

**"LIVES IN BETWEEN":
AMBIVALENCE AND LIMINALITY IN THE EXPATRIATION-REPATRIATION
OF EXECUTIVES FROM BRAZILIAN MULTINATIONALS**

**"VIDAS DE ENTREMEIO":
AMBIVALÊNCIA E LIMINARIDADE NA EXPATRIAÇÃO-REPATRIAÇÃO DE
EXECUTIVOS DE MULTINACIONAIS BRASILEIRAS**

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this article is to investigate how the dynamics of expatriation-repatriation affect the subjectivities of executives from Brazilian multinationals. Thus, this study contributes to the field of International Human Resource Management (IHRM) by analyzing how the experiences of Brazilian expatriate executives (re)configure their identities in response to international mobility. Through semi-structured interviews with 21 Brazilian expatriates, the findings show the multidimensional nature of identity, as well as its varying degrees of reconfiguration within an international context, affecting participants' values, attitudes, and behaviors. Furthermore, the data analysis indicated that expatriation-repatriation is an ambivalent and liminal process involving losses and gains, challenges and learning experiences, and disruptions and continuous (re)configurations, wherein the human challenges of intercultural adaptation are frequently overlooked by human resource managers in multinationals. Therefore, this study suggests that Human Resource Management should develop specific strategies to mitigate the challenges arising from the expatriation and repatriation process.

Keywords: Ambivalence; Multiple Identity Dimensions; Work Relations; Expatriation-Repatriation; Liminality.

RESUMO

O objetivo deste artigo é investigar como a dinâmica da expatriação-repatriação afeta profissionais de multinacionais brasileiras em suas subjetividades. Assim, este estudo contribui para o campo da Gestão Internacional de Recursos Humanos (IHRM) ao analisar como as experiências de executivos brasileiros expatriados (re)configuram suas identidades em função da mobilidade internacional. Por meio de entrevistas semiestruturadas com 21 (vinte e um) expatriados brasileiros, os resultados mostram o caráter multidimensional da identidade, bem como a reconfiguração em menor ou maior grau em um contexto internacional, afetando valores, atitudes e comportamentos dos entrevistados. Além disso, os dados analisados indicaram que a expatriação-repatriação é um processo ambivalente e liminar de perdas e ganhos, de desafios e aprendizados, de rupturas e (re)configurações contínuas, no qual os problemas humanos de adaptação intercultural são frequentemente ignorados pelos gestores de recursos humanos das multinacionais. Nesse sentido, este trabalho propõe que a gestão de recursos humanos desenvolva estratégias específicas para minimizar os transtornos decorrentes do processo de expatriação e repatriação.

Palavras-chave: Ambivalência; Múltiplas Dimensões Identitárias; Relações de Empregados; Expatriação-Repatriação; Liminalidade.

1 INTRODUCTION

In both academic literature and the corporate sphere, expatriation is frequently portrayed in an idealized manner, often "enveloped in a fog of false glamour" (Freitas, 2010, p. 698-699). However, this romanticized perspective on the invitation to represent a company abroad contrasts sharply with the complexity of the responsibilities incumbent upon the international executive. While organizations offer compensation systems aimed at facilitating employee adaptation in the new country, expatriate professionals must adjust to the new reality and achieve organizational objectives, often without expressing any dissatisfaction when facing the challenges encountered (Spanger; Carvalho, 2010).

Beyond the perceived glamour, the predisposition of many professionals towards transnational relocation is subject to the "control of subjectivity," manifested "in a context of a flexible labor market, in which the threat of unemployment is on the horizon for all employees" (Dardot; Laval, 2016, p. 229). In this scenario, expatriates also grapple with job insecurity (Dardot; Laval, 2016); consequently, they are subject to the effects of unequal power relations (Gaggiotti, 2006).

Operating within the dynamics of subjective control, multinational companies "manufacture" the expatriate – the "citizen of the world," the "global executive," among other labels found in the literature – as a "neoliberal subject" (Dardot; Laval, 2016, p. 327). That is, guided by neoliberal rationality, the organization produces "the subject it needs, ordering the means to govern it so that it actually behaves as an entity in competition and must therefore maximize its results" (ibid., p. 328), thereby rendering them an "active agent of the productive world" (Gaulejac, 2007, p. 80-81). In other words, within the neoliberal context, the expatriate is trained to be a "competitive man, totally immersed in global competition" (Dardot; Laval, 2016, p. 322).

The glamorization of expatriation also warrants scrutiny in light of the "personality rupture-restructuring" experienced by individuals undertaking international professional assignments (Joly, 2012, p. 84). Situated within companies guided by an instrumental ideology, rather than embracing opportunities for individual and social exchange with the host country, expatriates "develop strategies and tactics to 'get ahead' [orig: 'se dar bem'] at work and ensure an increase upon their return, which demystifies one of the 'promises' of expatriation, which is providing the opportunity to practice interculturality" (Spanger, 2012, p. 258).

In summary, the dominant ideology surrounding expatriation often obscures HR managers' perception of the suffering and/or shock that expatriates experience during the process of adapting to an unfamiliar culture (Sanchez; Spector; Cooper, 2000; González; Oliveira, 2011). If the "human" element is indeed crucial for organizational success, managers must recognize that suffering cannot continue to be naturalized (Dejours, 2007). Ultimately, all decisions made by managers have consequences and impacts on the lives of others (Soares, 2015).

The relevance of a critical debate on expatriation-repatriation is exemplified by Spitzer's (2001) work, *Lives in Between*. In this study, the author illustrated how the process of continuous assimilation and marginalization, experienced across several generations of three families undergoing upward social mobility, was permeated by ambivalence and liminality over time and across different continents and cultures. "I belong nowhere, and everywhere I am a stranger," is how one of the individuals investigated by Spitzer (2001, p. 174) described their situation. In other words, Spitzer (2001), as an anthropologist, highlights the concept of the 'intermediate life,' which can be understood as a life belonging to two worlds, yet fully part of

neither. Therefore, considering the potential anxieties associated with these so-called "Lives in Between", this study adopts the metaphor proposed by Spitzer (2001) as a framework to investigate the (re)configuration of executives' identities throughout the expatriation and repatriation processes.

