

## EPISTEMOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE AND DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: CRYSTALLIZATION OF DATA

*PERSPECTIVA EPISTEMOLÓGICA E CONSTRUÇÃO DISCURSIVA NA PESQUISA QUALITATIVA: CRISTALIZAÇÃO DE DADOS*

Rafaela Araújo Jordão Rigaud Peixoto<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT:** This paper aims at discussing some aspects related to the epistemological perspective of qualitative research, as well as the discursive construction process during this type of research. To this end, this paper discusses: (i) the relationship of participants with the researcher in the context of the research, including the due ethical positioning; (ii) the context of data generation; (iii) the profile of respondents and the research situation; and (iv) the visual map of the main topics reported in the interviews. In this sense, it is argued how principles of qualitative research are developed among the several variables present at the time of data generation, especially in relation to intercultural imbrications. It is hoped that the discussions addressed in this paper may contribute to increasing awareness on the relevance of considering the crystallization of data (qualitative aspects) when dealing with investigations involving human beings; and can be used as input for students to envision a comprehensive scope of the qualitative research planning.

**Keywords:** Qualitative research; crystallization of data; Cultural Studies.

**RESUMO:** Este artigo tem o objetivo de discutir alguns aspectos relacionados à perspectiva epistemológica da pesquisa qualitativa, assim como o processo de construção discursiva durante esse tipo de pesquisa. Para isso, este artigo discute: (i) a relação dos participantes com a pesquisadora no contexto de pesquisa, inclusive o devido posicionamento ético; (ii) o contexto de geração de dados; (iii) o perfil dos participantes e a situação de pesquisa; e (iv) o mapa visual dos principais tópicos reportados nas entrevistas. Nesse sentido, é discutido como os princípios de pesquisa qualitativa se desenvolvem em meio às diversas variáveis presentes no momento de geração de dados, especialmente em relação às imbricações interculturais. Espera-se que as discussões trazidas neste artigo possam contribuir para aumentar a conscientização acerca da cristalização de dados (aspectos qualitativos) ao lidar com investigações envolvendo seres humanos; e possam ser utilizadas como insumo para os alunos vislumbrarem o amplo escopo do planejamento de pesquisa qualitativa.

**Palavras-chave:** Pesquisa qualitativa; cristalização de dados; Estudos culturais.

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<sup>1</sup> PhD in Letters/Language Studies from PUC-Rio, with Postdoctoral research in Corpus Linguistics developed at the University of Sao Paulo (USP), Translator and Researcher at the Department of Airspace Control (DECEA) and Researcher and Collaborative Professor at the Air Force University (UNIFA). Vice-coordinator of the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies in Aerospace Sciences (NEICA/UNIFA).

## 1 Introduction

This work follows methodological assumptions of qualitative research and, for that, presents a research outline with semi-structured interviews, in compliance with ethical precepts recommended by the Resolution of the National Health Council (CNS) Nr. 466, of 12 December 2012, and by the Resolution of the National Health Council (CNS) Nr. 510, of 7 April 2016, both published by the Ministry of Health in Brazil and used as compulsory guidelines for research at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio), where I developed my PhD.

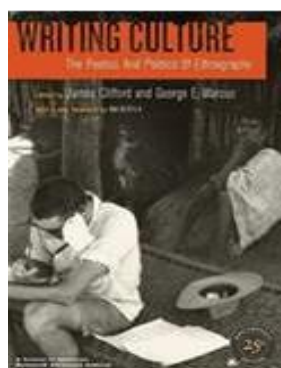
In this qualitative research, data crystallization was used as a methodological principle (Malatamidou, 2018), to bring together some aspects of a qualitative research situation, especially when some more complex variables are at stake, as in the case of students who are more used to dealing with research in STEM fields.

To this end, the assumptions on the epistemological perspective of qualitative research, as well as the discursive construction process during this sort of research, particularly in relation to the example of experience with Chinese and Brazilian participants, will be discussed in this paper by addressing: (i) the relationship of participants with the researcher in the context of the research, including the due ethical positioning; (ii) the context of data generation; (iii) the profile of respondents and the research situation; and (iv) the visual map of the main topics reported in the interviews. In this sense, it is discussed how principles of qualitative research are developed among the various variables present at the time of data generation, especially in relation to their intercultural imbrications.

## 2 Epistemological perspective of qualitative research

The qualitative research perspective adopted focuses on analyses centered on the individual, as to try to encompass the complexity of one's identity (Velho, 1978). The beginning of this approach arose from practice in the field of anthropology, with revisited considerations published in the book *Writing Culture*, by Clifford and Marcus (1986). This was considered a milestone in qualitative linguistic studies, due to the fact that the authors, for the first time, tried to situate the context of the interviewees and also the interview, in a perspective that is made evident, in a very symbolic way, in the book cover, as shown below:

Figure 1 - Cover photo of the book *Writing Culture* (1986)



Source: Google Books (2018)

By using this cover photo, Denzin and Lincoln (2003) show that the context of qualitative research at that time was silently imbued with biased positions, since it was almost always subject to an analysis driven by the discursive lens of the ruling class. From this insight, this work could perhaps be considered “the most influential book on ethnography in the last half of the 20th century” (Denzin; Lincoln, 2003, p.2), as its cover photo reproduces “two ideas that are quite fresh in the racist imagination: the notion of the white male as writer/authority [...] and the idea of the passive brown/black man [and woman and child] who is doing nothing, merely looking on.” (Hooks, 1990, p. 127 apud Denzin; Lincoln, 2003, p. 2), and discusses this assumption.

When problematizing this perspective, it was recognized that qualitative research is so complex to the extent that it must be understood as a continuum of analysis, which must not disregard possible additional methodological approaches to understanding a given study object (Winkin, 1998). In essence, qualitative methods are not ultimately “finished”, and this is precisely the reason why objective questionnaires (such as the sociocultural ones) are “instruments” being discontinued in Discourse Analysis research since they do not account for the full understanding of what these data mean in a research environment.

Along with this, it must be noted that qualitative and quantitative methodologies are not necessarily dichotomic but can be used in a complementary way for the analysis of generated data. In the research discussed in this paper, although it mostly relies on qualitative assumptions, there is also small contribution from quantitative data. Then, as advocated by Creswell (2003) for a mixed methodology, a visual model was provided, to objectively situate the data generated, as a sort of diachronic clipping.

In addition, procedures were also aligned with the defended by Winkin (1998), who suggests stages of (a) spatial description, with the elaboration of spatial maps; (b) time, with the realization of temporal maps; and (c) theorization, with the regular reassessment of data, to improve systematization resulting from data observation. The author emphasizes that the data should not be allocated in mere theoretical “boxes” but be subject to constant analysis in the light of theory. And the contribution of visual maps adequately allows situating the interaction, without limiting the scope of the data generated.

