

# Strategy implementation in the transnational MNC: A critical realist investigation of European and Indian unit collaboration

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## ABSTRACT

Inter-unit collaboration in transnational multinational corporations (MNCs) is central to unlocking MNCs' competitive advantage. We find that managing multilevel interaction of macro-level (social structures within and outside the MNC) and micro-level (individual interpretations and behaviors) factors ensures the implementation of strategic goals regarding inter-unit collaboration. In a case study of Finnish, Russian, and Indian unit collaboration in one European-origin transnational MNC, we observe that individual ascriptions of social identity to Indian colleagues (micro-level factor) affect the MNC's strategy implementation (SI) process and outcomes (macro-level factors). Building on the latter observations, critical realist theory of identity, and the idiosyncratic Indian context, we develop the currently inadequate multilevel theorization on the SI process in the MNC and expand perspectives on social identity in International Business literature. For MNC managers from Western countries, the paper offers insights into factors that should be considered to succeed in strategic and operational inter-unit collaboration with India.

## 1. Introduction

The ability to collaborate across multinational corporation (MNC) units is the basis of MNCs' competitive advantage (Birkinshaw, Ambos, & Bouquet, 2017; Hansen & Nohria, 2004). This is particularly true for transnational MNCs, in which management attempts to balance global integration and local responsiveness (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1989; Harzing, 2000) through inter-unit collaboration in the network of differentiated subsidiaries (Ghoshal & Nohria, 1989). Seamless inter-unit collaboration is an expected outcome of the transnational strategy (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1989) and an essential medium for an MNC's strategy implementation (SI) (e.g., Šilenskytė, 2020) - the process of communicating, interpreting, and enacting strategic plans (Noble, 1999). Thus, the implementation of strategic goals regarding inter-unit collaboration is vital for every transnational MNC.

However, a multilevel phenomenon of SI in MNCs and the implementation of MNCs' specific goals, such as regarding inter-unit collaboration, remain inadequately explained in the IB literature (Šilenskytė, 2020; Šilenskytė & Smale, 2021). IB scholarship has primarily investigated organizational (macro-level) and some individual (micro-level)

factors, limiting the understanding of multilevel (macro- and micro-level factors') interactions in the theorization of MNC management (Foss & Pedersen, 2019; Meyer, Li, & Schotter, 2020; Minbaeva, 2016) and its specific processes, such as the SI process (Šilenskytė & Smale, 2021). For example, MNC inter-unit collaboration has been studied by focusing on select macro-level variables, such as organizational structure (e.g., Ghoshal & Nohria, 1993), control (e.g., Prahalad & Doz, 1981; Sageder & Feldbauer-Durstmüller, 2019), coordination (e.g., Martinez & Jarillo, 1991; O'Donnell, 2000), integration (e.g., Kim, Park, & Prescott, 2003), and shared corporate values (e.g., Nohria & Ghoshal, 1994); and some micro-level variables, such as boundary-spanners (Minbaeva & Santangelo, 2018) and expatriates (e.g., Kong, Ciabuschi, & Martín, 2018).

Outside the field of IB, knowledge of SI as a multilevel phenomenon in which both macro- and micro-level factors interact also remains limited (cf., Tawse & Tabesh, 2020; Weiser, Jarzabkowski, & Laamanen, 2020). Uncertainty remains regarding which theories can be borrowed and how they can be adapted to assist the development of the multilevel theorization on SI process (Šilenskytė & Smale, 2021; Weiser et al., 2020).

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In our study, we engaged in a theory-development exercise to lessen this gap in scholarly understanding of the interactions of macro- and micro-level factors in the SI process of transnational MNCs, aiming to achieve seamless inter-unit collaboration. Given the scarcity of theoretical guidance, we used phenomenon-based research (Doh, 2015) and investigated a unique case of SI. One MNC providing engineering services, unlike its industry counterparts, managed to establish strategic- and operational-level collaboration among its smaller European units and the largest MNC unit in India. Thus, this European-origin MNC produced a case of a successfully implemented transnational strategy (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1989) in most of its global projects.

When exploring the inter-unit collaboration of Finnish, Russian, and Indian units at multiple levels of analysis, we found that strategy was not implemented consistently (i.e., to the same degree) within all MNC units, which explained why some of the MNC's global projects suffered from a lack of inter-unit collaboration. Investigating the reasons for inconsistent SI, we observed that micro-level factor (individual ascriptions of social identity to India) influenced micro-level factors (e.g., collaboration among individual colleagues in MNC units), macro-level factor (the MNC's SI process), and macro-level outcomes (e.g., consistent implementation of strategic goal regarding inter-unit collaboration across MNC units).

The European MNC members who ascribed to Indian colleagues a negative identity (belief about who they are), formed from uniform discourses about India, largely failed to establish seamless collaboration with them and implement the organizational-level strategic goal “Working as one MNC” regarding inter-unit collaboration. In contrast, the MNC members who explored different identifications within the Indian unit successfully implemented this strategic goal by establishing close collaboration with their Indian colleagues. Thus, through our abductive case study (Dubois & Gadde, 2002), we discovered the utility of the ontologically novel, essentially multilevel critical realist theory of identity (CRTI) (Sánchez, 2006) for explaining the multilevel SI process in transnational MNCs. The CRTI suggests that multiple identifications will exist within the same social group (e.g., country unit), and these identifications only partly define individual interpretations and actions. Consequently, the adoption of CRTI allowed explaining conditions under which the implementation of strategic goals regarding MNC inter-unit collaboration is likely to be inconsistent across MNC units.