The objective of this article is to investigate how the dynamics of expatriation-repatriation affect the subjectivities of executives from Brazilian multinationals. Thus, this study contributes to the field of International Human Resource Management (IHRM) by analyzing how the experiences of Brazilian expatriate executives (re)configure their identities in response to international mobility.

The study's contribution to the literature lies in interpreting, understanding, and reflecting upon expatriates' experiences across multiple dimensions: namely, personal, social, work, organizational, ethnic, national/plural, political, and religious identity. Therefore, exploring identity issues related to the expatriation/repatriation process, while considering the polysemy of identity, addresses a gap this research seeks to fill. Indeed, to investigate identity (re)configurations in depth, "we need to listen closely to the stories of those we claim to understand and study their interactions, the discourses and roles by which they are constituted or resist – and do so with sensitivity to context" (Sveningsson; Alvesson, 2003, p. 1190).

Following this introduction, the article discusses mainstream IHRM literature juxtaposed with the lived realities of expatriates, alongside identity literature from various fields, to construct a multidimensional framework for analyzing the (re)configuration of expatriate identity. Subsequently, the methodological approach is presented, followed by the analysis, discussion, and concluding remarks.

2 EXPATRIATION REALITY: THE MULTIDIMENSIONAL (RE)CONFIGURATION OF IDENTITIES

Discussing the expatriation process prompts reflection on the transformations "in the individual's self-image, in their identity, and the effects that this process of self-deconstruction-reconstruction would have on adaptation to the host country and subsequent readjustment to the home country" (González; Oliveira, 2011, p. 1123). That is, it necessitates consideration of the subjection to the effects of the "Lives in Between" (Spitzer, 2001) experienced by expatriates. Since identity is a form of differentiation and "exposure to a foreign culture leads us to see our own culture from a new perspective" (Joly, 2012, p. 92), the experience abroad can cause profound changes in expatriates' personalities, given the intense exposure to a new culture (Calderón; Guedes; Carvalho, 2016).

Given the complexity of the topic of identities, this study adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical approach, aiming to unravel the subtleties that permeate fundamental questions, such as: Who am I? Who are we? What are the potential tensions generated by the answers to these questions? (Brown, 2022). Thus, the theoretical confluence of different areas of the social sciences could be a source of understanding for a phenomenon that proves relevant.

To understand the relevance of multiple identity dimensions within organizations, we can turn to the case of emotional and identity dissonance experienced by employees of an organization during a corporate money-laundering scandal (Frandsen; Grant; Kärreman, 2024). Faced with the shame of the event and the need to preserve their self-image, the study revealed that, to cope with the emotional crisis – marked by the tension between the 'I', indignant at being unjustly blamed, and the 'we', ashamed by the scandal – employees constructed a functional separation between self-identity and social identity (Frandsen; Grant; Kärreman, 2024). Thus,

the multiple identities assumed by individuals emerge as responses to the pressures experienced at both the personal and collective levels.

Discussing identity also involves addressing estrangement towards the other and cultural attachments (Li *et al.*, 2024). The experience of estrangement is part of the migration context. Within the social sciences and humanities, conceptual debates related to difference, the foreigner, and the 'Other' only gained relevance in the 1970s and 1980s, when the category of 'Alterity' established a multifaceted field of analysis, consolidating the argument that identity depended on difference. As a social construction, "identities are determined by comparison and, above all, by the opposition between two opposing groups: 'us-them; I/other'" (Woodward, 2014, p. 40).

The foreigner is defined as follows: "The foreigner is the other [...] the distant one, the one who does not belong, the one who belongs elsewhere" (Souza, 1998, p. 155). The stranger always runs the risk of being considered "a stranger, as a non-member of the group [...] contacts with him are, at the same time, near and far, in the fragmentation of relations through which an abstract human equality develops" (Simmel, 2005, p. 267).

This subject, detached from their culture of origin, is "led to occupy [...] the place of the Other, that is, the place where they must renounce, repress the expressions of their desire and, to be accepted, please, seduce" (Melman, 1992, p. 9). This necessarily implies considerable emotional effort. The cultural pattern of the new group, which is unknown to them, is, "instead of an instrument helping them to disentangle problematic situations, a problematic situation in itself, and difficult to master" (Schutz, 1979, p. 93). On the other hand, social identity is also seen as an affective and internalizing experience, that is, it encompasses the incorporation of group identity and identification with artifacts or ideas in self-definition (Ashforth & Mael, 2024). In this sense, we observe the multiple dimensions of identity as functional for dealing with strangeness (Frandsen; Grant; Kärreman, 2024).

Identity formation as an experience of assimilation and mobility is presented in the work *Lives in between* (Spitzer, 2001, p. 16). Using a transcultural comparative biographical approach, the work presents such an experience based on the reality of different generations from a class-stratified society:

[...] The book seeks to enhance our theoretical understanding of the concept and function of marginality in the 19th and 20th centuries; and to draw some general conclusions about identity formation in contexts of subordination and domination, in colonial societies and in emerging capitalist societies.

We understand that the difficulties described by Spitzer (2001) are akin to those faced by expatriates. The question of identity lies at the center of debates within contemporary social sciences (Sveningsson; Alvesson, 2003; Brown, 2022), primarily linked to culture. Identity and culture are understood as polysemic and complementary terms (Arias, 2002).

What distinguishes people, groups composed of other people, and other groups is shared culture; that is, culture is the "source of identity" (Giménez, 2009, p. 11). Between the two terms, culture and identity, there exists a symbiotic relationship; an interrelation and inseparability, from the perspectives of sociology and anthropology (Brah, 2011; Giménez, 2009).