In this context, it is relevant to differentiate social distance (group experiences) and psychological distance (individual experiences), as Velho (1978) points out:

[the fact of] two individuals belonging to the same society does not mean that they are closer than if they were from different societies, but [they are] approximated by preference, gestures, idiosyncrasies. To what extent can one distinguish socio-cultural from psychological aspects? (Velho, 1978, p. 38, my translation)<sup>2</sup>

In other words, it can be said that people of more privileged social classes, coming from different locations, have more similar preferences and behaviors in comparison to those of other social groups in the same location. It applies to any group of individuals who see themselves as sharing any identity. For example, Jews share values as a nation no matter where

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<sup>2</sup> Original: “dois indivíduos pertencerem à mesma sociedade não significa que estejam mais próximos do que se fossem de sociedades diferentes, porém aproximados por preferência, gestos, idiosincrasias. Até que ponto se pode, nesses casos, distinguir o sócio-cultural do psicológico?” (Velho, 1978, p. 38)

they are. It could be said, therefore, that social relations awareness occurs in an approximate and not definite degree, i.e. it is not essentialist, since there is always the possibility of “interference” of unpredicted variables, due to the complexity of identity constitution of an individual.

It is interesting to note that qualitative research was traditionally situated as a counterpart to quantitative research, being the latter considered more objective, supposedly allowing the researcher to be at a “safe distance”, so as not to interfere in the production of data. However, as illustrated by Figure 1, it was realized that this so-called interference is actually representative of a real interactive situation, one that invariably occurs by assimilating the relationship with other situational factors, also arising from different socio-historical experiences.

Therefore, this paper discusses an approach that adopted a narrative analysis perspective based on semi-structured research interviews, complemented by field diary notes. As recommended by Creswell (2003), open strategies were used, with comprehensive questions, with exploratory verbs, to avoid limiting the scope of the data to be generated.

The geographical and economic aspects of the location where the participants come from were also deemed relevant to better understand their experience in the world, according to an emic approach. In this sense, more detailed data about the participants’ life history were provided, and situated in the research context, also as a way to make more evident that data are not subject to “validation” itself but constitute reflected and refracted identity projections from the “crystal of interaction.” (Denzin; Lincoln, 2003).

Denzin and Lincoln refer to this process as refraction of a crystal, stating that “each telling, like light hitting a crystal, reflects a different perspective on this incident.” (Denzin; Lincoln, 2003, p. 8). This metaphor was initially introduced by Richardson (1997), according to the perception that qualitative research is centered on the image of the crystal and not on the triangle, since the possible projections (reflected and refracted, from the crystal) are the ones that must be analyzed in qualitative research, and not simply the data or the way the data relate to each other, as aligned in a triangle. In the author’s words,

I propose that the central imaginary for “validity” for postmodernist texts is not the triangle – a rigid, fixed, two-dimensional object. Rather, the central imaginary is the crystal, which combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimensionalities, and angles of approach. Crystals grow, change, and are altered, but they are not amorphous. Crystals are prisms that reflect externalities and refract within themselves, creating different colors, patterns, and arrays casting off in different directions. What we see depends on our angle of repose – not triangulation but rather crystallization. (Richardson; St. Pierre, 2018, p. 1416).

This perception of refraction, refracted images, is consistent with the Bakhtinian idea that the subject’s identity develops according to his/her interpretation of the other interactant, that is, how the other understands or would come to understand one’s speech. Thus, evaluation, through politically correct discourse or rectifications, is an important element to be considered as projecting identities.

When comparing reflected and refracted images of a crystal (Richardson, 1997), the optimum or saturated point of a research is considered as reached when additional data would

not aggregate greater understanding of the object studied. This threshold is not a consensus, though; it depends on critical analysis about how data would be organized and, if necessary, expanded (Minayo, 2017).

And it is important to highlight that all data generated and other information gathered during the research must comply with ethical standards, as it will be discussed in the following section.

### 3 Ethical standpoint in research

All research procedures must be carried out after the project is approved by the Ethics Committee (generally of a given university), to protect the identity of respondents, according to ethical principles, through the anonymous “registration” of participants.

For the research used as example in this paper, approved by the Ethics Committee of PUC-Rio (Report Nr. 14/2018, of 16 August, 2018), participants were granted pseudonyms, chosen according to the order of interviews conducted and according to nationality: names are in alphabetical order, and in the Portuguese or English language (for nationals and foreigners, respectively), so data generated is more easily managed.

To corroborate this intention, according to guidelines from the PUC-Rio Ethics Committee, the interviewees received a Free Informed Consent Form, prepared in Portuguese, after approval by the Committee. This Term, in accordance with the provisions of Resolution CNS Nr. 466, of 12 December 2012, and Resolution Nr. 510, of 7 April 2016, clarifies that the data have no binding effect and can therefore be destroyed at any time, if requested by the participants, according to clause IV.3, subparagraph d) of Resolution Nr. 460 (Brazil, 2012) and Art 17, item III, of Resolution Nr. 510 (Brazil, 2016).

Among the important criteria to be considered in a qualitative research, Simons and Piper (2015) cite that there must be informed consent; confidentiality and anonymity; access to the results of the research before the publication of the data generated; approval by the Ethics Committee; and ethical considerations for the researcher. The authors point out, in relation to the Ethics Committees, that these currently take a very defensive stance, in which legal issues (right to privacy, copyright, etc.) seem to be more imperative than moral issues, as in the case of interviews with refugees (Jacquemet, 2005).

The authors mention that the ethical principle used to have a more “rational” approach, with weighing of rights and duties, while current ethical principles are based on participatory and democratic practices, and are called “ethics of care” (Simons; Piper, 2005, p. 58), since they take into account “relationships, people’s lives and context” (Simons; Piper, 2005, p. 58).

The care with the participant, a perspective mainly directed by the strengthening of human rights principles, motivated what is called “situated ethics”, in which specific aspects of the socio-political context of research should be considered, in order to avoid embarrassment or discomfort to a particular social group, for example. The authors cite that “any ethical decision needs to take cognisance of the precise way in which many of the above factors are played out in the specific socio-political context. (Simons; Piper, 2005, p. 58), a context that is called by Usher (2000) as “ethical moment”.

Regarding the criterion of ethical considerations for the researcher, Simons and Piper (2015) highlight that the possible effects for the researcher should also be considered, since

s/he are always in a position of vulnerability, although being the one conducting the research. This fragility is usually more evident when the researcher deals with participants in situations of imminent danger, such as war zones or prisons (Biar, 2012), but, in fact, it pervades the researcher's entire experience, especially in research of ethnographic nature, and particularly in autoethnographic research.