To this end, our study contributes to the IB literature in several ways. We develop the currently inadequate multilevel theorization about SI in MNCs. Our study extends the scholarly understanding of the conditions under which managing macro-level factors (MNC structure, control and coordination mechanisms) in the SI process might be only partially effective. Moreover, it elaborates on the macro- and micro-level factors that interact and must be managed simultaneously in a transnational MNC's SI process (Šilenskytė & Smale, 2021). The multilevel critical realist explanation of the SI process in MNCs provided in this paper ontologically and epistemologically extends the perspectives (Foss & Pedersen, 2019; Meyer et al., 2020; Minbaeva, 2016) on the ways individuals and social structures might interact, shaping MNCs' processes and outcomes. Moreover, it sheds some light on the role of social identity in MNCs' strategic management, which is currently under-researched (Raskovic & Takacs-Haynes, 2020).

Additionally, building upon the CRTI and rich contextual idiosyncrasies present in India (Khanna, 2009; Mukherjee et al., 2022), we introduced the concept of “identities-in-difference” (Bhaskar, 1993; Sánchez, 2006) in SI and IB research. This concept suggests that ascribing identities to a particular group or entity, e.g., a group of colleagues or a country, without recognizing individual differences within it, leads to detrimental social outcomes, such as racism or unwanted confrontations (Sayer, 2000).

The exploration of the CRTI and its concept of identity-in-difference extends the existing approaches to social identity research in IB (cf., Raskovic & Takacs-Haynes, 2020) and explains inconsistent findings obtained within the Indian context. For example, utilization of this

concept strengthens concerns regarding the uniform cultural and economic models currently applied to form discourses about India (cf., Rienda, Claver, & Quer, 2011). Additionally, it allows us to explain research findings that are inconsistent with the uniform, frequently negative discourses about India (e.g., Awasthy & Gupta, 2004; Budhwar et al., 2006; Gertsen & Zølner, 2012; Koppman, Mattarelli, & Gupta, 2016; van Marrewijk, 2010). The latter encourages IB scholarship to go beyond the predominantly quantitative empirical study approach (Mukherjee et al., 2022), which treats India as a single unit of analysis (Rienda et al., 2011) instead of “...an immensely diverse country with many distinct pursuits, vastly disparate convictions, widely divergent customs and a veritable feast of viewpoints” (Sen, 2012, p. ix). Critical realist theorization illustrating India's internal diversity and its impact on SI in MNCs observed in this study confirms the need recognized by Mukherjee et al. (2022) to re-examine the ontological and epistemological assumptions of established theorizations or to engage in the new theory development in the Indian context.

For managers, this study offers a better understanding of implementing inter-unit collaboration among units embedded in culturally, economically, and politically diverse contexts within an MNC. This study assists MNC managers from Western countries in developing a better understanding of their Indian colleagues by providing a nuanced discussion of the discourses with which Indian nationals may or may not identify. A lack of reflection on the latter might hamper the implementation of cross-border collaboration with Indian units.

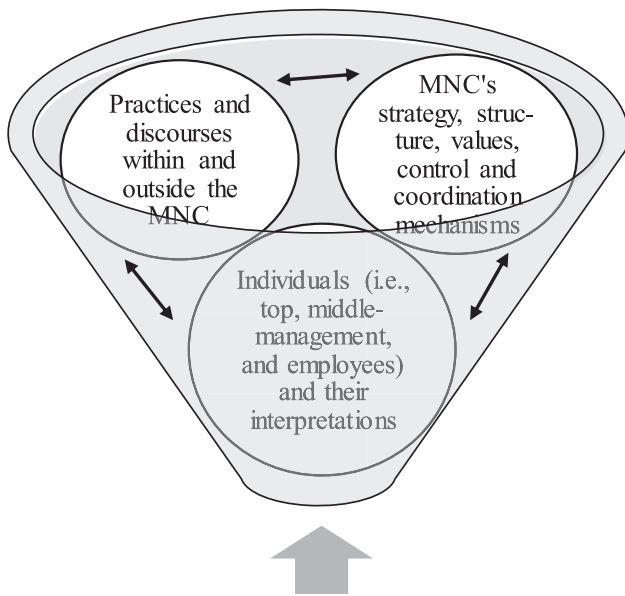
## 2. The strategy implementation process in transnational MNCs

### 2.1. Macro- and micro-level factors shaping the SI process in transnational MNCs

SI – the process of communicating, interpreting, and enacting strategic plans (Noble, 1999) – remains one of the most significant challenges for managers (Hitt et al., 2017). Despite 40 years of research on the topic, many questions lack rigorous explanations (Hitt et al., 2017). In particular, there is an insufficient understanding of the SI process across the levels of analysis (Tawse & Tabesh, 2020), i.e., the interaction of macro- (structures, controls, incentives) and micro- (social practices, discourses, emotions, individual interpretations) level factors during SI (Weiser et al., 2020). Even less is known about SI and these specific issues in MNCs (Šilenskytė & Smale, 2021) – large, diverse organizations that comprise significant contextual, inter-organizational, and individual diversity (Roth & Kostova, 2003).

The SI process is exceedingly complex in MNCs that adopt a transnational strategy (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1989). In transnational MNCs, inter-unit communication and interactions, upon which these MNCs create their competitive advantage (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1989; Hansen & Nohria, 2004), occur at all organizational levels and are frequent and hard to predict and manage (Kostova & Roth, 2003). Transnational MNCs typically adopt complex structures and diversified unit roles (Ghoshal & Nohria, 1989; Ghoshal & Nohria, 1993; Nohria & Ghoshal, 1994), which bring complexity to the communication, interpretation and enactment of MNCs' strategic goals (cf., Šilenskytė, 2020).

The ground-breaking contributions to the management of and change toward transnational MNCs (e.g., Bartlett, 1986; Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1989) place emphasis on the role of individuals and the need to consider their capabilities, responsibilities, attitudes, identities, and interpersonal relationships (micro-level factors) (Bartlett, 1986) in addition to structural control and coordination mechanisms (macro-level factors) (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1989). Spanning from the early works on transnational MNC, the research on its management has split into the investigations of different activities, such as knowledge-sharing (e.g., Foss & Pedersen, 2019), boundary-spanning (e.g., Birkinshaw et al., 2017; Minbaeva & Santangelo, 2018), the headquarter (HQ)-subsidiary relationship (cf., Kostova, Marano, & Tallman, 2016), and subsidiary management (cf., Meyer et al., 2020), setting aside the comprehensive



### Research question:

How to implement strategic goals regarding inter-unit collaboration in transnational MNCs?