Identity, which exhibits a multidimensional, dynamic, and fluid character (Cuche, 1999), related to reflection and subjectivity, is a term that: "involves the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions that make up our conceptions of 'who we are'. [...] The positions we take up and identify with constitute our identities." (Woodward, 2014, p. 56)

Thus, a fundamental point for revealing identity(ies) is the understanding of people's subjectivity. Identity is "diverse," "pluritopic," "multivocal," "polysemic," "itinerant," "fluctuating" (Arias, 2002), in "motion" (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003), "fluid" and "fractured" (Brown, 2022), and is considered a social construction (Sallum Jr. *et al.*, 2016); it reconstructs itself "constantly within social exchanges" (Cuche, 1999, p. 183).

Therefore, if identity is accepted as a social construction, it can be argued that identities are "historically produced and transformed" (Segato, 2010), based on the idea of race as "a modern mental ideological construction and instrument of social domination, initiated over 500 years ago and remaining untouched to the present, having nothing to do with biological structures" (Walsh, 2010, p. 97). Identity, diversity, and difference are "insurgent instruments" that contribute to confronting the cultural colonialism of homogenizing globalizing projects, "faced with which our only hope is to know that we are different, that we have diverse cultures and our own distinct identities" (Arias, 2002, p. 116).

It should be noted that the contemporary interest in identity within organizational studies is largely due to the weakening of social ties and the accelerated emergence of the individualization process, present in the neoliberal management of companies, where "greater autonomy of teams or individuals, polyvalence, mobility [...] translate into a weakening and instability of work groups" (Dardot; Laval, 2016, p. 227). This scenario draws special attention to "the personal, the intimate, the subjective, interest in the multicultural and the different, and, certainly, interest in personal identity" (Giménez, 2010, p. 1). Identity, which in organizational contexts is always in motion and, if treated as a metaphor for struggle and work (Sveningsson; Alvesson, 2003), offers an alternative approach to understanding the process of identity transformation.

If the discussion of identity refers to difference, it is also necessary to state that "identities are sites of resistance and empowerment" (Restrepo, 2007, p. 27). In the articulation of identities, it is not merely exercises of domination and submission that are at play. The term encompasses a variety of definitions, which can be seen in Table 1 below:

Table 1 - Identity polysemy. Dimension individual and collective

Identity types	Definition	Sources
Personal individual or	Considered the construction of self-concept throughout an individual's life, through various social relationships in different spheres, leading to the conformation of the self towards the process of individuation.	Pimentel e Carrieri (2011)
Social	Understood from the formation of self-concept by linking to social groups, through interaction with these various groups.	Pimentel e Carrieri (2011)
At work	It refers to the construction of the self by the activity performed and by the people with whom one has contact, through interaction with the activity and with people at work.	Pimentel e Carrieri (2011)
Organizational	It corresponds to the construction of the concept of identity of the social group, as if it were an autonomous entity, a "subject," which binds and subordinates the other subjects participating in the group to this identity, making them accept it (at least implicitly and tacitly), by linking to the	Pimentel e Carrieri (2011)
Ethnic	It is a specification of social identity based on the subjective self-perception that actors called "ethnic groups" have of themselves.	Giménez (1995)
National/plural.	The idea of national identity constructed by power is a fallacy; One should talk about different identities, multiple and differentiated, which meet, dialogue, negotiate and confront each other	Arias (2002)

	within a plural nation.	
Political	It is defined in terms of affiliation or belonging to certain political collectives with degrees of intensity that vary from simple sympathy to militant participation.	Giménez (2007)
Religious	Element of individual and collective self-recognition that reaffirms a value and sense of belonging based on a certain type of symbols, beliefs and contact with the sacred	Ibáñez (2014)

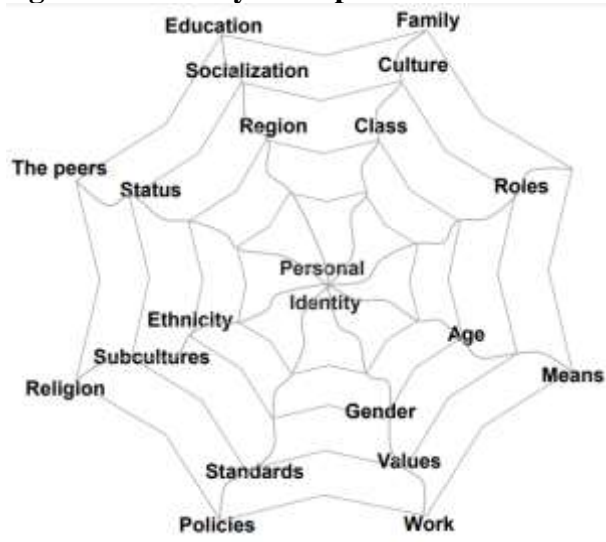
Source: elaborated by authors.

The polysemy of the term identity indicates that the term 'is an enigma which, by its very nature, rejects a concrete definition' (Brah, 2011, p. 44). Thus, Table 1 is based on the assumption that identity is not fixed or singular, but rather comprises a variety of relationships undergoing constant transformation.

Social identities are defined as: 'the result of the identification of a plurality and diversity of individuals with a social collective that unifies them through the mediation of different symbols and rituals which, when shared, generate a strong sense of belonging' (Arias, 2002, p. 110). Therefore, the process of social identity formation is mediated by historical and social forces, along with their respective collective actors (Giménez, 2007).

Identities are formed from the different cultures and subcultures to which an individual belongs or participates (Giménez, 2009), both intertwining like a web, as shown in Figure 1, wherein the contradictions and dispositions of the sociocultural environment profoundly impact the identity process (Giménez, 2007).

Figure 1 - Identity conceptual network



Source: Gimenez (2007, p. 55).

Regarding the relationship between identity and territory, human mobility across different territories does not necessarily signify deterritorialization (Li *et al.*, 2024; Giménez, 2009). Territorial mobility provides new territorial dimensions, which overlap with the territoriality of origin 'without nullifying or suppressing it' (Giménez, 2009, p. 28). However, deterritorialization in the context of multinationals can be considered a mechanism of power, linked to loyalty towards the organization, a dynamic that also extends to the expatriate's family (Pagés; Bonetti; Gauleja, 1987).

