissimilarities of the underlying dimensions. When Hofstede incorporated the fifth dimension of the Chinese Value Survey (CVS), he compared several CVS dimensions that were significantly correlated with his IBM dimensions (Hofstede, 1994). In the multi-dimensional nature of culture, the construct and consequent measures used for culture studies are a key for the outcomes of the research, especially significant in the international management study context. However, it is still too early to conclude a best set of dimensions because choosing any one set of dimensions would lose the richness of cultural understanding that the diverse concepts permit (Schwartz, 2011b, p. 315).

In Table I, we observe the underlying universality in dimensionality through different terms preferred by different scholars seen from their own viewpoint. Critical observers also underline that scholars are trapped by their favored ways of conceptualizing culture. For instance, Lowe et al. (2007) stress that Hofstede's expectation that different approaches would explore an "intersubjective" understanding of culture has not happened. Our comparative result confirms what Lowe et al. (2007, p. 245) observe in their "paradigmapping studies in culture and organization", which shows an imbalance in culture conceptual approaches toward one particular dimension in their analytical framework. It therefore exhibits less dissimilarity than claimed, favoring a "paradigmatic hermeticism" and hindering "the metaparadigmatic advancement of the understanding of culture".

Epistemology of researchers in culture studies

The study of such a multi-faceted phenomenon as culture is wrought with susceptibility to conflicts that arise from differences in the assumptions and perspectives that management and IB researchers involved in culture studies adopt. Hofstede (1994) claims that management scientists are also human, referring to the influence of researchers' cultures on research processes and outcomes. Extending this cultural embeddedness, it can be viewed as a different epistemological stance, i.e. researchers' ontology and view of reality underpinning their theoretical perspective and research methodology. Different approaches are taken to carrying out scientific research in accordance with their philosophic positioning. Within management science, current dominant conceptualizations bound to Western culture can be observed (Adler, 1983a; Tsui, 2006). Long overdue novel conceptualizations of an alternative culture model have been slowly emerging only recently, including Brannen and Salks' (2000) concept of negotiated culture.

The implications of this boundedness are seen in at least two aspects. Scholars are bounded by the perspectives taken to research human beings and their behavior, particularly in IB, where contextualization is a major concern (Michailova, 2011; Tsui *et al.*, 2007). First, cultural factors *per se* (e.g. national culture), have consciously or unconsciously influenced researchers in their management studies via their cognitive formation. This bias may constitute specific frames of references in which questions are posed and answers are found. Second, one may look at matters through an emic or etic approach. An emic approach is culture specific because it is understood on its own terms, as seen from the perspective of cultural insiders, in constructs drawn from their self-understanding (Morris *et al.*, 1999, p. 783). In contrast, an etic account is a description of a behavior or belief by a scientific observer, in constructs that can be applied across cultures (Morris *et al.*, 1999). These two aspects, cognitive style differences and the emic-etic approach, are not totally separate.

Culture and cognitive style differences
When Hofstede (1994, p. 10, p. 11) compared IBM and CVS studies, he detected that values related to the dimension of uncertainty avoidance did not seem to be important enough to Chinese scholars to be included in the list of CVS; meanwhile, the dimension of long-term orientation was not found in the IBM study. The cause of this difference was not the people who answered the questionnaire but the researchers who composed it.

One decade earlier, Adler (1983a, b) had already presented six distinct approaches in management studies through culture: parochial, ethnocentric, polycentric, comparative, geocentric and synergistic. For each approach, there are different assumptions and premises concerning similarity and difference across cultures, regarding the extent to which management phenomena are or are not universal. A similar but differently termed categorization has been used by scholars for other contexts such as the international managerial approach: ethnocentric, polycentric and geocentric attitudes (Perlmutter, 1969; Bartlett and Ghoshal, 1989).

These different approaches reflect the different culture and cognitive styles of management researchers and managers. Adler *et al.* (1986, p. 313) argues that the research progress in cross-cultural management depends upon the relationship between culture and cognition. Culture plays a role in the formation of the cognitive mental procedure in perceiving, interpreting and constructing reality as well as identifying and solving management issues; hence, cognition differs among different researchers, either due to their different epistemological stance or culture background. Researchers may benefit from better understanding of how and when managers use different cognitive approaches to solve problems, as a first step to better comprehending management decisions and international research.