Fig. 1. Heuristic framework of the study.

investigation of the entire SI process, in which MNC strategic goals are enacted through the strategic and operational activities in the multilevel inter-unit interactions within an MNC (Šilenskytė, 2020). In addition to splitting the SI process into separate activities, the investigation of these activities has typically been performed at a single level of analysis (cf., Foss & Pedersen, 2019; Meyer et al., 2020). Consequently, the research on SI in MNCs remains split between the macro- and micro-levels of analysis, providing only a limited understanding of managing multilevel interactions in the SI process (Šilenskytė & Smale, 2021).

As a result, within the management (Tawse & Tabesh, 2020; Weiser et al., 2020) and IB fields (Šilenskytė & Smale, 2021), suggestions emerged to shift away from the fragmented, single-level investigations of SI and focus on multilevel theorization to better represent and explain the multilevel nature of this phenomenon. Consequently, in this study, we went beyond the consideration of macro-level factors, such as organizational structure (Ghoshal & Nohria, 1993), output, process, and social control (Sageder & Feldbauer-Durstmüller, 2019), coordination (Martinez & Jarillo, 1991; O'Donnell, 2000), integration (Kim et al., 2003), and the establishment of shared corporate values (Nohria & Ghoshal, 1994), as the exclusive tools for managing SI in transnational MNCs. Instead, we investigated *interactions* of the macro-level factors with micro-level factors, such as individual roles (e.g., boundary spanners (Minbaeva & Santangelo, 2018), expatriates (Kong et al., 2018)), practices, discourses, and interpretations (Weiser et al., 2020). The heuristic framework of this study is illustrated in Fig. 1.

Investigating these interactions through fieldwork, we observed a decisive role of identity (belief about “who we are” or “who they are”) in the SI process and outcomes.

## 2.2. Social identity and strategy implementation in MNCs

Some management research has considered identity to be related to SI (cf., Weiser et al., 2020). Leader identity (Stewart et al., 2017), identification with earlier organizational practices (Ezzamel, Willmott, & Worthington, 2001), or the image of the organization (Sasaki et al., 2020) were found to hinder implementation efforts. The advocated dual identity in management (i.e., intense identification with the group and simultaneously with the organization) was found to create challenges

for strategic consensus and reduce the perceived interdependence of teams (Porck et al., 2020). Individual identity was found to be important when disseminating strategic messages in organizations (Van Grinsven, Sturdy, & Heusinkveld, 2020).

However, only little is known about the role of identity when implementing strategies in a multifaceted inter-organizational setting of an MNC that comprises units embedded in economically, politically, and culturally diverse contexts. In the field of IB, social identity has been applied mostly for country comparison (macro-level), to study individuals such as consumers or employees (micro-level) (Raskovic & Takacs-Haynes, 2020), and when exploring MNCs' organizational identities (e.g., Fortwengel, 2021; Munjal, Budhwar, & Pereira, 2018).

Social identification attempted to offer explanations about some of the processes in MNC management. In the studies on HQ-subsidiary relationships, researchers have found a tendency of managers to identify more strongly with their units rather than with the MNC (e.g., Reade, 2001). However, the overarching assumption of transnational MNC management has been that despite differentiated contexts and subsidiary roles, MNC units collaborate because of the established corporate values with which MNC units identify (Nohria & Ghoshal, 1994). Some research has questioned these assumptions (e.g., Welch & Welch, 2006), leaving many unanswered questions regarding corporate values' role as a 'glue' for inter-unit collaboration. Therefore, the need to better understand the role of social identity in various processes of MNC operations (Vaara, Tienari, & Koveshnikov, 2021) and MNCs' strategic management (Raskovic & Takacs-Haynes, 2020) remains. Guided by our fieldwork, we explored some of these questions in our study.

## 2.3. Social identity theories to explain inter-unit collaboration

Social identity can be defined as a “self-image that derives from the social categories” to which a person perceives belonging (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 16). Social categorizations by identity change the way individuals see themselves versus others, i.e., how they behave toward their in-group and out-group (Hornsey, 2008). Therefore, social identity theory (SIT) is widely used to explain inter-group relations and emotions, collective behavior, and other social processes within and outside the IB domain (cf., Hornsey, 2008; Raskovic & Takacs-Haynes, 2020).

In the social sciences, various schools of thought have attempted to analyze identity and its impact, e.g., identity theory (IT), SIT (cf., Stets & Burke, 2000), self-categorization theory (SCT) (cf., Hornsey, 2008), identity politics (e.g., Vaara et al., 2021), and the CRTI (Sánchez, 2006). These theories, by their ontological assumptions, belong to three groups. The first group includes positivist (grounded in empirical realist ontology) theories (IT, SIT, SCT), in which individuals and social groups entirely internalize identity (Marks & Mahoney, 2014). In the second group, identity politics builds on a critical discursive, linguistic approach (e.g., Vaara et al., 2021) grounded in idealist ontology and investigates how linguistic structures *shape* individual, group, or national identities. The third group includes the CRTI (grounded in critical realist ontology), which differentiates the individual and the identity, recognizing a multilevel nature of identification.

Since the heuristic framework of the study (Fig. 1) ontologically differentiated social structures and individual interpretations and fieldwork observations indicated the existence of multiple identifications within the same social group, the CRTI appeared to be instrumental in explaining multilevel interactions observed in the MNC's SI process. Thus, in the subsequent section, we describe the CRTI, shedding light on its major assumptions, which were utilized to develop a multilevel theorization about the SI process in transnational MNCs.