Therefore, it can be said that discussing identities entails addressing a multidimensional and interdisciplinary concept, one that can also be contradictory and discrepant (Woodward, 2014; Frandsen; Grant; Kärreman, 2024).

In operationalizing this research, the uniqueness of the individual was considered, cognizant that 'an individual's experience and lived reality occur within the scope of collective history' (Minayo, 2012, p. 623). Thus, a qualitative approach was adopted for this study, aiming to understand 'the human aspect of social life' (Taylor; Bogdan, 1987, p. 21).

Like Spitzer's methodological stance, a more 'other-oriented' posture was adopted in the research. Therefore, the methodological procedures were based 'explicitly on the communion of feelings and experiences' among all parties involved in the research (Spitzer, 2001, p. 22).

The qualitative research process was characterized by its flexible and non-linear nature, following a circular movement wherein theory guided the search for empirical data and contributed to refining the methodological and theoretical framework (Izcara-Palacios, 2014). Consequently, theoretical construction and empirical activity sometimes overlapped in a complementary motion. Thus, the research design emerged throughout the process (Penalva-Verdú *et al.*, 2015).

Aiming to understand the unique aspects of expatriation experiences, in-depth interviews (McCracken, 1988) were conducted with 21 individuals (5 women and 16 men), all Brazilian nationals, who are currently working or have previously worked as expatriate/repatriate executives in Brazilian and foreign multinational corporations. Participant selection utilized the 'snowball' sampling strategy (Creswell, 2014), and recruitment concluded upon reaching theoretical saturation (Valles, 1997). The interviewees had experience in a total of 10 multinational corporations (5 Brazilian and 5 foreign). The characteristics of the interview participants are detailed in Table 2, below:

Table 2 - Characterization of the People Interviewed

N °	Sex	Marital status	Academic Background	Position Current	No. of Child ren	Time in the company	Experience International	Company's sector of activity
E1	F	Married	Administrator	HR Coordinator	2	11 years	Japan	Trading, investment and services company
E2	M	Stable Union	Engineer	Coordinator	2	31 years	England	Oil and gas exploration and production
E3	M	Divorced	Administrator	Manager	0	16 years	Japan	Automotive industry
E4	M	Married	Mechanical Engineer	Division Head	1	36 years	Germany	Electrical and thermonuclear energy
E5	M	Separate	Civil engineer	Project Engineer	3	2 years	United States	Oil and gas exploration and production
E6	F	Married	Electrical Engineer	Quality engineer	1	4 years	France	Electric Energy
E7	M	Married	Mechanical Engineer	Production Assistant	2	3 years	Denmark	District heating industry

E8	M	Married	Chemical Engineer	Operational Support Management	2	36 years	Bolivia, Nigeria, Colombia, Argentina, Peru	Oil and gas exploration and production
E9	M	Married	Counter	Full Accountant	2	14 years and 8 months	Nigeria, Benin, Angola	Oil and gas exploration and production
E10	F	Married	Designer	Marketing and Communications Manager	2	11 years	Switzerland	Oil and gas exploration and production
E11	M	Married	Economist	Senior Operator	1	18 months	United States	Banking Services
E12	F	Stable Union	Administrator	Corporate Director Assistant	18	32 years	England, Argentina	Oil and gas exploration and production
E13	M	Married	Systems Engineer	Senior Systems Analyst	0	14 years	Nigeria	Oil and gas exploration and production
E14	M	Married	Mechanical Engineer	Advisor to the Presidency	2	19 years	Bolivia, Chile	Oil and gas exploration and production
E15	F	Divorced	Nurse	Internal consultant	0	12 years	Peru, Chile, Argentina	Oil and gas exploration and production
E16	M	Married	Mechanical Engineer	Retiree	2	34 years	Bolivia, Chile	Oil and gas exploration and production
E17	M	Married	Mechanical Engineer	Director	2	11 years	Japan	Trading, investment and service company
E18	M	Married	Counter	Senior Accountant	4	30 years	Bolivia	Oil and gas exploration and production
E19	M	Married	Petroleum engineer	Sector Manager	2	30 years	Bolivia, Ecuador, Türkiye, Portugal	Oil and gas exploration and production
E20	M	Married	Electrical Engineer	Technical Support Manager	2	31 years	Colombia	Oil and gas exploration and production
E21	M	Married	Geologist	post-investment coordinator	2	35 years	Nigeria	Oil and gas exploration and production

Source: Data obtained and organized by the authors from field research.

The interview guide was structured around the following thematic categories: Identity, Expatriation, and Meanings. For data analysis, the content analysis method was employed, based on analytical categories (Bardin, 2011). During the analysis of the interviews, emergent categories were identified, which we classified as: Gains-Losses and Challenges and Lessons Learned. These are presented following the *a priori* categories.

3 RESULTS ANALYSIS

The presentation of identity types aims to demonstrate the polysemy and overlap inherent in the term during the construction of the 'self'. Following Table 1, Identity Polysemy, the analysis of the interviews was conducted based on the following types of identities: personal, social, work, organizational, ethnic, national/plural national, political, and religious.

3.1 Personal

During the research, when speaking about themselves, the expatriates highlighted the different identities that simultaneously constitute the 'self'. This process corroborates the understanding of the intertwining between various forms of identity, exemplified by the 'web' metaphor (Giménez, 2007; see Figure 1). Evidence of the juxtaposition between personal identity, work identity, and national/plural national identity is represented in the following excerpt: *"I had a mission, I was abroad, and abroad I am not just Alberto, I was Alberto, "KLM is Brazil". [...] This is a behavior I have, even when I travel for pleasure."* (E4)

In another account, the interviewee distinguishes and overlaps multiple roles in the construction of the 'self': son, student, employee. Consistent with the literature, this individual's profile is attractive to multinationals, which tend to choose executives for expatriation, primarily due to their technical competence. *"I am the son of a teacher, [...] I have always been very hardworking in my life, always. When I was in school, college... I was always one of the good students in the class; I always had good grades."* (E3)

The following account highlights the multidimensional, dynamic, and fluid nature of identity (Cuche, 1999): *"As a person, I am an engineer, I love history, I study history a lot, I am a voracious reader. [...] I have a son, a granddaughter, and I married for the second time, and that is basically it."* (E4)

Notably, the interviewee constructs his identity around his life story, considering the variety of roles he plays in society. The statement shows that biographical identity also includes habits and lifestyle. Thus, the taste for reading and history are indicators of the interviewee's personal identity, which merges with work identity, just as the roles of grandfather, father, and husband are also constitutive parts of the 'self'.