Since it is never possible to predict all the unfoldings of the initial planning, the vulnerabilities listed during the research planning are only the foreseen ones. For this reason, Simons and Piper (2015) argue that the 'informed consent term' should be, in fact, called 'consent term in progress', subject to adjustments during the research. It is a continuous and open process during data generation, because at any time the participant has the right to review a position (for example, you may initially choose to wish for your "non-identification", and later you may wish to change your posture and wish for your name and identity to be revealed, at least partially).

Although this practice is not widespread in Brazil, such dynamics began to be observed and respected in some studies. For the generation of data for my research, used as an example for this paper, participants were informed that they are fully protected by their right to request, at any time, that data generated is disregarded.

There should be commitment to transparency in procedures to generate data, and methodological steps must be carefully planned to be aligned with the ethical parameters recommended in qualitative research.

#### **4 Relationship with participants in the research context**

The research undertaken in the PhD dissertation from which this paper derived had the participation of seven Brazilians and four Chinese, and the interviews were granted in Portuguese and English, respectively, and only recorded in audio. Among the Brazilians interviewed, most participated in exchange programs of the Fulbright Commission (the Foreign Language Teaching Assistant - FLTA, to teach Portuguese; and the Sandwich Doctorate), in several states in the United States, between 2013 and 2015, when they shared residence, were dormitory neighbors or worked daily with Chinese. In addition to them, two other Brazilians who lived with Chinese in Brazil were interviewed. Regarding the Chinese, all were Mandarin teachers resident in Rio de Janeiro, in exchange programs promoted by the Confucius Institute or the Ministry of Education of China (HanBan), held at PUC-Rio or Pedro II School. One of the participants initially worked in an extension program at PUC-Rio, then engaged in other partnerships, also maintained by the Chinese government.

The contact with Brazilians occurred through groups of former participants of the FLTA program, registered on the social network platform Facebook. As I was also a former participant in this exchange program, I posted messages in the group of my program edition (2013-2014) and in the group of the following edition (2014-2015), in which I knew some of the participants. Initially, I posted survey messages, to check availability of participants to grant interviews via Skype, and got several favorable responses, although not all who showed a positive response at this time have ultimately granted interviews later, due to scheduling incompatibilities.

Concerning the Chinese, the initial contact was with a Mandarin teacher, named Deborah in my research, who stayed at my home during her one-year exchange program in Rio

de Janeiro, and showed a lot of enthusiasm for the research initiative on Chinese culture. In addition to her, during this period, I also hosted another teacher from Confucius Institute for about two months, referred to as Jenny in my research.

Through the first Mandarin teacher, I met other Mandarin teachers who also agreed to grant interviews. As the type of activity developed by Chinese participants was similar, the content of the interviews referred to a recurring discourse in relation to conceptualizations of the language teaching of the Confucius Institute. One of the interviewees (Frank) even made himself available to give lectures, in short presentations, on topics in which the referred Institute was engaged in Brazil.

I sought to strengthen the relationship with my Chinese participants, to get to know a little more about their culture. With Deborah, I attended service at an evangelical church of Chinese origin located in the neighborhood of Tijuca, in which bilingual services were held; I participated in an event celebrating the Chinese New Year, organized by the Consulate of China in Rio de Janeiro; and I joined the gastronomic celebrations of the group of Chinese exchange students of the Confucius Institute, whether Mandarin teachers or graduate students at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio). In addition, I tried to make my Chinese participants take part in Brazilian cultural activities, such as Carnival, and two of them (Deborah and Erick) joined me in a parade in the samba school Imperio Serrano, whose theme was China in that year.

The opportunity of sharing daily routine and cultural activities with Chinese in exchange programs and other Chinese, along with the possibility of discussing several topics, allowed me to somewhat sharpen my perception of opinions about their experiences in Brazil, as points of view of this group of Chinese were more freely shared, from the moment they were in China, preparing to come to Brazil.

This closer contact motivated me to visit China in July 2019 to try to have a more skeptical perspective in relation to the country's culture. In my 20-day itinerary, I included visits to tourist areas and a stay in a city of greater industrial concentration, in which a relative lived for about 10 years. Thus, I initially visited the cities of Beijing, Xian, Guilin, Yangshuo and Shanghai, then went to Guangzhou and Hong Kong. In this journey, I tried to pay careful attention to interactions between the Chinese, the city dynamics and informally "interview" as many Chinese as possible. In this first part of the trip, besides the Brazilian person with whom I was traveling, my husband, my contact was only with Chinese, so I needed to use other communication strategies, as I do not speak Mandarin. For this, I used maps and applications to translate from English to Mandarin, and use a voice/verbalization tool.

In Guangzhou, more specifically, I had the opportunity to stay longer, since my brother-in-law lived there, with his French wife. Therefore, unlike other cities, I interacted more with Brazilians and French who lived in the country for ten to twenty years, and worked for a French company; in addition to a Chinese, and his family, close to this group, and with previous experience of about ten years in Italy, where he studied.

In the interaction with these people, I was also able to conduct an informal investigation, on the perspective of this group on some points of contrast between the Western and Eastern cultures, both based on the narratives of the Westerners and on the narrative of the Chinese. During these observations and according to these narratives, there was certain polarization in the groups of employees in the companies, with foreigners usually interacting with each other, without a very close contact with the Chinese. Most likely this was due to the

fact that the majority of foreigners residing in China mainly work for foreign companies that have branches in that country.

This social distancing was also observed by me when I interacted with two Chinese who could become possible participants in my PhD research. Through a Brazilian who worked in a Chinese multinational company of the energy sector, I contacted two Chinese who agreed to participate in the research. However, perhaps for the sake of preserving labor relations, the interview was only granted in written form, with generation of scarce data, which were eventually disregarded.

Unlike the employees of the energy company, Mandarin teachers have always been very open to participate, perhaps because they are more comfortable with cultural issues that also permeate language teaching situations, in addition to having a relationship with PUC-Rio, the same institution where I was a PhD candidate. In previous informal conversations and during the interviews, idiosyncratic situations regarding the contexts of study and work in the respective cultures were reported. The engagement of Chinese respondents can be more effectively observed in Frank's interview, who once conveyed some anguish in relation to situations affected by cultural simulacra, and that he could offer a contribution for me to "solve this problem" with my research, in the sense of understanding how it is developed.