Emic vs etic approaches
Taking an emic or etic approach is particularly complex in the IB field, where researchers must pay serious attention to "cultural completeness" (Lo and Michailova, 2010, p. 192), i.e. examining the emic of multiple cultures so that constructs are truly generalizable in a cross-cultural sense. The role of researchers is important with respect to the perspectives taken on studying human beings and their behavior. Local country knowledge cannot be easily obtained without the use of qualitative research data

(Redding, 2005; Morris *et al.*, 1999). This is particularly true for a foreign researcher trying to learn about and understand the cultural norms and values of a host country, thereby taking an emic, culture-specific approach rather than conducting etic research.

The complementarity of the emic and etic perspectives by scholars in IB has long been encouraged, yet it has so far not been achieved. For instance, in a broad culture block of West and East, albeit studies in a non-Western context indicate considerable culture differences (Nisbett, 2003; Stening and Zhang, 2007; Schaffer and Riordan's (2003)), a cross-cultural management review shows the tendency to be etic, with only a very small percentage taking an emic approach (Michailova, 2011). This imbalance therefore calls for further methodological complementarity between etic and emic approaches to reasonably approach and ensure "connection" to the existing body of knowledge when researching unknown cultures.

Von Glinow, Shapiro and Brett (2004) also broaden the concept of "contextualization of research" inherent in an emic approach by describing a process of incorporating multiple dimensions of a context for a holistic and valid understanding of any phenomena within it – a process called "polycontextualization". Similar emphasis was given by (Tsui, 2006, p. 4) to advise "plunging into the sea" (tiao jin da hai) rather than fishing from the shore for scholars interested in addressing issues of real significance to firms operating in the Chinese context and discovering knowledge of real value to these firms.

Methodology in culture research

Methodological concerns arise from emic and etic balance issues. For instance, local country knowledge would be obtained through qualitative methodology, which appears to be advantageous to this type of research for an emic purpose (Redding, 2005; Morris *et al.*, 1999). Qualitative data typically entail very different relationships between research and participants than survey-based quantitative strategies, and such relationships are reflected in the data. The relationships in which qualitative research is itself embedded, the interplay between flexible and unchanging features in data-generation strategies and the embodied interpretations of interaction and meaning generate particular challenges for management and IB research in the effective interpretation and analysis of data. Comparing emic and etic approaches, for scholars to adopt a true emic perspective in research, their presence at the point of data collection and familiarity with the immediate contexts in which it happens are critical to an authentic understanding and analysis of data (Morris *et al.*, 1999). These are less relevant for an etic approach, as, sometimes, dis-attachment is even preferable to keeping supposedly objective observation from the generated data.

Even though the complexity of culture issues and globalized business demands both emic and etic approaches, and commentators in the field encourage an emic plus etic approach in culture studies in IB, researchers are observing an increased reliance on quantitative data analysis using large samples, typically for equating it with "hard science" (Cheng, 2007; Birkinshaw *et al.*, 2011). If a combined emic and etic approach is taken, the use of both quantitative and qualitative data and analysis methods is required. This contradiction raises concern on methodological issues in culture studies in IB, in line with what we discussed about how the complicity and epistemological stances influence researchers in their decisions to choose a qualitative or quantitative methodology and data to work with.

Not now a new topic, the methodological issue of culture research has been widely reviewed and discussed by scholars (Schaffer and Riordan, 2003; Tsui *et al.*, 2007; Birkinshaw *et al.*, 2011). Generally a multi-cultural research team is encouraged, involving researchers from different cultural backgrounds and using local languages in context-specific IB studies, and such research is not necessarily restricted to insiders (Tsui *et al.*, 2007). When research is undertaken outside their own culture, researcher concern arises on issues such as "what is a researchable question, sampling, developing valid research instruments, data collection and data interpretation" (Stening and Zhang, 2007, p. 121).