3.2 Social

Listening to the interviewees' subjectivity (Gaulejac, 2006) provided moments for reflection, emotion, and the expression of feelings, thoughts, and values during the interviews. These accounts indicated that living in another country holds the potential for enriching experiences. Furthermore, to ensure it is not an experience of suffering, it is essential that there is some form of reception – an encounter with receptive and friendly people – who facilitate the expatriate's adaptation and, thereby, contribute to mitigating the feeling of strangeness, as one of the interviewees reported: *"Perhaps my greatest strangeness was feeling like a foreigner all the time, you know? Yes, you do not understand some codes that are already common, so*

often you cannot participate in games or jokes. [...] it is really the feeling of not belonging.” (E12)

Individuals experience a sense of rootlessness and transience during the international assignment. Consequently, they attempt to strengthen ties with the culture in which they are immersed, seeking to mitigate the initial disruption from their home culture. Thus, strengthening solidarity among fellow Brazilians to preserve home traditions and values becomes crucial for reinforcing national/plural and social identity (Arias, 2002; Giménez, 2007). Conversely, there is also integration into the local culture, facilitating the engagement necessary for the adaptation process, as illustrated by the following excerpt: *“Our group was very small, and we participated a lot [...] there was a card-playing group – a games group. [...] there was a reconnection, obviously among the Brazilians, but there was a large group of Bolivians who joined us, and we joined them too. It was a very good relationship.”* (E8)

Thus, as indicated in the literature, expatriates' identity reconfiguration is closely linked to the international experience, which implies an articulation with memory, referred to as 'the nutrient of identity' (Giménez, 2009, p. 8). As several interviewees stated, Brazilians maintained cultural eating habits, celebrations, religious rituals, and typical Brazilian festivities as rites for activating memory. These Brazilian culinary habits facilitated moments of exchange between Brazilians and locals [or *host country nationals*], thereby fostering interculturality on various occasions (Fraga; Esteves, 2004). The identification with the Brazilian group, evident in the presented accounts, indicates a sense of belonging (Arias, 2002) and demonstrates the dialectical relationship between identity and alterity (Machado; Hernandez, 2004).

3.3 Work

Work identity holds significant preponderance in the construction of the 'self' and self-esteem for each of the expatriates interviewed (Spanger, 2012). It originates with the choice of profession and, subsequently, with the education or training that enables individuals to enter the workforce. Likewise, personal identity is invariably influenced by work identity, shaped by the relationships expatriates maintain at work, their previous experiences, and the inherent nature of their profession. *“I was invited to join the current Japanese company where I work [...] I became passionate about Japanese management at the shipyard: the respect for rules, the discipline – it was something that suited my profile very well.”* (E1)

On the other hand, the accounts reveal the neoliberal subject shaped within MNCs (Dardot; Laval, 2016). Paradoxically, they also reveal suffering at work (Dejours, 2007), primarily linked to a lack of recognition, feelings of injustice, and devaluation. One instance of suffering occurred when an expatriate was professionally exposed within a corrupt environment, as revealed in the account of one expatriate's wife: *“What I find unfair is that he never reached a director or senior management position, [...]. I came to understand that they would never let him advance because he is honest, he has integrity, and he would not be part of it.”* (Wife of E14)

This points to a sensitive situation, which affected the individual's self-esteem and engendered ambivalent feelings: on the one hand, the interviewee was proud of his professional work, while on the other, he was profoundly disturbed by the direction the company was taking considering political interventions and the management system itself, which was permeated by the ideology of a political party at the time.

I joined the company with the creation of the international division. [...] I faced the challenge of transferring the company's management culture to the firms we were

acquiring or establishing abroad. [...] So that is what I enjoy doing; what I dislike about the work is precisely this corporatism, this clientelism, this lack of recognition for meritocracy that was evident. (E14)

In other accounts, two interviewees revealed that what causes them displeasure at work is the focus on achieving targets, the pressure exerted to meet them, and even the top-down decision-making model (Gaulejac, 2007) – practices typical of managerial ideology.

3.4 Organizational

From the interviews, it is possible to understand what is central (Pimentel; Carrieri, 2011) to some of the organizations to which the research participants belong. One interview revealed that respect for diversity is viewed as a core value for the organization. Consequently, due to the company's stance and its diversity management practices, as highlighted in the account, the interviewee stated that they did not experience prejudice at work.

“We were a diverse group in the company [...] the company has a very strong stance on diversity, enormous respect for diversity, and that's a value within the organization; there's a whole effort around diversity management, so I didn't feel prejudice in my work as a woman, nothing like that.” (E10)

On the other hand, the policies of one of the companies are characterized by prioritizing the recruitment of young professionals from the market and maintaining long-term relationships. However, the interviewee reports shortcomings regarding policies at the international level. IHRM remains a difficult obstacle to overcome; it continues to be a challenge (Fleury; Fleury, 2012). Several interviewees mentioned difficulties within the IHRM function when handling the expatriation process. In particular, they questioned the lack of sensitivity in dealing with the human issues inherent to the entire mobility process.