### 2.3.1. The critical realist theory of identity

In the CRTI, social identity is a discursive, dynamic construct that is “shaped by political, economic, and cultural forces” (Sánchez, 2006, p. 35). The same individual may ascribe or be ascribed multiple identities

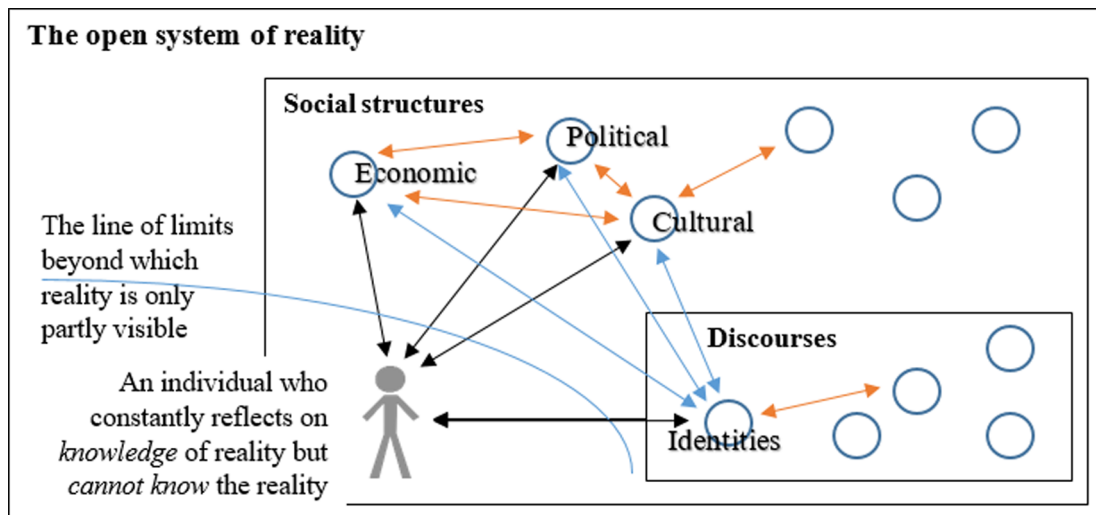


Fig. 2. The major assumptions of the CRTI (visualized upon the writings of Sánchez (2006)).

through discourses, but these identities *do not* necessarily shape or define who an individual is (Marks & Mahoney, 2014; Sánchez, 2006). The motives of individual behavior are multifaceted and go beyond belonging to one or more social groups (Sayer, 2000; 2005). Therefore, the CRTI rejects the absolute power of social structures to shape individual behavior yet recognizes structural influence on it. Discourses are produced around these structures and interact with individuals and existing social structures (Sánchez, 2006).

The world consists of social structures (economic, political, or cultural) in which individuals and their groups are *positioned* (located) but are not defined by them. Structures influence discourses and individuals; being of a social nature, however, they can also be influenced by them. Individuals can therefore affect and even change structures and discourses, such as identity (Sánchez, 2006). Individuals cannot know reality, as social systems and discourses are only partly visible (and sometimes invisible) to them; individuals experience their existence through their manifestation and make sense of reality based on this (Bhaskar, 2008; Sánchez, 2006). Fig. 2 illustrates these assumptions of the CRTI.

In the CRTI, individuals perform *identification* (ascribe identity). Individuals may identify with some social discourses. Individuals may *assume* that they know about other individuals embedded in different social structures and, therefore, ascribe a particular identity to them through discourses (Sánchez, 2006, p. 40). This process is dynamic. Thus, social identity does not entirely define the behavior of an individual or a group (Sánchez, 2006). For instance, if the dominant discourse about a particular culture suggests the culture is hierarchical, we may find individuals who identify with this discourse and others who do not. That is why the CRTI is well described by the term “identities-in-difference” (Bhaskar, 1993), which signals the variety of identifications within a given social group.

Moreover, even if each individual/group is *positioned* “within a given social reality,” they will live this positioning within specific social structures in different ways due to *positionality* (“one’s imagined relation or standpoint relative to that positioning”) (Sánchez, 2006, p. 38). For example, two managers residing in the same position within the same organizational structure may experience their situation differently due to their imagined relations with and interpretations of the situation. We further present an empirical investigation in which the CRTI was utilized to explain observations.

### 3. Methodology

Based on the research question of *how* the implementation of

strategic goals regarding inter-unit collaboration can be achieved, the case study research strategy was a suitable choice (cf. Yin, 2009). This choice was further reinforced by the ontological assumptions behind the theoretical framework (Fig. 1), which separated social structures (e.g., MNC structure) from individuals and their interpretations, manifesting core beliefs of critical realism (Bhaskar, 2008). The case study research strategy has been strongly advocated for critical realist empirical investigations (Ackroyd & Karlsson, 2014; Risjord, 2014; Wynn & Williams, 2012) and therefore was adopted in this study.

An abductive investigation was necessary (Ackroyd & Karlsson, 2014) because critical realism rejects “...the naïve assumption that reality is easily observable” (Delanty & Strydom, 2003, p. 376) and suggests that all theories are fallible (Fletcher, 2017). Thus, we utilized an abductive case study approach and performed systematic combining (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). This technique implied that the fieldwork observations were expected to challenge the initial theoretical framework (Fig. 1). The theorization had to be further refined in the iterative interplay of theory and empirics (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). Moreover, according to critical realism, investigation of the phenomenon requires multiple observations, theoretical considerations, and inferences beyond the observable facts (Bhaskar, 2008; Wynn & Williams, 2012). Thus, we performed a *holistic* investigation (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008), which considered multiple perspectives and levels of analysis and incorporated diverse sources of data (both qualitative and quantitative) (Yin, 2009).

The aim of this study was to develop a theorization about the multilevel SI phenomenon that is currently inadequately explained. For this purpose, a single case study was instrumental, as single cases are used for theory development and, particularly, for “...examining relations between multiple interdependent elements” (Lervik, 2011, p. 232). A single case intensive critical realist case study facilitates the exploration of “...specific causal mechanisms in one context” (Morais, 2011, p. 75) what allows explaining how specific phenomenon occurred. Therefore, a single case of the SI process (implementation of strategic goal regarding inter-unit collaboration in the MNC) was explored by analyzing the multilevel interactions of several embedded cases - MNC units and individuals within them.