## 5 Context of data generation

The data were primarily generated, after approval by the Ethics Committee, through interviews given by Brazilians and Chinese, in August 2018, about their experience with people from the counterpart culture. Data analysis stemmed from the understanding that cultural simulacra is present in the discourse of the Chinese group and correlate with cultural simulacra present in the discourse of the Brazilian group of participants.

Initially, before the official data generation, an informal interview (pilot interview) was conducted with a Chinese teacher, to create intelligibilities about the presence of possible intercultural interferences in the discourse about people from a foreign culture. Based on this initial input, a pilot interview script was developed, containing about ten questions, to elicit narratives about the interaction between people from the two countries. Although sharing the same analytical purpose, the interview scripts were prepared in a slightly different way, to meet the specificities of each perspective from each group of Brazilians and Chinese.

Interviews with Brazilians were mostly granted by Skype, except for two people, interviewed face to face; and all Chinese were interviewed face to face. However, this different methodological modality did not pose significant impacts on data generation. During the interviews, other questions were asked to the interviewees and, in some cases, I was also asked some questions. At the initial moment of the research, there was a concern to request authorization to use data for the purposes of research and scientific publications, and to register the agreement of the interviewees, also stressing the possibility of withdrawing this authorization at any time, as prescribed by the mentioned Research Ethics Resolutions. At the end, there was opportunity for the interviewees to express themselves freely, making additional comments.

With this, we sought not only to obtain other information considered relevant but also to observe ratification or reflection of previous discourse, marking the most impactful elements for the interviewees, as well as details of the research situation.

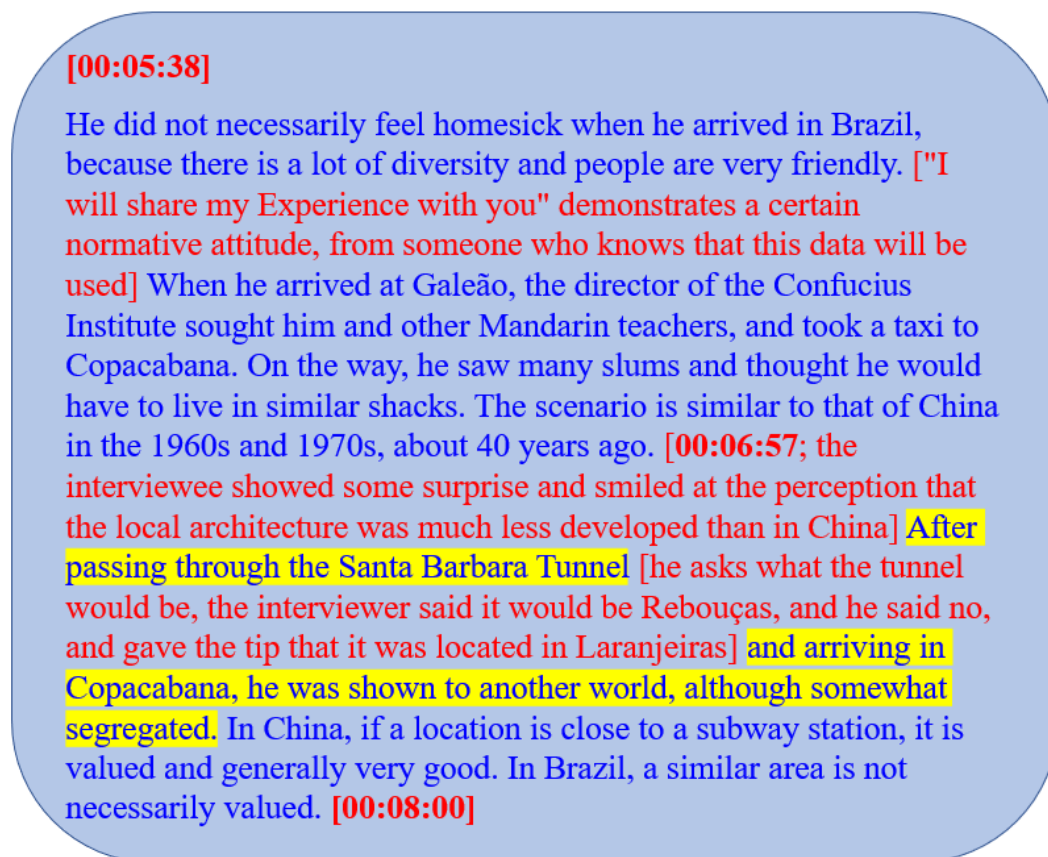


In general, preparation for field work consisted only in the support of a print interview script, and the use of audio recorder from a smartphone, both for face-to-face interviews and for interviews via Skype. In the case of face-to-face interviews, the recorder was positioned strategically between the interviewee and me, so that the sound was clearly captured when each one was speaking. In the case of the interview via Skype, in a laptop, the cellphone was placed exactly in the sound output of the laptop, so my voice was more clearly captured by the audio recorded by the cellphone.

Interview situations were always initiated and ended with a small talk, not necessarily recorded. Among the difficulties encountered, there were problems only when the internet connection failed, in the Skype conversations.

In the first hearing of the data generated, I carried out a primary transcription of content, using reported speech. With this, it was possible to have a sort of guide, relatively summarized, for reference of interview excerpts considered relevant in a later analysis. In this “summary”, regular demarcations of playing time and comments by me, the researcher, were inserted, as shown regarding Excerpt 24, in an interview given by participant Frank:

Figure 2 - Transcription of content of Excerpt 24



Source: Translated and adapted from Author (2019)

In this excerpt, the red color was used to mark my comments in context, and the yellow color was used to highlight a high moment in the narrative. The playing time was inserted after significant extracts of text, which would constitute a possible excerpt, to make it easier to be located in the complete audio file.

In other hearings, additional comments were made, coded in other colors, as also suggested by Ramalho and Resende (2011), either to add more refined perceptions, or to differentiate observations of another nature or other levels of language. As new situations of interlocution were found to be significant, complementary theoretical references were read, which allowed refined technical analysis, by referring to assumptions of narrative theory, qualitative methodology and migratory practices (Winkin, 1998).

It should be noted that the data were translated aligned with an “ideological and performative process” (Lewis, 2016, p. 142; De Fina; Tseng, 2017), according to which the meanings constructed in a language A do not correspond exactly to the ones in language B, that is, the meanings are not univocal and stable. In this sense, the translations undertaken may be considered an interpretative procedure, supported by the sociocultural load of the researcher and by the familiarization with the research situation, that is, the shared knowledge.