Language issues
Language has its own intriguing effects on knowledge management and creation (Holden, 2008) in the social sciences, although it is still considered to be less explored in the IB field. As an aspect particularly relevant for non-native researchers, language comprises an important part of methodological design, opening a window into cultural meanings (Brannen *et al.*, 2014). In quantitative studies, international survey instruments often use back-translation for equivalence in meaning. However, language acts as a type of psychological priming or cultural knowledge base that affects responses by survey participants through the interpretation of its subtlety; the language effect on survey responses is seldom discussed, and the best back-translation may not necessarily guarantee the same or close interpretation of meaning, due to contextual and value differences which underlie an apparent linguistic equivalence (Brannen *et al.*, 2014; Tsui *et al.*, 2007). Dolan and Marin Kawamura (2015, p. 116) refer to the "language of context" that needs to be understood, as it determines the level of coded and implicit messages in information which are difficult for outsiders to interpret.

As IB studies are not context-free, the questions included in a survey carry specific meanings and imply specific interpretations which are relative and subject to the interpretation of participants who are embedded with their own culture and cognitive system. For instance, surveys often use very short terms or questions to achieve a certain efficiency in the data collection process. Therefore, back-translation cannot always resolve the above-mentioned type of linguistic and cultural issues to ensure construct validity (Tsui *et al.*, 2007), as the translation *per se* out of its context is not inappropriate. Hence, language as a key construct in the IB field needs to be carefully articulated, with hands-on protocols and carefully crafted terms and meanings, with pre-studies to reflect on related methodological issues to avoid a "premature closure of meaning" or the silencing of non-English speakers' perspectives and experiences (Brannen *et al.*, 2014, p. 501; Holden, 2008). Therefore, a combination of quantitative and qualitative methodology appears to be advantageous, to resolve this type of preoccupation and minimize the methodological bias introduced in language-varied data to ensure construct validity.

Methodological selection
The multinationals in IB evolve their way of doing business over time. From the dominance of European and later American companies, the rise in Japanese companies' global success in the 1980s and the current increasing economic power of Chinese business in the globe, all have invoked much interest in seeking alternative theories to provide a higher explanation power of these phenomena. For instance, Nonaka's and

Takeuchi (1995) seminal work "The Knowledge-creating Company" explains successful Japanese companies and achieves further theory building by deploying inductive methodology. Polycentric research, in this sense often using inductive methodology and interpreting management within a specific culture (Adler, 1983b, p. 35) may be useful to adapt the emic approach to cultural studies. With this approach, the impact of research process on culture is minimized, and a pattern is allowed to emerge from data to generate models or theories. It is important to highlight that under this methodological approach, the embeddedness of the researchers' own cultural background in the study process is noted. Researchers not only need to be very aware of not imposing their cultural perspective, but cooperating with local researchers from the target cultural context is also desirable to be more familiar with the studied cultural conditioning (Stening and Zhang, 2007).

Not new but continuing trends in replicating quantitative survey research, seeking universal theory and researchers' interest for efficiency in data collection, outcomes oriented for publication and career development for promotion, have not changed course to combine qualitative and quantitative methodologies. More emphasis needs to be given to qualitative studies, to offer the possibility of building a new theory or paradigm change in the emerging economic power shifting the world. Ongoing calls for more qualitative research by top journals and scholars are ignored. The knowledge school of organizational study is an example of initiating a paradigm with the inductive qualitative method, while a similar example could be observed in strategic management when it emerged as a prominent paradigm in management (Hoskisson *et al.*, 1999). The IB field is also among these, as noted by Birkinshaw *et al.* (2011).

Culture paradigm shift: three trends

The multi-faceted nature of culture in terms of its conceptualization, multi-dimensionality and multi-levelness coupled with differing methodological approaches has helped researchers investigate culture in creative ways. At present, however, no concerted effort has been made to overcome the observed fragmentation in the field of culture studies in IB, which is particularly important with the growing attention in IB research to non-Western countries. It has now become a barrier to progress for culture studies in IB, as its advancement depends on continuous paradigm development based on shared, accumulated knowledge over time (Kuhn, 1996; Capra, 1982).