#### 3.1. Research design

We investigated the case of the transnational SI process in one European-origin MNC, MKMC (name changed). With HQ in Finland, MKMC was a global engineering service provider established 30 years ago that employed over 1,000 people and operated in a business-to-



business environment serving primarily European customers, i.e., other MNCs. MKMC was selected because it offered a unique case of an implemented transnational strategy. MKMC had 11 foreign units obtained via acquisitions or established by management from Finland<sup>1</sup>, and, unlike its European competitors within the same industry, engaged in a long-lasting collaboration with India. The Indian unit was the first subsidiary that MKMC Finland had established. Moreover, Indian unit grew to be the largest unit in MKMC (employed over 500 people, i.e., over half of the employees of the MKMC group). It had one of the most significant profits in the group, which was obtained by providing operational support in global projects for the MKMC's European units (approximately 70% of unit profits) and selling services in the Indian market (approximately 30% of unit profits). Thus, the European-Indian inter-unit collaboration was at the core of MKMC's operational and strategic success<sup>2</sup> defined by the corporate strategic goal "Working as one MNC." To this end, we investigated the SI of the corporate strategic goal "Working as One MNC," which spoke directly to the transnational strategy and global delivery model (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1989).

To implement the latter goal, at least for the past seven years, MKMC used macro-level factors, which are widely discussed in the IB literature. More specifically, MKMC utilized organizational structure (matrix design) reinforced by the target lists and corporate communication (at the strategic management level) and policies defining global work and global project structures (at the operational management level). From the micro-level factors, boundary spanners and expatriates were used to support transnational SI at both strategic and operational management levels. Consequently, the multilevel casing technique (Fletcher & Plakoyiannaki, 2011) was adopted because the research design had to permit investigation of strategic and operational management levels and observation of a variety of factors in the SI process.

Even if MKMC was known for its European-Indian collaboration in the industry, this collaboration was not consistently implemented in all the global MNC projects. We chose to find a unique project in which units, managers, and employees consistently implemented the strategic goal "Working as One MNC." Such selection supported critical realist investigation, in which a unique or extreme case is known to yield major discoveries (Ackroyd & Karlsson, 2014, p. 24–25).

Consequently, an ongoing project "Siberia" (collaboration among Finnish (HQ), Indian, and Russian units) that top management considered the most successful global project thus far was selected. "Siberia" was also the most significant project MKMC managed to win and conduct via European and Indian unit collaboration. Moreover, "Siberia" was unique because the Russian and Indian units were in one global project for the first time. However, their close collaboration had already become well known within the MNC. Methodologically, this unique project case was a suitable choice. The two-plus-year project was nearing its end. The interviewees (primarily project participants) could reflect on their couple of years of experience in the extensive inter-unit collaboration. Such a design supported a critical realist investigation, which requires *retrospective* analysis (Wynn & Williams, 2012).

As a result, our first unit of observation included three *strategic* MNC units: Finnish, Indian, and Russian. The second unit of observation was *the global operational* project "Siberia" and the individuals working within it. Such a study design supported the development of the multi-level theorization about the SI process because we were able to obtain

extensive primary and secondary data about the MNC's strategic and operational activities in the SI process (macro-level factors) and to tap into the experiences of individuals residing within the various countries (micro-level), understanding how these factors interact.

### 3.2. Data collection

The study comprises 50 interviews with top, middle, and project managers as well as non-management employees with 45 interviewees in Finland (16), India (23), and Russia (6) (see Appendix). All of them were directly or indirectly connected to the selected global project. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted between 30 min and more than two hours, with an average length of one hour. The interviewees were asked to reflect upon the SI in the MNC according to the following themes: a) What were their experiences working in a global team consisting of Finnish, Indian, and Russian units?; b) What was easy, challenging, and why; and how did they overcome challenges in inter-unit collaboration?; c) How did they feel about the strategic goal "Working as One MNC" and why?; d) What were the strategic goal's advantages, disadvantages, and outcomes?; e) What knowledge, skills, competencies, or resources were needed for successful collaboration among country units in the project?; f) What motivated and demotivated them?; and g) What systems and processes were there in the MNC to support/hinder the SI of "Working as One MNC"? Such open-ended questions provided rich data and allowed us to inductively comprehend individual relationships among global team members, individual opinions about strategic and operational processes, and the importance of the interviewees' ascriptions of social identity. Additionally, secondary data (strategic documents, employee surveys, communication outlets, and alike) in three countries were collected to perform data triangulation (Nielsen et al., 2020).

### 3.3. Data analysis

The first stage of data analysis was performed by mapping empirical observations against the theoretical framework (Fig. 1) as suggested by Fletcher (2017). We first classified data into themes by applying holistic coding (a code applies to a larger unit of data rather than "line-by-line coding") (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014, p. 77) to observe demiregularities (regularities that are contingent on context) as well as anomalies (Fletcher, 2017). In this process, we observed different SI patterns within the same group (i.e., within the same MNC unit) and different identities ascribed to the same country, i.e., India. Thus, as expected, empirical observations challenged the initial assumptions (Dubois & Gadde, 2002), and the CRTI appeared to be instrumental for further, more detailed data analysis.

The second stage of analysis was completed according to the CRTI and the examples provided by Sánchez (2006). This step-by-step process that crossed several levels of analysis is summarized in Table 1. Adapting CRTI meant that *positioning* (location) within social structures (i.e., location of country in the MNC's strategy, structure, and the general society) affected *identification* - social identity ascriptions to others (i.e., how individuals working in MNC country units identified each other). Thus, in Step I, which is described in Section 4.1, we analyzed how MNC country units were positioned in MNC strategy and the discourses about each unit's social identity. In Step II (see Section 4.2), we proceeded with the analysis of how this positioning and discourses around it (expressed via corporate and individual communication within the MNC) affected the identification of Indians. In Step III (see Section 4.3), we analyzed how such identification affected *positionality*, i.e., how individuals experienced specific situations when implementing a transnational strategy. We also investigated how the identification of Indians affected individuals' abilities to implement strategy and the outcomes of SI at the individual level. Finally, in Step IV, we explored the *outcomes* of the SI process at the organizational level (see Section 4.4).