The data generation and analysis procedures were categorized into nine steps as shown in the following chart:

Chart 1 - Procedures and strategies for data generation



Source: Translated and adapted from Author (2019)

The steps listed seek a more detailed analysis of situational elements during the moment of data generation, in the light of what Briggs (2007) defends. For this author, culture is derived from the interaction between individuals and their social environment; culture is therefore situated in space and in time, that is, it occurs in a way that it is intertwined with the situational context and not only with the scenario where it happens. Based on this assumption, the author guides the perception about “how communicative ideologies structure interviews ideologically and shape their social effects” (Briggs, 2007, p. 558). For that, he proposes a theory of communicability, consisting of eight principles to be considered in the analysis of interviews: (1) The subject shall be considered as the focal point of the interview, called “origo”; (2) The data generated shall be derived from the natural performance of respondents, not modulated; (3) The choice of respondents already presupposes a kind of social classification of the target audience; (4) It is an illusion to believe that all people, when interviewed in the same way, will have the same discursive standpoint (Mishler, 1986); (5) The spatio-temporal scope of communicability from interviews has been expanded by digital technologies; (6) Although interviews present situational contradictions, their potential (of the productive ones) lies in their ability to naturalize connections between three competing ideologies (language, subjectivity and knowledge); (7) Studies based on interviews provide communicable maps, they are not only descriptive; and (8) Communicable maps design and understand communicable roles.

Briggs (2007) uses the term communicability according to a concept that can be subdivided into three segments: (1) Socially situated communicative processes, i.e. communicative events that create subjectivities and motivate certain ways for people to interact; (2) Social fields or arenas of social organization (Bourdieu, 1993) that produce social roles played and challenged by individuals and the community as a whole; and (3) Chronotope (Bakhtin, 1981), which considers speech as reflective and refracted in various communicative situations. On this, Briggs (2007) says that









this process is powerful, shaping and contestable; in spite of their basis in material and institutional inequalities, communicable maps achieve effects as people respond to the ways that texts seek to interpellate them—including by refusing to locate themselves in the positions they offer, critically revising them, or rejecting them altogether. (Briggs, 2007, p. 556)

We sought to meet these principles when conducting research, generating data, and performing analysis, taking into consideration the participants’ profile and general context, as it will be explained next.

### *5.1 Participants: profile, research situation and representativeness*

In order to allow a more contextualized understanding of the meanings constructed by the interviewees in the interactional situation of the research, the profile of the interviewees and research context was summarized. In the first column of the figure, there is name, age group, gender, date of interview and duration of interview. In the second column, the qualitative profile of respondents and the research situation are presented.

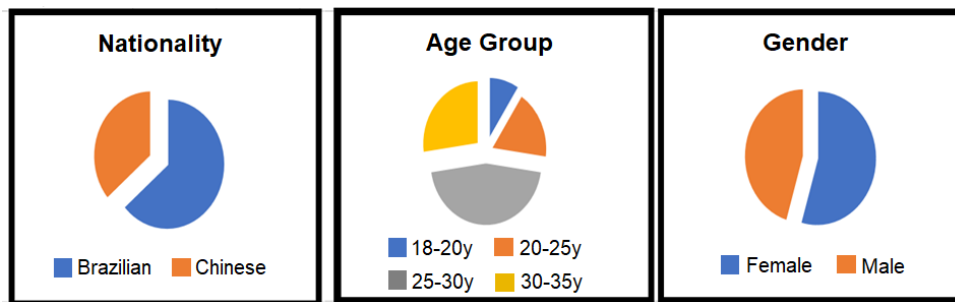
Figure 3 - Description of the interviewees' profile and the research situation

|  |   |  |
|--|---|--|
| <b>ANA</b><br>25-30 / F<br>17 Aug 18<br>00:27:36     |    | She lived in Brazil (Araruama-RJ, Macaé-RJ, Niteroi-RJ and Salvador-BA) and in the United States (Jackson-MI, Ypsilanti-MI and Ann Arbor-MI), graduated in Letters, M.A., teacher of English and Portuguese. Currently lives in Salvador-BA, Brazil.<br><i>[Interview via Skype, with connection interruptions.]</i> |
| <b>BRUNO</b><br>30-35 / M<br>17 Aug 18<br>00:17:11   |    | He lived in Brazil (Petrolina-PE, Rio de Janeiro-RJ and São Paulo-SP), graduated in Economics, M.Sc., economist. He currently lives in Rio de Janeiro-RJ, Brazil.<br><i>[Face-to-face interview, without significant interruptions.]</i>   |
| <b>CARLOS</b><br>25-30 / M<br>17 Aug 18<br>00:26:28  |    | He lived in Brazil (Aracaju-SE and Salvador-BA) and the United States (Nashville-TN), graduated in Letters, PhD, professor of English and Portuguese. He currently lives in Salvador-BA, Brazil.<br><i>[Interview via Skype, with connection interruptions.]</i>   |
| <b>DEBORAH</b><br>20-25 / F<br>18 Aug 18<br>00:29:00 |    | She lived in Brazil (Rio de Janeiro-RJ) and China (Guangzhou), graduated in Letters, Master's student, teacher of Mandarin. She currently lives in Hong Kong.<br><i>[Face-to-face interview, without significant interruptions.]</i>   |
| <b>ERICK</b><br>18-20 / M<br>18 Aug 18<br>00:25:13   |    | He lived in Brazil (Rio de Janeiro-RJ) and China (Anqing and Xian), graduated in Letters, teacher of Mandarin. Currently lives in Anqing, China.<br><i>[Face-to-face interview, without significant interruptions.]</i>  |
| <b>FRANK</b><br>25-30 / M<br>18 Aug 18<br>01:30:13   |    | He lived in Brazil (Rio de Janeiro-RJ) and China (Huainan and Sichuan), graduated in Letters, M.A., teacher of Mandarin. Currently lives in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.<br><i>[Face-to-face interview, without significant interruptions.]</i>   |
| <b>GUSTAVO</b><br>25-30 / M<br>19 Aug 18<br>00:20:10 |  | He lived in Brazil (Oeiras-PI, Teresina-PI and São Paulo-SP) and in the United States (Incline Village-NV and Atlanta-GA), graduated in Letters, teacher of English and Portuguese. Currently lives in São Paulo-SP, Brazil.<br><i>[Interview via Skype, without significant interruptions.]</i>                     |
| <b>HELENA</b><br>30-35 / F<br>20 Aug 18<br>00:14:51  |  | She lived in Brazil (Fortaleza-CE) and the United States (Woodbridge-VA and East Lansing-MI), graduated in Letters, PhD, teacher of English. Currently lives in Fortaleza-CE, Brazil.<br><i>[Interview via Skype, with connection interruptions.]</i>  |
| <b>ISABELA</b><br>25-30 / F<br>22 Aug 18<br>00:29:05 |  | She lived in Brazil (Bragança Paulista-SP and Campinas-SP) and in the United States (Salt Lake City-UT and Urbana-Champaign-IL), graduated in Letters, PhD candidate, teacher of English. She currently lives in Urbana-Champaign-IL, USA.<br><i>[Interview via Skype, without significant interruptions.]</i>       |
| <b>JENNY</b><br>20-25 / F<br>25 Aug 18<br>00:36:14   |  | She lived in Brazil (Rio de Janeiro-RJ) and China (Qinhuangdao), graduated in Letters, teacher of Mandarin. She currently lives in Qinhuangdao, China.<br><i>[Face-to-face interview, without significant interruptions.]</i>  |
| <b>KARINA</b><br>30-35 / F<br>30 Aug 18<br>00:19:50  |  | She lived in Brazil (Niteroi-RJ), graduated in Letters, PhD candidate, teacher of Portuguese. Currently lives in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.<br><i>[Face-to-face interview, without significant interruptions.]</i>  |