By exploring the existing knowledge base of culture studies in management, we can identify the aforementioned tendencies and difficulties in culture research. Because science is characterized by the dominance of succeeding paradigms as models for thinking, which is defined by Kuhn (1996) as "a constellation of concepts, values, perceptions and practices shared by a community which forms a particular vision of reality that is the way a community organizes itself", there are also repeated calls for a paradigm shift (Fang, 2012). We observe that these difficulties pertain to a specific paradigm under which the research has been conducted. To overcome these challenges, the existing paradigm does not offer sufficient scientific fundamentals to serve for collective scholarly progress in the field. Therefore, a new paradigm is required to build a new "vision of the reality" generally accepted by the scholarly community for further theory building and testing (Clarke and Clegg, 2000). We present three identified paradoxical tendencies for the potential envisaged paradigm shift.

Integration of West-East dichotomy

The West-East dichotomy refers to the perceived differences between the cultures of the East and the West. The term gives special relevance to cultural rather than geographical division in the differences between Eastern and Western worlds. Though it receives criticism for the simplification of cultural variation and diversification within each block (Berger, 1997), the term has been often used in the field of management referring in the West to North America, Europe and their associated economic alliances and, in the East, especially to Asian countries (Berger, 1997; Ichijo and Nonaka, 2007; Kase *et al.*, 2011; Nisbett, 2003).

The rise of Eastern management in the predominating English publications is principally due to the upswing of economic power in the East Asian region (Berger and Borer, 1997), for instance, the Asian Tigers. The emergence of Japanese multinationals in the 1970s and 1980s in the global world challenged US dominance in international business. The high interest in understanding Japanese companies' recipe for success led to some of the most influential impacts on managerial theory, such as the Japanese companies-based inductive study *The Knowledge-creating Company* (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995), creating a new paradigm of the Knowledge School of organizational theory. For Ichijo and Nonaka (2007, p. 280), the East/West dichotomy entails the two opposing approaches to organizational knowledge creation between Western and Japanese companies, representing Eastern management.

The ongoing rising power of the Chinese economy (e.g. China overtook the USA as the first economic power in 2014 in terms of Purchasing Power Parity valued Gross Domestic Production) has brought another wave of scholarly and practitioner interest in systematically understanding management in Chinese companies (Tsui, 2004). The foundation of the International Association for Chinese Management Research (IACMR) in 2002, with now more than 6,000 registered members from almost 100 countries, is a witness of this interest and demand.

Viewing from their corresponding perspectives, scholars from different cultural origins compare the roots of Eastern and Western management. Nonaka and Toyama (2007) distinguish the explicit knowledge versus the tacit knowledge focus in Western and Japanese tendencies in terms of epistemology; and individual- versus group-orientated emphasis in terms of ontology for Westerners and Japanese. Furthermore, a list of East/West dichotomy with specific differences between European and Japanese styles is provided, containing elements on objective, product appeal, product concept creation, flow of activities, ensuing process, organization, strengths and weakness (Ichijo and Nonaka, 2007, p. 281). As regards the knowledge base for Chinese management, Barney and Zhang (2009) call for Chinese management theory to explain the rising phenomena in a Chinese context and to extend that to a universal setting. Many scholars have explored this line, with most attempting to link Chinese culture's roots with a Western management concept. For instance, Chen (2002, p. 187) seeks to link Eastern and Western management thought with paradoxical integration. While Chinese thought represents the East in this case, it is distinguished by its nature of being integrative, and encompassing Western thought's strengths in categorization and analysis. Moreover, Chinese and Western perspectives are contrasted on their elements of intellectual paradigms, time, and performance.

Certainly a number of Western scholars have already experienced problems in extending Western-based concepts, models and methods to non-Western settings (see

more in Adler *et al.*, 1989), particularly following the growing interest in management in emerging and economically powerful Eastern countries such as Japan and China. Chen (2002) states in terms of intellectual paradigms that the Chinese contains holism, both/ and and interdependent opposites, while the Western encompasses the analysis of parts, either/or and exclusive opposites. Other scholars also argue that one of the principal differences lies in the fact that the Western cultural construct seeks polarity on the two extremes of the same linear, while the Eastern construct is integration-based, embracing contradictions (Capra, 1982; Fang, 2012).