“This relationship that the COMPANY has with its personnel in Brazil is a very strong trait of Brazilian culture that we end up taking abroad [...]. We end up having this way of dealing with people, of having long-term relationships with them, of preferring to hire young professionals and train them internally, in a completely disorganized manner.” (E16)

3.5 Ethnic

Ethnic self-identification was evident in only one case. The interviewee clarified that he had empathy and affinity with African countries (Angola, Nigeria, Benin) because he is Black and has African roots; these places made him see the world differently. They prompted him to reflect, for example, on religious syncretism, as his understanding of the invisibility of African religions spurred a deeper exploration of the religions in African countries. *“Before being a foreigner, I was Black. [...] Africa brought a lot to me [or: meant a lot to me], you know? [...] It was very important in shaping me as a person, and it was very important to return to my roots, you know?” (E9).*

3.6 National/Plural

Cultural differences were clearly evident in the interviewees' accounts, highlighting the richness of the international experience from a Brazilian perspective, rather than from foreign literature, which offers a culturally different perspective.

Within this diverse mosaic, the expatriates, based on their experience and in contrast with their own culture, perceived differences involving values, customs, subcultural differences, marks of coloniality, and differences between developed and emerging and/or underdeveloped countries. In making this comparison, expatriates necessarily had to 'look inward' at Brazilian culture; this fostered introspection and self-knowledge (intraculturality); the realization of a diverse world (multiculturalism); exchange and coexistence with other cultures (interculturality); and finally, in some specific cases, navigating between different cultures so as not to be harmed by the rough edges of globalization (transculturality) (Fraga & Esteves, 2004).

Conversely, the need to carry Brazilian symbols with them, such as the Brazilian flag, football team jerseys, and paintings of national landscapes, denotes the need to possess objects rooted in and related to the culture of origin (Giménez, 2010). The need to 'feel at home' or to have elements reminiscent of the home culture is part of the mechanisms used by expatriates to reinforce their identity.

3.7 Political

Only one interviewee declared their political ideological identity (Giménez, 2007). The interviewee reported always being left-leaning, having been a voter for a left-wing president, and yet ceasing to identify as a party member following a significant event that shaped his career path within the company: the unions' request to 'pass on' the party's ideology to employees. Following his refusal of the union's request, his career took an unexpected turn: dismissal from a relevant position, being 'sidelined' for a time, until expatriation to Bolivia, Chile, and Argentina became the solution—with punitive undertones—that the company found to remove him from his position.

3.8 Religious

Religious practices and identification with any type of religion were very tenuous. However, they were fundamental elements for mitigating loneliness, as well as for expressing the emotions felt by expatriates, as indicated in the following account:

"I was raised in the Catholic church since I was a child [...] this helped me with the spiritual aspect. I was not someone who participated in groups or anything like that; I went to the celebrations [or masses], but it helped me from a spiritual standpoint, to have peace, to know that someone was looking after me." (E09)

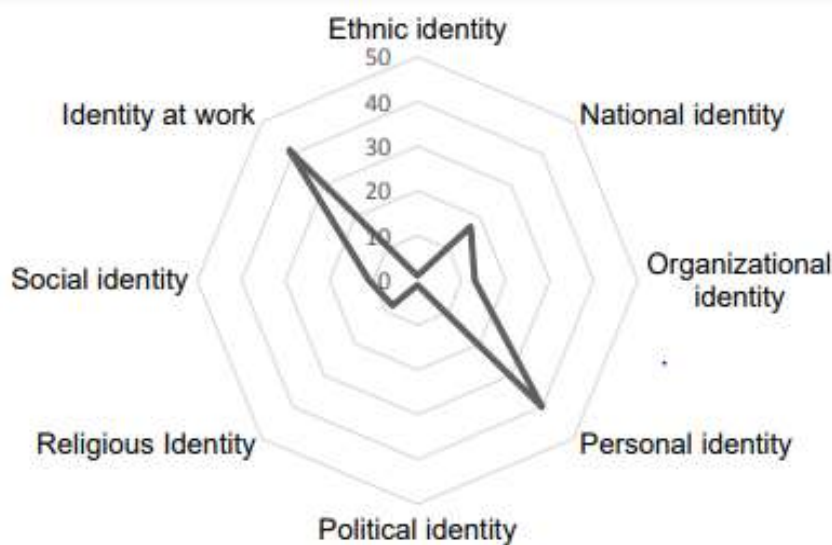
However, another interviewee highlights that due to constant travel, it was not possible for their children to receive religious education, and this was identified as a loss. Expatriation in Turkey, a Muslim country, restricted, according to the interviewee, the practice of other religions.

"[the children] had a fantastic learning experience while they were there. On the negative side, they did not have the presence of family or religion because we move

around; especially when you go to Turkey, it is not that Turkey is an officially Muslim country, I mean, 'do you have to be Muslim?' No, but it is a country that does not give you the freedom to practice another religion, whether it be Catholic, Christian, or Evangelical, whatever it is." (E19)

In summary, expatriates (re)configure their identities when dealing with a different culture. Thus, it is clear that work identity and personal identity occupy a central position in the construction of the 'self'. However, the other identities are also part of the construction and (re)configuration of identity:

Figure 2 - Number of responses by identity type from the 21 interviewees



Source: Prepared by the authors.

4 DISCUSSION: AMBIVALENCE AND LIMINALITY IN IDENTITY (RE)CONFIGURATION

The empirical findings show that changes in expatriates' identity reconfiguration manifest simultaneously through shifts in values, behaviors, and worldview. Thus, the emergence of new elements allows for the identification of the influence of the environment and cultural context on the interviewees' identity reconfiguration. Consequently, the lessons learned across different places, spaces, and times amalgamated, such that they (re)configured the identity of expatriates and their families.

The perception of it being a transformative experience encompasses both individual and social spheres. The initial estrangement and socialization with the local culture appeared intertwined with ambivalent feelings: on the one hand, it is considered a very happy time, and on the other, very difficult. It is perceived, therefore, that the experience entails both losses and gains. However, as shown in the research, the essentially human aspects are often overlooked by multinationals, while expatriates feel they are no longer the same person or that changes have occurred in their identity.