Source: Translated and adapted from Author (2019)

According to the above data, it can be established that the sample of participants was very representative, balanced, mainly in terms of nationality and gender, as illustrated in the following graphs:

Figure 4 - Representativeness of samples



Source: Translated and adapted from Author (2019)

In order to better understand the interactional content of the interviews, particularly in relation to each participant separately, the content of the speech verbalized by each interviewee was organized in the following verbatim notes (Lee, 2016):

**Participant Ana.** She lived with Chinese people, young and old, at work, in the state of Michigan, in the US, in the five-year period she had been living in that country. She considers the Chinese are serious/formal and curious; she showed concern about being politically correct and taking a scholar “neutral” stance. She pointed out that there is diversity in the US, but it does not mean inclusion: the Chinese interact more among themselves and rarely with other foreigners. The erasure of Chinese culture is great, since people from the city community, in general, do not comment much about the Chinese, although they comment on other peoples, such as the Muslim religion. *Additional comments:* she did not make any comments initially but inquired about the objective of the research and said that the distance between Brazilians and Chinese is probably due to different notions of personal space, with distinct perceptions of closeness in the interaction.

**Participant Bruno.** He lived with two Chinese women as flatmates in the city of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, one of which still lives in his residence. He considers the Chinese with whom he currently lives quite funny, reserved and kind. According to Bruno, China is still a very closed country, without much freedom. He demonstrated/verbalized that he had preconceived opinions on Chinese culture, which were partially demystified during the time he lived with the Chinese. *Additional comments:* he emphasized that the Chinese have a more passive profile and should not perform any kind of global leadership.

**Participant Carlos.** A Chinese woman lived in a room next to his in a student dormitory in the state of Tennessee. The Chinese girl was very proactive, friendly, sought interactions with other dorm students, all international ones, and was a sort of leader. He showed that he was a little afraid at first, because a Brazilian friend had shared negative perceptions on Chinese. In addition, his knowledge was mostly based on movies. He assumes a certain discourse of authority for having defended a master’s dissertation in the field of intercultural studies. The interaction with other foreigners motivated reflection on the culture itself. He believes that in the US there is a lot of participation of Eastern researchers in the field of technology. *Additional comments:* he emphasized a politically correct speech but ended up saying that his Chinese friend is a bit different from the profile of someone from a Chinese culture.

**Participant Deborah.** She lives with a Brazilian couple in Brazil. In China, she

obtained biased information about Brazil, mostly not observed in her experience in the country. When she left the airport, the route in the North zone scared her initially. She emphasized social norms of conduct regarding commitment to schedules, study and work. The decision to come to Brazil was motivated by her interest in exercising the skills she learned as a language teacher (Mandarin). She highlighted the perception that Brazilians are very festive, have a quieter routine and Brazilian food is very good. In her opinion, Brazilians are curious about China. *Additional comments: the routine is slower than in China and even poor people seem to be happier in Brazil. She was surprised with adversities arising from the recessive economic period that she witnessed in Brazil. She highlighted that the curiosity about Chinese in Brazil is so great that even an Uber driver would have waited a long time just not to miss the opportunity to have her as a passenger.*

**Participant Erick.** He interacts with Brazilian students and Brazilian members of a jiu-jitsu group. He was surprised by the Brazilian weather and food. He highlighted that rules of good manners are not very followed in an informal context in Brazil. He reported pejorative speech of Brazilians themselves in relation to Brazilian women and more naturalized discourse about sexuality. His perceptions of Brazil stemmed from orientation he had received in China and information he learned from movies. He highlighted socio-cultural differences in the Brazilian society and some racist reactions. He praised Chinese State policy, emphasizing that China is increasingly modern and the stigmas (poor, dirty) no longer correspond to reality. *Additional comments: coming to Brazil was a unique opportunity. The presence of Chinese in several countries will contribute to a greater acceptance of Chinese culture.*

**Participant Frank.** He interacts with Brazilian students and friends. He has lived in Brazil for longer (four years) than the other interviewees. He believes that Brazilians are very smart. The transportation system in Brazil is not so efficient. He also showed, as did Deborah, a negative initial impression of moving from Galeao Airport to his host house. He made very relevant socio-cultural and socioeconomic considerations, especially in relation to housing, night scene, Brazilian economic policy, industrial investment, territorial development, trade relations with Latin American countries and trade relations within the BRICS. He shows concern in demystifying stigmas and trusts me to “solve the situation” (“it is your job to solve this”, Excerpt 25). He contrasted growth panoramas for Brazil and China. He highlighted some differences in relation to people from Rio de Janeiro, the Southern region and other regions of Brazil. He emphasized personal and group perspectives of commitment to study, work and consequent economic progress of the country. Like Erick, he stressed that Brazilians encourage sexualized postures and engagement in parties, and marked differences in unconventional family patterns. He also stressed growing encouragement to learn and teach Mandarin at both secondary schools and at universities. In his speech, he took a somewhat traditionalist tone and several times asked my opinion on the topics discussed. *Additional comments: emphasized the importance of investing in education and the apparent lack of interest from Brazilian schools to implement Mandarin, even with costs subsidized by the Chinese government. He praised the Chinese state policy and the consequent impact that Chinese culture would have in the coming years (he cites that Trump’s<sup>3</sup> granddaughter and the daughter of a retired Brazilian ambassador are learning Mandarin).*

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<sup>3</sup> Donald Trump was the President of the United States at the time.

**Participant Gustavo.** He lived with Chinese, known through a Taiwanese friend, in a student dormitory at a university in the state of Nevada, in the United States. He said that living with Chinese was surprising to him because they showed themselves differently than he imagined, also for being interested in how sexuality-related themes are dealt in Brazil. Before that, he didn't have much interest in the Eastern culture. *Additional comments:* none. In response to my question, the interviewee stated that there were not many people of other Asian nationalities at the university.