As philosophical stances of Western and Eastern scholars and practitioners vary, this difference in the native cultures is embedded in researchers and constructed managerial phenomena. Researchers largely agree that Asian thoughts and management are fundamentally characterized by paradoxical integration, dialectical thinking, continuous learning and dynamic changing mentality (Chen, 2002; Fang, 2010, p. 159; Nisbett, 2003; Zhang and Zhou, 2015), reflecting their Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism. According to Western paradigms, paradoxes would be viewed as obscure, absurd and irrational (Chakkarath, 2010; Lewis, 2000, p. 760). A source of concern as a construct validity problem when applying emic measures from one nation to another (Tsui *et al.*, 2007), applying emic measures or constructs from the West to the East could also be problematic due to their different intellectual paradigms and knowledge base. As mentioned above, current management and international studies have been dominated by large-scale quantitative survey research (Birkinshaw *et al.*, 2011; Tsui *et al.*, 2007), which may invoke the occurrence of a construct validity problem in international cross-cultural studies. Consequently, in this paradigm-shifting process for culture studies, new research strategies need to be devised, to incorporate contextualization research for international studies, and especially to approach country-specific research and go native (Meyer, 2006; Tsui *et al.*, 2007).

This would require an emic approach and country-specific research, on the one hand, to validly construct international management studies in the paradigmatic shifting process. On the other hand, the West/East dichotomy may stereotype (Chakkarath, 2010) the culture construct, overlooking the certain underlying similarity. That is, globalization and further international exchanges make this once-sharp distinction of what constitutes the "typical" or stereotypes of Western or Eastern management less clear-cut. First, many Asian executives have been trained according to the latest Western pedagogical tools and frameworks, either in Asian-based business schools with input from Western institutions or by studying abroad (Kase *et al.*, 2011). This intermingling of influences makes it much harder to distinguish cultural differences between the East and the West in international business management. Second, although predominant patterns are identified in Western and Eastern management, this does not signify an absence of the opposite culture. For instance, inductive management thinking generally prevails in Eastern management, while deductive management dominates the West, but exceptional cases also highlight entrepreneurs who are positioned in their opponent's category (Kase *et al.*, 2011). As the principle of Yin-Yang postulates, Yin is part of Yang and at the same time, Yang is part of Yin (Mun, 2011). So Western and Eastern management thinking are not mutually exclusive and isolated. As exemplified by Chen (2002), the concept of paradoxical integration is an integration of the Western concept of paradox with Eastern holistic and middle-way thinking. As well as a contrasting paradigm for the West/East dichotomy-based Western tradition, an

integrative paradigm may also be sought for potential universalistic theory building, bridging both West and East. Both the differentiation of culture differences (i.e. reflecting the prevailing culture pattern with a high degree of occurrence) and underlying value similarities (i.e. a common pattern for a human system) could co-exist in management and international theorization to further unfold the complex culture phenomenon.

Coexistence of convergence and divergence
If the West/East dichotomy reflects the differences of philosophic foundation of the two main culture blocks, which then implies management thinking and practices, as well as how research is carried out by scholars bearing their corresponding cultures, the paradigmatic debate between convergence and divergence is directly linked to managerial practices in culture-involved international business. The imperatives of globalization have revived the debate on whether cross-cultural transfer and the application of management practices results in cultural convergence, i.e. cultures becoming more alike; or in cultural divergence, i.e. cultures becoming more dissimilar and distinct (Schwartz, 1992).

Cultural convergence in the present state refers to how the industrialization of nations is transforming societal values toward behavior upholding free-market capitalism (Ohmae, 1990). Because industrialized countries are usually associated with Western capitalistic nations, convergence implies that non-Western countries are likely to assimilate ideologically driven values common to industrialized Western countries or "westernization" (Zheng, 1999). Underlying the convergence approach there is often the assumption of a supra-national level of culture and its interplay with lower levels of culture. *Global civilization* is proposed as a thematic pattern or development valence toward a social architectural mindset based on symbiotic societal values related to industrial and de-industrial values (Perlmutter, 1991).