The expatriation experience also enabled professional growth. In the interviews, a sense of pride was evident when one interviewee highlighted being *"one of the few Brazilians who led teams, who held a managerial position in Germany and Belgium."* (E4). Understanding the other made the expatriate *"less harsh"* [or less rigid]. Navigating between different cultures

made him a transcultural person, a “*citizen of the world*” (E4) with unusual reflective capacity and an ease in adapting to adverse conditions, often with humor.

Self-identification as a citizen of the world, in this instance, holds a meaning that contrasts with that of the “neoliberal subject” (Dardot; Laval, 2016). The transformation of personal identity is more pronounced because it suggests that not all expatriates are shaped to the same extent by managerialist ideology, particularly when personal identity, encompassing individual values, is stronger.

Behavioral change is almost inevitable, especially when situated in a different cultural context. Since, as foreigners, expatriates strive for acceptance within that culture (Melman, 1992). According to the testimony of an expatriate executive in Germany, there is a “*secret*,” which, according to him, involves “*not reacting against the culture*” (E4), but adapting to it. This gradually leads to the adoption of common practices from the local culture, which are incorporated, according to the interviewee, “*for a healthier social life*” (E4). The need for discipline and acceptance of new rules is evident. However, for axiological reasons, he considered them admirable, to the extent that he found this change easy.

The interviews revealed, as emergent categories, the consequences of the ambivalences faced during expatriation, which we classified as gains-losses, and challenges and lessons learned.

4.1 Gains, Losses, Challenges and Lessons Learned

The experiences recounted by the expatriates are replete with lessons about the challenges, crises, dramas, and difficulties they had to face and overcome amidst cultural differences and the temporary nature of the international assignment, which, according to the literature, represents “a moment of potential disjuncture [...] discontinuity and rupture within the scope of a personal and socio-professional trajectory” (Coelho, 2017, p. 27).

The expatriation experience brought both gains and losses (Burke, 2017) for each interviewee. Regarding challenges, specific situations experienced by the interviewees are mentioned. Conversely, learning pertains to subjective transformations. In this sense, concrete (yet temporary) difficulties may have served as opportunities for (lasting) learning.

Gains and Losses

One of the most prominent aspects in participants' accounts regarding losses was the weakening of ties with the home culture. This involves distancing from family and friendships, and a reduction in the close human connections so prevalent in Brazilian culture, as suggested by the interview excerpt: “*If I am having problems and need to talk to a real friend! I need to talk to my mother! That absence of close relationships is something that is hard for me.*” (E3)

Thus, the interviewees' axiological priorities (Porto, 2005), at the individual level, show the importance of family, which they regard as a central value in the constitution of personal identity and the foundation upon which the ‘self’ is built in its multiple dimensions.

Another point cited as a loss was the company's failure to leverage the international experience. The fact that these lessons and learnings are both professional and, more profoundly, personal may justify why companies, upon repatriation, do not know how to utilize them effectively. The ‘dehumanization’ and the managerial discourse focused solely on consolidating the professional aspect become apparent (Harrington *et al.*, 2015). Furthermore, throughout professional life, changes also signify disruptions, challenging individuals to reassemble their professional trajectory. This impacts their affective and emotional lives. Thus,

the uncertainty surrounding repatriation – i.e., not knowing beforehand where they will be placed within the organizational structure upon returning to the home country; the absence of a post-expatriation career plan; and the lack of defined tasks – generates frustration among expatriates.

Similarly, another interviewee pointed to a negative aspect of repatriation: the difficulty in applying the learning gained during the international experience. Although it was clear that the investment in him [as an expatriate] was very high, the company, however, is not valuing or adequately leveraging his acquired 'expertise':

“What I dislike about my current work is not being in an area where I can fully utilize the experience I gained abroad. [...] an expatriate is an extremely expensive employee; within the company, an expatriate costs approximately US\$600,000 per year! So, over there [abroad], you become versatile, and I believe this versatility could be leveraged here [in the home country] in some capacity.” (E9)

Questioning of the Brazilian company's internationalization process also becomes evident in the interviewees' narratives. The rich international experience of one interviewee, for example, allows them to offer critiques, highlighting, on the one hand, certain challenges for companies and, on the other, the feeling of ceasing to exist for the organization upon returning from the international assignment. This creates a shock that profoundly affects human subjectivity. Again, the utilitarian and strategic purposes of the MNC emerge through the dominant logic and ideology: as long as the expatriate 'serves' abroad, they can be kept on the 'mission,' enticed either by differential compensation, benefits, and services, or by the supposed 'glamour' of expatriate life. However, upon return, they feel they count for nothing.

Regarding gains, when recalling and evaluating their experiences during expatriation, the interviewees mentioned the personal transformations they underwent. Today, according to their accounts, they are different people. That said, the expatriation experience, despite being a painful and challenging process, contributes to the (re)configuration of expatriates' identities, including those of their families. The myopia of HR managers prevents them from understanding that returning expatriates are individuals who have evolved, learned to see aspects of themselves they were unaware of, and opened themselves to different ways of thinking and new knowledge; yet, they continue to be undervalued by organizations.

Based on the interviews and the literature, it was observed that companies invest more heavily in sending expatriates abroad and show little to no concern for repatriation. It is likely that if initiatives were implemented in this regard, both expatriates and organizations could mutually benefit.

Table 3 - Emergent Categories – Losses and Gains

Emerging Category	Examples
Losses	<p>End of marriage, influenced by work as an expatriate</p> <p>Lack of interaction with friends and family in Brazil</p> <p>Deficiencies of Brazilian habits, food, and lifestyle</p> <p>Loss of freedom to come and go in high-risk countries</p> <p>Absence at the funeral of a dear friend</p> <p>Not taking advantage of the experience and international experience in the company</p> <p>Loss of ties with the culture of origin</p> <p>Lack of interpersonal relationship</p> <p>Loss of religious training for children</p>
Gains	<p>become cosmopolitan</p> <p>learn other languages</p>

Acquire professional knowledge in different cultural areas
Have had better quality education for their children with excellent infrastructure
Opening the horizon to the global reality
Discover different countries in the world
The best professional experience
High standard of living compared to non-expatriate executives

Source: elaborated by authors.