**Participant Helena.** She lived with two Chinese women in the state of Michigan, in the United States, in a city where there were many Eastern people. The interviewee was very careful to be politically correct. She reported that there was a discrepancy in how hygiene and food issues were faced in the house, and that some Brazilians were afraid that Asians would "take over" the city where she lived. *Additional comments:* she emphasized that she found some hygiene and food habits a bit awkward.

**Participant Isabela.** She lived with a Chinese woman in the state of Utah, in the United States. Initially, she was afraid for not having consolidated knowledge about China. She shows concern in being more tolerant, since she was a language teacher (English). She reported communication noise about small talk practices between the two cultures. She reported more private posture of the Chinese with whom she lived, since there was not much interest to go out with other foreigners. Situations of possible conflict due to hygiene habits were prevented through negotiation. Concerning the impact of Chinese in world matters, she found it interesting because it would be an opportunity to get to know more of the Eastern culture, and also scary, for fear that they would "take over the world" and start to dictate a new world order, of Eastern influence. *Additional comments:* I asked some extra questions at the end about the contingent of Chinese at the university where the interviewee studies. The interviewee did not want to make additional comments.

**Participant Jenny.** She lives in Rio de Janeiro with a Brazilian and interacts with students. She reported that the scenario found in Brazil is different from that reported in China. She marked differences in relation to commitment to schedules, work and study. She also praises the Chinese State policy and says that citizens have a peaceful life because the stable government of their country enables that. Concerning social conduct, the Chinese are more influenced by familiar opinions than by any governmental doctrines, unlike in the Western world, where individual opinions [freedom] are more valued, to the detriment of group opinions. It shows a more conservative tone, as in relation to the limitation of women to perform specific jobs. She reports conflict situations experienced in Brazil: she did not recognize the spatial layout of a queue in a department store; she was approached by a lady who insisted that the interviewee and her friend were speaking English with an Asian accent and not Mandarin; and heard comments from Uber drivers about the fast accent of Mandarin. Despite showing some interest in continuing in Brazil, she stated that she would have to return to China to take care of her parents, although they did not necessarily need it [it is a custom to take care of their parents]. Regarding the impact of Chinese culture, the interviewee demonstrated she did not fully believe in cultural immersion, but only in some economic immersion of China. She pointed out that China has electronic items of higher quality, highlighting the company Huawei, although she said she has an iPhone. *Additional comments:* She stressed that she liked having learned a lot about Brazil, although

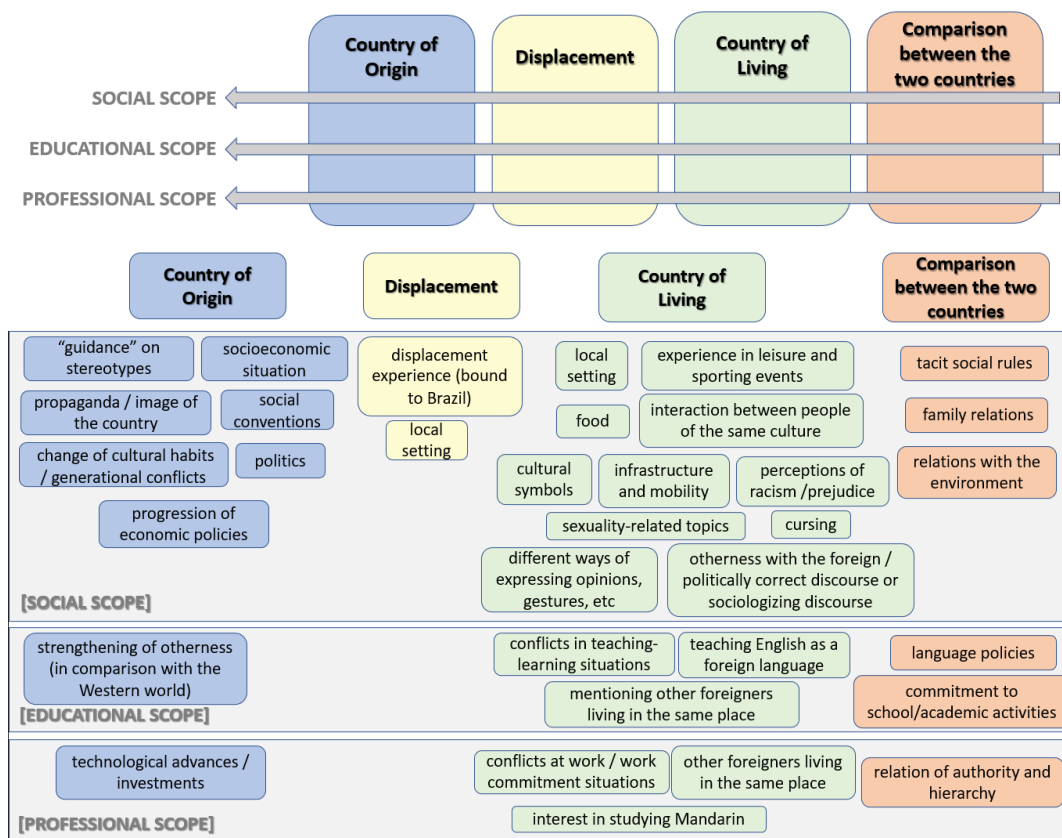
this may be related to her age. She drew consideration on the importance of having an international experience in order to become more tolerant.

**Participant Karina.** She lived with a Chinese woman [who was pregnant when she moved to her house] in Rio de Janeiro. She said she noticed very clearly the prejudice of Brazilians towards the Chinese, which would be a recurring event regarding immigrants considered “second-class”, unlike immigrants from Europe, the United States or Canada. Even very educated people reported fear that the Chinese took over basic jobs that could be executed by Brazilians. Negative characteristics of the Chinese were always highlighted and positive characteristics, such as sporting excellence, were less celebrated, on the grounds that it was typical of Chinese. Due to her living with the Chinese, the interviewee said that sometimes she “took sides” in debates about values and cultural habits of the Chinese. *Additional comments:* she shows much disappointment about the taken-for-granted idea that Brazilians are receptive to foreigners.

In total, about five and a half hours of interviews recorded in audio were generated, with 44 excerpts used as primary input for analysis. The transcription of this data, i.e. the selected excerpts, followed standards adopted by Bastos and Biar (2015).