It is important to note that, in critical realist ontology, not the

<sup>1</sup> data from the year 2017.

<sup>2</sup> "We are like typical Finnish guy who doesn't want to brag about what he has done. How many of our competitors or customers in the Finnish market know what kind of customer we have and what kind of project we have done? If they knew, it would be in all major newspapers in Finland... Our (major competitor), just some months ago, talked about how they are developing their work in India, which we have already for 15 years. We know how to do it, we have good experiences with India when (this competitor) is only learning, and many others are learning and having bad experiences...we have a success story" (Top management team member).

**Table 1**  
Summary of data sources and the second stage of data analysis process.

The CRTI applied to data collected in our research	Step I. (Section 4.1) Positioning of MNC country units	Step II. (Section 4.2) Individual identification of Indians	Step 3 (Section 4.3) Positionality of individuals due to the identification of Indians	Step IV. (Section 4.4) Outcomes of the SI process in the MNC
Level of analysis: Data sources:	Unit level of analysis Strategic documents, corporate communication outlets, yearly unit goals, interviews with top management	Individual-level of analysis Interviews with all individuals	Individual-level of analysis Interviews with all individuals	Unit and corporate levels of analysis Org. climate survey, some MNC performance data, evaluations by top management
Levels of measurement: Methods of data analysis:	Unit (mostly) and individual Content and discourse analysis After analysis of separate data sources: case description and explanation building	Individual Discourse analysis	Individual Discourse analysis	Unit (mostly) and individual Content analysis

frequency of codes but holistic investigation of all the evidence observed guides data analysis. The presence or absence of entities and the ability to understand how they form conditions necessary for the phenomenon to occur are central to critical realist data analysis (Saka-Helmhout, 2014; Wynn & Williams, 2012). Thus, using the CRTI allowed us to extract from the data the conditions that are necessary for the implementation of strategic goal regarding inter-unit collaboration and supported explanation building (Yin, 2009), comprehensively connecting all the sources of data, evidence, and the events observed in the SI process.

#### 4. Analysis and findings

This section presents findings from the data analysis structuring the observations according to Table 1. We first describe how MNC units were positioned and discourses around these positionings (Section 4.1). Then, we present the identification of Indians made by their colleagues and themselves (Section 4.2). Afterward, we reveal how individuals were experiencing such identification (positionality) (Section 4.3) and the organizational outcomes of the SI process for inter-unit collaboration (Section 4.4).

##### 4.1. Positioning of MNC country units: The case of the Indian unit

According to MKMC’s strategy, the Finnish unit (HQ) played the strategic role of global coordinator, i.e., global project management and sales functions were typically performed from Finland. The Russian unit served as a center of expertise for Russia-related projects. The Indian unit offered cost-efficient and flexible resources with a large scope for global project execution; it was expected to grow and serve both global and local customers.

However, discourses on the positioning of the Indian unit were dissimilar: some were more positive or neutral, and some were rather negative. Top management in Finland and Russia emphasized India’s presence in MKMC as an organizational strength and competitive advantage. Corporate communication in MKMC continuously reinforced messages about the unity of the MNC, the importance of the Indian unit, and its ability to deliver cost-efficient and high-quality output. Finnish and Russian project managers in the “Siberia” project fostered the same discourses. These operational managers recognized and were eager to nurture the Indian unit’s capabilities, as described in the strategy. Furthermore, Russian employees admired India’s rich culture and history of architecture. They appreciated their Indian colleagues’ openness and flexibility and related to their annoyance about some Finnish colleagues who positioned “Indians as slaves.” Indian unit management and employees related to all the aforementioned discourses and supported them. More generally, the Indian unit members combined two elements in their discourses and unit-level communication: India being an implementing unit and the innovator, who was able to challenge the status quo and continuously find better solutions.

Discourses were more negative in the Finnish unit at the middle management and employee levels. The Finnish middle managers (who did not directly participate in the “Siberia” project but were related to the project by being line managers of the project members) and employees who interacted with Indians only marginally were skeptical of the Indian unit. They doubted the Indian unit’s capabilities, explaining this by India’s purported underdevelopment, inability to organize themselves as a society, and cheap labor that is suitable only for ‘downloading’ easy tasks.

The discourses on India’s unit positioning are summarized in Table 2.

##### 4.2. Individual identification of Indians

The discourses discussed above largely shaped the identification of Indian colleagues within the MKMC. After triangulating data from the Finnish, Russian, and Indian units, it became evident that there were two different identifications (i.e., Groups A and B) of Indians within the Finnish and Russian units (see Table 3).

Group A nurtured neutral or positive discourses around Indian colleagues and identified Indians as being ‘different’ and contributing to the global team in many ways. The origin of these discourses was reported to be observations in the existing work relationships, such as Indian colleagues’ ability to deliver (possibly different from initial expectations, but) good output and, therefore, the Indian unit’s ability to fulfill the transnational strategy. In contrast, Group B, without much involvement with Indians, questioned the Indians’ ability to perform. This group grounded their doubts in the perceived superiority of knowledge and abilities of the European units and/or countries. In Group B, the identification of Indians was reported to derive from observations, such as receiving different than expected outcomes, occasional delays by Indian colleagues, and the different environment observed in the country. The reasons for receiving different than expected output from the Indian unit were not questioned.