By contrast, proponents of the divergence approach emphasize the existence of national-culture-driving values. By encouraging country-specific research in cross-national, cross-cultural research, Tsui *et al.* (2007) remark how the extension of the managerial model from the USA to other nations has the pitfall of whether the right questions are being asked, and the issues studied may be of low relevance to other cultures. Even if a nation adopts westernized capitalism, the value systems of the workforce will stay largely unchanged (Hofstede, 1984). Apart from the national cultural differences highlighted in the above-mentioned cultural management study classics, some of the most recent articles illustrate a certain degree of persistence of local cultural patterns and practices in international management (Azar, 2014; Ghazinoory *et al.*, 2014).

At present, cross-culture researchers agree with the co-existence of a certain degree of both convergence and divergence in international management. In a review of multicultural and international business research, Leung *et al.* (2005, p. 359) noted that, while some areas do show signs of convergence, the general argument sustaining that the world is becoming one culture seems untenable. Coinciding with the premise of comparative cultural studies defined by Adler (1983b), no full convergence or divergence has been confirmed in management reality. There has always been a co-existence between the two. Thus, not only is the universalistic perspective coming

under additional criticism, the national cultural paradigm in cultural studies is also being questioned (Gerhart, 2009). As Williams (1981, p. 210) said:

> […] in highly developed and complex societies there are […] many levels of social and material transformation […]. [Culture] is indeed in the area of these complex transformations that the signifying system is itself developed and must be analyzed.

A call for a new paradigm of cultural studies in international/global business is needed to fulfill this demand in a complex society. Noteworthy in this context is the research by Inglehart and Baker (2000, p. 49) who argue for a path-dependency of culture with a persistence of distinctive value systems. Examining the link between economic development and changes in traditional values, they found significant cultural change, but not necessarily in the direction of convergence and therefore toward a global culture. Based on their empirical findings from the World Values Survey, they suggest that, on the one hand, the rise of industrial society is linked with coherent cultural shifts away from traditional value systems, and the rise of postindustrial society is linked with a shift away from absolute norms and values toward a syndrome of increasingly rational, tolerant, trusting, postindustrial values. But, on the other hand, economic development tends to push societies in a common direction, rather than converging.

What Inglehart and Baker (2000) argue for is a cultural evolution on parallel trajectories shaped by cultural heritage. Furthermore, they doubt the production of a homogenized world culture driven by modernization in the foreseeable future. Influenced by economic and consequently management modernization, management practices also suffer this paradoxical co-existence of convergence and divergence. For instance, in their review of strategic human resource management (HRM) in China in comparison with Western concepts, Zhou et al. (2012) also observe the divergent path of convergence in HRM in China and the West. In this paradigmatic change of culture study, convergence and divergence is one of the principal debates and tendencies that convey potential discovery for the building of a new paradigm. We call for further research efforts on what is converging (e.g. certain HRM practices), and what is diverging (e.g. the path for Western HRM to converge with Chinese HRM), and to what extent (e.g. how far does Chinese HRM conserve its own traditions and to what extent are Western practices adopted), to explicitly articulate the dimensional effects in the future paradigm.

Dynamic vs static perspectives
Thus, even though cultural differences at the national level are a topic of ongoing research, different orders and priorities are evidence of different research directions. Complexity suggests multiple intricacies for dealing with different, turbulent environments. A new order and construct may emerge to make way for a new paradigm, after chaos is guided and led toward one defined direction in accordance with natural rules (Dolan et al., 2003, p. 26). Besides the two aforementioned tendencies for paradigmatic shift, we suggest a third for scholars to center their research efforts on, and to push forward the change of culture paradigm: culture is not static, and therefore we need to develop a dynamic model of culture to capture the changes in culture over time, and its effects in relation with dynamic acculturation strategies (Tsui et al., 2007, p. 465; Zhang and Lopez-Pascual, 2012).