After analyzing the content of all interviews, representative topics were identified, and illustrated in the following visual map (Winkin, 1998; Briggs, 2007):

Figure 5 - Visual map of the main topics reported in the interviews



Source: Translated and adapted from Author (2019)

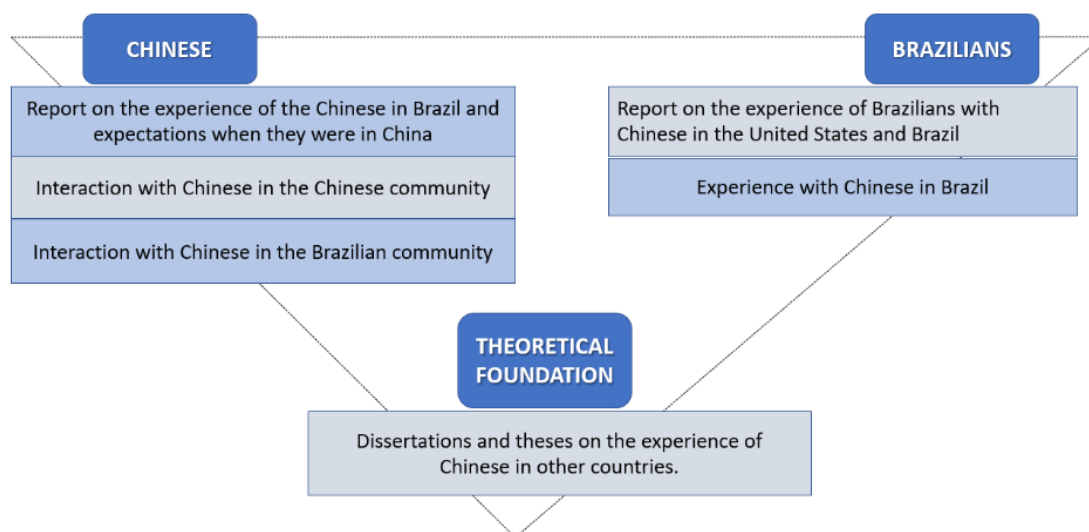


The visual map above demonstrates some preference to themes related to the country of living, particularly social-oriented ones, but it also illustrates some intersection with other themes, conveying an integrated perception of several factors that contribute to the identity projection of Chinese and Brazilians interviewed, as corroborated by Denzin and Lincoln (2003).

## 6 Crystallization of Data

As shown throughout this paper, the relationship between the participants and me was focused on trying to experience contexts beyond the research situation itself. The crystallization of data was sought, as in a crystal perspective, according to Richardson's (1997) metaphor, in order to better understand the Chinese culture and the setting of Chinese in the Western world. These research pillars were centered on Chinese, Brazilians and theoretical references about Chinese who lived elsewhere, as shown in the following chart:

Chart 2 - Data Crystallization



Source: Translated and adapted from Author (2019)

It is noteworthy that the prismatic crystal perspective, considering the three axes of analysis, is a way of analyzing the object in greater depth and consists of an alternative to the traditional method of validation (Denzin; Lincoln, 2003). In this sense, the validation occurs in a similar way to credibility, since it intends to rely on quantitative data to support a certain concept of analysis progression.

The relevance of this analysis lies in the potential of the prismatic amplitude provided by the variables, since qualitative research does not focus on data themselves, but on how the variables interrelate in a prismatic movement (Richardson, 1997 apud Denzin; Lincoln, 2003). In other words, data is understood as projections of identity, reflected and refracted ones.

In more detail, this prismatic perspective presupposes not only reflection, but also refraction of positions, that is, the interlocutors not only reproduce the concept assimilated by them, according to their experience, but also modify this concept in the light of other factors and refract it in a unique way. It is precisely at this point that the researcher has relevance in her participant observation, or quasi-participant observation, since she tries to understand the scope and amplitude of these variables, while also being part of this prismatic and refracted process.

In this context, one cannot disregard the researcher's agency during the research, referenced in the literature as the "observer's paradox", which will also modify the research context, until reaching the balance of variables and a unique research situation. This process, however, must follow very careful ethical parameters in order not to make participants of the research too much vulnerable, as it was explained in a previous section.

Much of the interest in these themes may be understood from the built identity patterns from both groups of interviewees, showing how important qualitative methodological panoramas help deepening the understanding of a contextualized study object. In that sense, the crystallization of data itself can be considered an asset for qualitative research, to help lessen the so-called "interference of the researcher", and understand it as part of the process, in line with the renovated epistemological perspective of qualitative research (Clifford; Marcus, 1986; Winkin, 1998). That is why the careful steps in preparing this sort of research is keypoint to the success of applying qualitative standards of analysis, as enhancing the epistemological perspective and discursive construction in qualitative research is necessary to envision how crystallization of data could best contribute to the research outline.

## 7 Final Remarks

The discussion presented in this paper showed how having a deeper understanding of the complex context of qualitative research is important to greatly improve results derived from data generated. (Denzin; Lincoln, 2003; Simons; Piper, 2005).

Epistemological issues such as how the researcher is [or not] involved in the research context and how this can "affect" data generated are often debated, and tend to contrapose qualitative and quantitative perspectives, in a dichotomic way. However, along the years, the influence of this involvement of the research assumed new points of view, deconstructing the observer's paradox (Clifford; Marcus, 1986), and showing how different types of data could actually be used in an integrated way instead, also as part of a crystallization process. (Richardson, 1997; Richardson; St. Pierre, 2018; Denzin; Lincoln, 2003).

Then, in this paper, after the broad contextualization of the research situation of qualitative approach and the path of data generation, the projection of refracted identity of Chinese and Brazilians was shortly analyzed as an example, according to the dialogical expressiveness observed in the research data used as reference in this paper.

To discuss aspects related to the epistemological perspective of qualitative research, as well as the discursive construction process during qualitative research, considerations were drawn on steps such as the relationship of participants with the researcher, the context of data generation, and the profile of respondents, to help integrate these elements in the research outline to provide situated data. (Winkin, 1998).

At last, providing a visual map of the main topics reported in the interviews is a final “product” that enables seeing the whole scope of themes debated in the interview. As a matter of fact, some possible themes may have been guessed based on the participants’ profiles described but, as the research situation is unique, i.e. how interviewees actually interact with the researcher, the visual map shows how profitable a designed research was in practice – or was not, for the envisioned objective of the research. In this sense, principles of qualitative research must be followed taking into consideration the several variables present at the time of data generation, especially in relation to intercultural imbrications.

Therefore, it is hoped that the discussions addressed in this paper may contribute to increasing awareness on the relevance of considering the crystallization of qualitative aspects when dealing with investigations involving human beings; and that it can be used as input for students to picture a comprehensive scope of the qualitative research planning.

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