The Indian unit members nurtured discourses about their identities that were closer to the identifications by Group A. Moreover, the Indians considered their work practices to be grounded in mutual respect, the division of responsibilities and power, which was derived from the management practices of Indian historical leaders, such as King Akbar: “When Aditya started his career as a section manager, he made Navaratnas like the great King Akbar. He has a team of nine people with different specializations, like Akbar’s Birbal, and so on. King Akbar learned all his kingdom through those nine persons.... So here, Aditya has appointed some seven to eight guys; instead of taking all control himself, he has shared his activities” (Team leader). That is why the identification of Indians by European colleagues did not always match the identities that Indians ascribed to themselves. This discrepancy affected individual experiences in inter-unit collaboration. We elaborate on positionality in the following section.

**Table 2**  
Discourses on the positioning of the Indian unit.

Country unit	Discourses on the positioning of the Indian unit
Finnish (HQ) unit	<p><b>Positive or neutral:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In MKMC's corporate strategy: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Indians deliver "cost-efficient, high-quality operations" and are part of the "Europe-India delivery model." Units "deliver services as one MKMC"</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Top management team: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ "Many of our customers are dealing with us first of all because of these 'cost-efficient, high-quality operations', and this means more or less that we have built the Indian organizations 2004...and today, we have more than 500 people in India trained to do export work to Europe: working on the same tools, the same way everything as a company here. So, it's not that we buy from an Indian company; it's really that we have built our own operations there and then have good work between Europe and India."</li> <li>◦ "India is in MKMC's DNA... MKMC would be very different if India was not a part of this group, pretty small and much weaker in many aspects"</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Project managers in the Project "Siberia": <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ "We have a resource split that way because it is cheaper to do work in India; that is why we have a big Indian office that is actually cheaper....But, I believe that the Indian resources have big potential..."</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Employees in the Project "Siberia": <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ "I have no bad experience of this. If you want to find someone in India who has certain knowledge or competence, we can contact him or her, who consults us or even does the thing we need"</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><b>More negative:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategic goals in Finnish unit target list (the year 2016 &amp; 2017): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Finnish unit must "agree on ways of working and communication channels to plan and monitor downloading to India" and "develop a competent Indian information team"</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Employee (only marginally involved with the Indian team in the project "Siberia"): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ "In Finland or Europe, we just trust that you need to do this, please, do. You don't need to teach people here... this is Finland; that one is India, so it's a very different kind of cultures and countries: there's rubbish everywhere, we have rubbish cans."</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Russian unit	<p><b>Positive, or neutral (no negative):</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In the strategic documents of the Russian unit: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ "Working with India is better managed in MKMC than in any other MNC"</li> <li>◦ "Strong and well-working Indian unit"</li> <li>◦ Under the cost-efficient, high-quality statement: "Solid operations in India since 2003"</li> </ul> </li> <li>• In the Russian unit target list: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Strategic goals: "deliver services as one MKMC"</li> <li>◦ Operational goals: "technical expertise from Europe and design resources from India" (2016); "Deliver professional services as 'One MKMC' on time with the required quality" (2017).</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Unit management: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ "We utilize our Indian resources"; "Then, the technical expertise in many fields we take from Europe and design resources from India"; "Indians are not cheap resources according to Russian market standards"; "We know how to work with India better than other MNCs"</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Project managers and employees: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ "I can't understand this attitude of people to Indian people. That is really very disappointing because they just think about them as slaves. When I worked on my first project, some guy from Finland told me 'you can find some Indian resources'...Not some person, but a resource."</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Indian unit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The unit website, strategic documents, and yearly goals: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Indian unit should work as "one team for global projects" and focus on "aggressive sales", "competence development", and "challenging the cost structure"</li> <li>◦ "Innovations" and "doing things differently for the better" is what the unit practice with devotion</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Unit management and employees: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ India is an "implementing unit"</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

#### 4.3. Positionality of individuals due to identification of Indians

Individuals within Group A were positive toward Indian colleagues and adopted practices that supported collaboration. Finnish top management placed high trust in the Indians and managed the Indian unit with mutual respect, discussions, and adaptation. They were eager to alter communication and some behaviors as advised by their Indian counterparts. Indian management had to fulfill transnational strategy expectations by having a certain level of shared systems and processes but was also given chances to alter systems for the Indian context as needed.

Employees as well as project and middle managers in Group A applied the same management practices as the Finnish top-level managers. They were work-oriented and specific about the needed output from India, were ready to collaborate in the search for solutions, and avoided behavior that would be hierarchical, domineering, or micro-managing: "I try to give them the possibility to think out of the box ... I trust Indian resources ..." (Project manager, Finland); "I try to be polite, and when I contact new people (in India), I ask 'How is your day?' ... I ask what they think about things, and we discuss" (Employee, Finland).

Moreover, MKMC members within Group A observed differences in the work methods of Indians. Instead of complaining that "Indians need to be taught how to work" (as in Group B), Group A tried to understand their Indian colleagues' behaviors and find positive justifications: "Indian specialists ... they are very friendly, and ... they ask one question several times. For example, they ask why this point is like this. After some time, they ask the same question again. It was strange for me, but after that, I understood. They want to be sure that I'm sure, that my answer is right. And, I like it because after he asks the second time, I start checking myself. Maybe I'm wrong: should that answer be the same?" (Employee, Russia).

In Group B, which identified Indians as 'less capable,' behaviors toward their Indian colleagues were different. They were less engaged with their Indian colleagues. For example, instead of active communication, Finns in Group B would merely send an email about the task without detailed task specifications. If the outcome received from India happened to be different than expected and changes were requested, they complained about it to their Finnish colleagues and Finnish unit visitors: "When I came to Finland, Finns would say: Indians always spend so many hours!" (Russian employee, who visited Indian and Finnish units).