Among the gains, for example, interviewees mentioned the high standard of living enjoyed as expatriates. However, the way multinationals entice and recruit individuals – offering, for instance, education in international schools for their children – is highly valued by those interviewees who traveled with their children, alongside fluency in multiple languages and respect for diversity.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

The situations experienced by participants clearly illustrate the significance of language as one of the most complex challenges they faced. Although a global business language exists (English), local languages present barriers that must be overcome to integrate into the local community. This integration is fundamental for constructing the social identity of the expatriate and their family:

Another challenge mentioned by expatriates arises when traveling with family. As previously noted, the expatriate is often left to handle this situation. Concern for children and spouse regarding everyday aspects, such as finding schools, highlights the role of the father [or parent, if needing generalization] and their absolute responsibility for these matters. Conversely, the interviewee may mention that the company takes very good care of *them* (the employee). Faced with this situation, multinationals often remain silent regarding the family, as if they were not inherently responsible for the expatriate unit: *“I experienced the constraint of having to take care of them [family] in the new reality, just as I took care of them here in Brazil. [...] This was not a cost the company bore; this was my cost. In the program I participated in, the company took very good care of me; I took care of my family.”* (E5)

The expatriate's return to the home country also entails suffering and tension. Metaphorically, it can be compared to a diver returning to the surface after a long ocean dive. Beyond the practical difficulties of the relocation itself, readjustment to the home culture takes time, and the shock of returning is traumatic (Joly, 2012). The individual who returns is not the same person, faced with all the identity changes and contradictions experienced: *“The process of leaving is very difficult, and the process of returning and readjusting here is another difficult process.”* (E14)

Regarding learning, reflecting on the expatriation experience proved to be an interesting exercise, particularly as it provided a moment for reflection on issues such as those highlighted in Table 4:

Table 4 - Challenges and lessons learned during expatriation

Emergent Category	Examples
Challenges	Limited contact with colleagues in the workplace; Very high emotional wear; Suffer prejudice for being a woman, divorced, and being alone on an international mission; Dealing with the subcultural differences of the destination countries, especially with different ethnicities;

	<p>Understand the differences in organizational culture in the branches where they were assigned; Falling ill in a country whose health conditions were precarious; Difficulties with the local language; Dealing with teenage children in the process of adapting to the new culture; Dealing with technical challenges at work; Balancing personal and professional life in the first moments of expatriation.</p>
Learned lessons	<p>Respect for the other, for the individuality of each one regardless of cultural origin; Strengthen citizenship, based on comparison with other cultures; Respect for nature, people, animals, the unknown; Cherish the experience; Be less anxious, less demanding or stressed; Have patience; Be more tolerant; Valuing people and the relationship with them; Stop being arrogant; Become a better person.</p>

Source: elaborated by authors.

When comparing Tables 3 and 4, we perceive that the learnings and gains outweigh the losses and challenges. Learning pertains to subjective transformations that include the incorporation of values, such as respect for the other, the uniqueness of the other, and the understanding of differences among others. This signifies that living abroad not only sensitizes expatriates to understanding cultural differences. It goes further; in cultural contexts, sometimes antagonistic and unfamiliar, the understanding that ultimately 'we are all human' may be the most significant learning one could experience in another culture, as discussed by the concept of the 'epistemology of vision': 'Solidarity as a form of knowledge is the recognition of the other as an equal' (Santos, 2011, p. 246).

5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

By investigating how the experiences of Brazilian expatriate executives from multinational companies (re)configure their identity(ies) across multiple dimensions, we perceived that between the expatriation and repatriation movements, the phenomenon of 'Lives in Between' (Spitzer, 2001) occurs – that is, the experience of belonging to two worlds without, however, fully belonging to either. Thus, expatriation and repatriation constitute a process permeated by ambivalence and liminality.

The research also demonstrated the multidimensional nature of identity and how the expatriation process affects individuals' values, attitudes, and behaviors, causing suffering and emotional exhaustion. Expatriates feel the need to balance the different roles undertaken during the expatriation process, especially family and professional roles. Furthermore, they undergo an ambivalent process characterized by losses and gains.

Another point observed in the research was that expatriation causes expatriates, as well as accompanying family members, to lose the ability to identify the places to which they belong. Despite recognizing the injustices of managerial power, work occupies a central place in these individuals' identities, as their lives become intertwined with the employing organization, necessitating demonstrations of 'loyalty'. However, multinationals often overlook these essentially human aspects, deviating from the principles that ostensibly guide them.

The research also enabled the consideration that the conceptual reductionism of expatriation presented in mainstream literature appears contradictory when compared with the expatriate's perspective. Management handbooks often disregard expatriates' subjectivity – their feelings, emotions, values, beliefs, pain, joy, losses, and challenges. Policies within

International Human Resource Management regarding expatriate return are also scarce. A career plan for post-expatriation scenarios, for example, is non-existent in almost all companies where the research participants work. The absence of repatriation initiatives, therefore, denotes the utilitarian strategic character of companies, as well as the urgent need to rethink IHRM practices.

Finally, this investigation contributes to unveiling the neoliberal discourse encompassing IHRM policies and practices, often justified by terms such as efficiency and effectiveness, to the detriment of the 'human' element. The research findings also contribute theoretically to the field of IHRM from Brazil as a locus of enunciation, as it highlights the possibilities of Brazilian-style management. For future research, an investigation into the identity (re)configuration of immigrants is suggested, including contemporary migratory processes, as well as the consequences experienced within the labor system, marked by precarization and other negative effects of globalization.

As a practical recommendation, considering that the expatriation process involves high levels of stress and uncertainty, we propose that organizations develop support programs, logistical assistance, and psychological and social support. These measures aim to reduce the tension experienced before departure, during the assignment abroad, and upon return to the home country. Additionally, we advocate for the creation of a post-expatriation career plan that allows the expatriate/repatriate to retain knowledge and promotes shared career planning. This strategic approach can result in alignment between the company's and the expatriate's expectations, thereby enhancing the expatriation experience.

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