Rather than static objects, Berry *et al.* (1992) view cultures as evolving adaptations to ecological and sociopolitical influences, and view individual psychological characteristics in a population as adaptive to their cultural context, as well as to broader ecological and sociopolitical influences. Highly interrelated with the integration of the West/East dichotomy and the coexistence of convergence and divergence, the dynamic perspective of culture study potentially provides high explanation power to the fusion of two culture blocks and the harmony between the two trends. Recognizing and incorporating culture changes is especially useful for scholars studying the phenomenon in nations with rapid economic, technological and social development such as China, India, Mexico, Russia and Brazil (Tsui *et al.*, 2007, p. 465), where strong traditions resist and survive along with converged industrialized, high-tech and international standard culture. While the static paradigm has its obvious merits in enabling managers and researchers to make "the best first guess" about cultures (Osland and Bird, 2000, p. 67), it is incapable of capturing culture dynamics in a globalizing society. In a dynamic vision of culture, culture is not simply the independent or dependent variable, but cultural change over time needs to be understood as a process, a strategy or an outcome. Indeed, a dynamic perspective of culture studies is related to the synergistic research advocated by Adler (1983b) to seek the interaction of different cultural patterns. Culture evolves and the interaction of different culture patterns can push these evolutions forward in a certain direction. In this sense, Zhang and Lopez-Pascual (2012) identify four phases in which acculturation takes place, and a different interpretation occurs if taking a static or dynamic perspective of culture when studying Spanish banking's internationalization in China: cultural barriers, cultural adaptation, cultural development and cultural integration. Below, we present the advantages of a dynamic perspective of culture.

First, while a static perspective of culture is useful in providing an awareness of culture difference, not providing any mechanism beyond that has not helped to guide managers through the process to successful organizational performance. In change, capturing culture dynamics, a dynamic paradigm towards culture would allow managers to go beyond the currently common approach of testing "established Western models", without seeing Asian countries or other emerging economies as an important source of inspiration for theory building and theory reconstruction. Instead of satisfying the intellectual curiosity of Western scholars, future scholars could use either polycontextuality or the configuration approach to incorporate higher levels of theorization accounting for interactions among culture values, and the inclusion of other contextual factors (Tsui *et al.*, 2007, p. 465).

Second, a dynamic perspective of culture study advocates a learning approach of acculturation to deal with international business issues (Zhang and Lopez-Pascual, 2012), therefore providing potential mechanisms to learn, participate in and influence culture changes. Culture can be "seen as being made up of relations rather than as a stable system of form and substance" (Soderberg and Holden, 2002, p. 112). Therefore, a dynamic perspective of culture permits a new culture to emerge from interactions at various levels, e.g. the interactions between organizational members of different national cultural backgrounds, or the interactions of foreign subsidiary managers with local firms in a host country. For instance, Marshall and Boush (2001) found in their study that country effects reduce over time in the decision-making process when interaction between USA and Peruvian managers increased as the consequence of

augmenting influence from attributes of relationship and personal characteristics. Zhang and Zhou (2015) also observe the evolution over time of Chinese culture in history, and diversified ingredients and sources for today's Chinese culture, combining both traditions and modern Western concepts. Hence, within a dynamic paradigm, cultural differences are not necessarily seen as a management problem to be solved, but rather as an opportunity for inter-organizational and intra-organizational learning and knowledge transfer (Holden, 2002; Fang, 2012).

Finally, studying organizational culture in international business within a dynamic paradigm could facilitate tackling the interplay of organizational and national/regional culture, as it allows for intercultural interactions between these two levels. The core idea is that multiple-level contexts give rise to different sources of meaning, which, in turn, influence how managers act, and knowledge is interpreted in an organizational setting. Yet, cultural learning takes place not just longitudinally from one's own ancestors within one's own cultural group, but all-directionally from various possible potential cultural orientations exposed at different levels, for example, from different nations, different regions, different industries, different professions and different people in an increasingly borderless workplace. Though we observe some common dimensional patterns in several popular scholarly works, different attributes may be used for varied disciplinary studies. Instead of using a narrow mode with a set of a few culture values, the dynamic perspective provides an opportunity to go beyond (Tsui *et al.*, 2007) and to further interrelations between culture and broader societal and business contextual factors. In this sense, Zhang and Zhou (2015) advocate an ambidexterity of culture toward its effects on innovation, which creates a duality of cultural effects on general performance. Therefore, a configuration approach is needed to fully understand the interaction among cultures of different levels in this emerging new paradigm.

Discussions and future research

In this process of paradigm shift in culture studies, researchers face the challenge of exploring a new paradigm: How does the interaction between different cultures affect the cross-cultural paradigm? Will national-level cultural differences still be the most significant differences in global business, as they were during the international business stage? Is the cultural comparison between the two big culture blocks (i.e. the West and the East) still valid? To what extent? How does the exchange flow of culture between West and East, or between and among nations, dynamically affect the convergence and divergence tendency? How can organizational/corporate culture prevail, or adapt national culture to consolidate business positions in international markets? What will be the new elements and dimensions of culture studies in the new paradigm? How to constitute a configuration of culture with multiple levels and dimensions to better understand the rapidly changing global phenomenon?

The economic rise of Asia, first of the Four Tigers and Japan, now of China and probably tomorrow of India, provides an opportunity for researchers to observe and study this changing phenomenon and the Western paradigm in management and culture studies. Indigenous Asian research in international business could provide theoretical contributions of global relevance by participating in global scholarly discourse, and make major contributions by drawing on traditional Asian thought, developing new theories (Meyer, 2006, p. 119), inspiring and enriching the current knowledge base on business management (Tsui, 2009). This would pave the way for more "inside-out" studies (Tsui, 2006) by Asian

academics and practitioners, making indigenous and emic views accessible to readers outside Asia. The priority would shift from testing Western models toward exploring how Eastern managers and employees view the function and impact of national, organizational or team culture, and not measuring them through a pre-designed instrument adapted from studies of Western firms.

A growing number of commentators also agree that the present static paradigm is a pre-globalization and pre-Internet phenomenon (Fang, 2012), and our earlier discussion pointed to the principal critical points in culture research in international management. In fact, for decades, scholars such as Capra (1982) have argued that it was a turning point for science, society and the rising culture. Indeed, underlying intellectual, economic and technological dynamics are too powerful to reverse, and one needs to understand, approach and handle all these cultural differences. Yet the aforementioned three tendencies in paradigm shift are in transition; until a new established paradigm is built, the former will retain its functionality and influence (Kuhn, 1996).

Our review of the knowledge base on culture studies in management makes a key contribution with respect to a better understanding of the envisaged paradigmatic shift of the discipline. By unfolding the nature of an abstract and high-order definition of culture, we focus on deciphering the complex construct and the multi-levels and multi-dimensionality in its measurement, which, in turn, interact with the epistemology of culture researchers and the choice of methodology used to carry out culture studies. Eventually interaction of the three elements studied will lead to our proposed three paradigmatic changes in our dynamic evolving business world.

Moreover, our discussion will help practitioners understand most recent scholarly judgments. In this new global paradigm, culture is especially relevant to further systematically understand the role of organizational culture interplaying with national culture, and the strategic decisions that multinationals need to make regarding both corporate and national culture. By creating a knowledge base of culture studies in management and international business, we are able to better address the paradigmatic direction that culture studies are oriented toward. In terms of practical implications, only by better understanding cultural complexity and the collective efforts of culture may the still predominant US paradigm addressed by Tsui et al. (2007) be turned, and other diversified paradigms may emerge to replace it. A new paradigm is a necessity to allow multinationals or any other types of enterprise to be trained and prepared for superior performance in such a turbulent environment. On the one hand, Western multinationals are facing fierce challenges in multiple domestic markets from local competitors; on the other, the rising powers of multinationals from emerging markets are questioning the existing rules of the game in the international business environment (Sinkovics et al., 2014). This article set in the midst of all these ongoing changes and alterations calls on scholarly efforts to resolve these three paradigmatic issues: the West versus East dichotomy, the convergence and divergence tendency, and the dynamic versus static perspective.

Conclusion

We have traced how the complexity of culture issues leads to a rising pressure for paradigm changes in the research on culture in international management. In terms of academic debate about culture, the crucial paradigm shift has not yet happened. Research and writing are still dominated by a mechanistic-rational approach which

does not quite know how to handle cultural phenomena which by nature are mutual, often transient and invariably context-specific. We observe rising pressure for paradigm changes through three main trends: the integration of the West-East dichotomy, the coexistence of convergence and divergence and dynamic vs static perspectives. We argue that the unresolved debate on the culture construct and its measurement, the epistemological stance by researchers, and associated methodological choices in culture studies in IB reinforce these trends, urging an imminent paradigm shift.

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