Indians recognized the rich heritage of India and the contemporary diversity within the country and cherished these differences by adopting various practices that foster inclusivity: "The South Indian people have one

**Table 3**  
Discourses in the Finnish and Russian units about the identification of Indians.

	Group A: Indians are 'different' and 'differently valuable'	Group B: Indians are 'less capable and valuable'
Finland	<p>"Many different Indian people in the same project, they have maybe different backgrounds in their lives.... They are not working like us here in Finland." (Project manager)</p> <p>"India-Europe, it's not only about having global resources; we have cheap resources in India, but, really, we are setting the model that has to be clear in Europe before detailed engineering in India so that they can deliver efficiently." (Top management team member)</p>	<p>"Of course, Indian resources have a low price, etc. But, I don't know how this will work, this cooperation...Some engineering tasks are so demanding that they cannot do this in India... if it takes five or six years here in Finland to learn these things, it will take at least the same time in India or more time to learn these things. We have some very demanding design tasks that we cannot put in India." (Middle manager, related to project work only as a line manager to the project "Siberia" participants)</p>
Russia	<p>"Doing Russian project in India? How can this work? Indians know nothing about Russia (at first I thought, but)...in India, they can do whatever you ask. For instance, today in the morning, I asked to check one point about beam calculation, and before lunch, he came back to me: 'Oh, I've done it'. He already provided me a scanned copy of his manual calculations - that is good!...Raj doesn't know Finnish at all, but he knows that on some page, he can find such kind of picture, and he can refer to it (at work)" (Employee)</p>	N/A

way of thinking; North Indians are different. Some people like very soft talk, some like harder talk, somebody shouts a little; somebody loses patience. All differences are always there, depending on the environment the person has grown up in. Our aim, even if the culture<sup>3</sup> is different – people should work together. ... (To achieve this), we create more interaction between them. We put them in one project, we ask them to discuss if required to go for tea – our aim is that they should be together as much as possible" (Middle manager, India).

Furthermore, all Indian local management team (ILMT) members, middle managers, and team managers followed managerial practices that are typically considered Western: employees were encouraged to make suggestions to managers; in strategy events, employees at all levels were expected to challenge unit and corporate strategies and discuss them; development discussions were personal and encouraging, and operational managers spent most of their time with ground-level engineers rather than in their offices. Over the visits, the Finnish CEO was asked to mingle with all-rank employees after the official strategy presentations. By all means, Indian management avoided discussion of "cost-effectiveness" because they were aware of existing negative discourses about Indians and their false identification: "Cost is important, but you also need those people who understand the quality that Europe is demanding. ... Thus, it is not always good to compare India as low-cost, because that is something people don't like back here. ... Now and then, this is a mistake people from Europe make. They always think this is low-cost. It doesn't really add value" (ILMT member). To conclude, Indians were aware of the negative identification of Indians by some of their European counterparts and understood that it hindered unit collaboration. However, they continued collaborating with colleagues from Group A.

#### 4.4. Outcomes of strategy implementation in the MKMC

Largely due to the positionalities described above, the organizational outcomes produced by SI processes within the MKMC were inconsistent. The strategic goal regarding inter-unit collaboration was implemented at the average level in the Finnish unit, which hosted Groups A and B. Satisfaction with global work was low, except at the offices in which the collaboration with Indians unfolded relatively well. Fewer than expected global projects were successfully completed. Finnish management considered that such outcomes meant partial failure when implementing "Working as One MNC" at the unit level. The Russian unit, in which managers and employees fell under Group A, had a strong collaboration with Indian employees and was willing to continue the inter-unit collaboration. The Russians realized the Indian colleagues' ability to operate in a multilingual environment, build relationships

<sup>3</sup> "Culture" in this context means the religious and ethnic diversity of Indian society. Indian nationals frequently referred to a different "culture" when discussing differences among ethnic groups or religious practices present within India.

with limited language skills, and gain knowledge of diverse engineering standards.

In the Indian unit, according to the organizational climate survey, the employees were happy, motivated, and aware of the strategy; however, they felt that improvements were needed in the information flow between managers and employees, workload, and performance recognition (especially from the Finnish HQs). Global and cross-disciplinary cooperation was evaluated positively (4.19/5). Finally, the Indians in the unit were ready for any additional projects with the Russian unit but were excited to work only with certain Finnish colleagues.

## 5. Discussion

The IB scholarship has a long-lasting focus on select macro-level and some micro-level factors shaping MNC management, but not their interactions (Foss & Pedersen, 2019; Meyer et al., 2020; Šilenskytė & Smale, 2021). Therefore, the extant IB literature provides an inadequate explanation of multilevel phenomena, such as SI in MNCs (Šilenskytė & Smale, 2021) and the implementation of MNCs' specific goals, for instance, regarding inter-unit collaboration (Šilenskytė, 2020). To this end, we conducted a phenomenon-driven, abductive, critical realist case study in one European-origin MNC to investigate the SI process, in which 45 individuals embedded in MNC's three country units (Finnish, Russian, and Indian) collaborated to implement a transnational strategy. By doing so, we aimed to contribute to the IB literature by developing a multilevel theorization of the SI process in MNCs.

### 5.1. The multilevel SI process in transnational MNCs

The necessity of macro-level factors in transnational MNC management (e.g., Ghoshal & Nohria, 1993; Martinez & Jarillo, 1991; Sageder & Feldbauer-Durstmüller, 2019) was confirmed. However, it was also revealed that structure, control and coordination systems meant to support SI were insufficient to produce consistent SI outcomes in all country units, even when supported by boundary spanning (e.g., Minbaeva & Santangelo, 2018) activities. We discovered that a substantial hindrance to collaboration between European and Indian units was ascribed identity to Indians that affected the SI process and outcomes. We further explain the observed macro- and micro-level factors' interactions in the multilevel process of SI in transnational MNCs.

As the CRTI (Sánchez, 2006) suggests, the individual ascriptions (micro-level factor) were influenced (but not defined) by several macro-level factors (see Fig. 3): the MNC's management systems (including strategic goals), countries' social structures (economic, political, and cultural), and the discourses about the specific country (e.g., India). For example, the strategic goals, such as regarding roles of the MNC units in inter-unit collaboration, are defined in the MNC's strategy and communicated via the corporate systems meant to enable the SI process. When communicated, these goals scatter due to the influence of other macro-



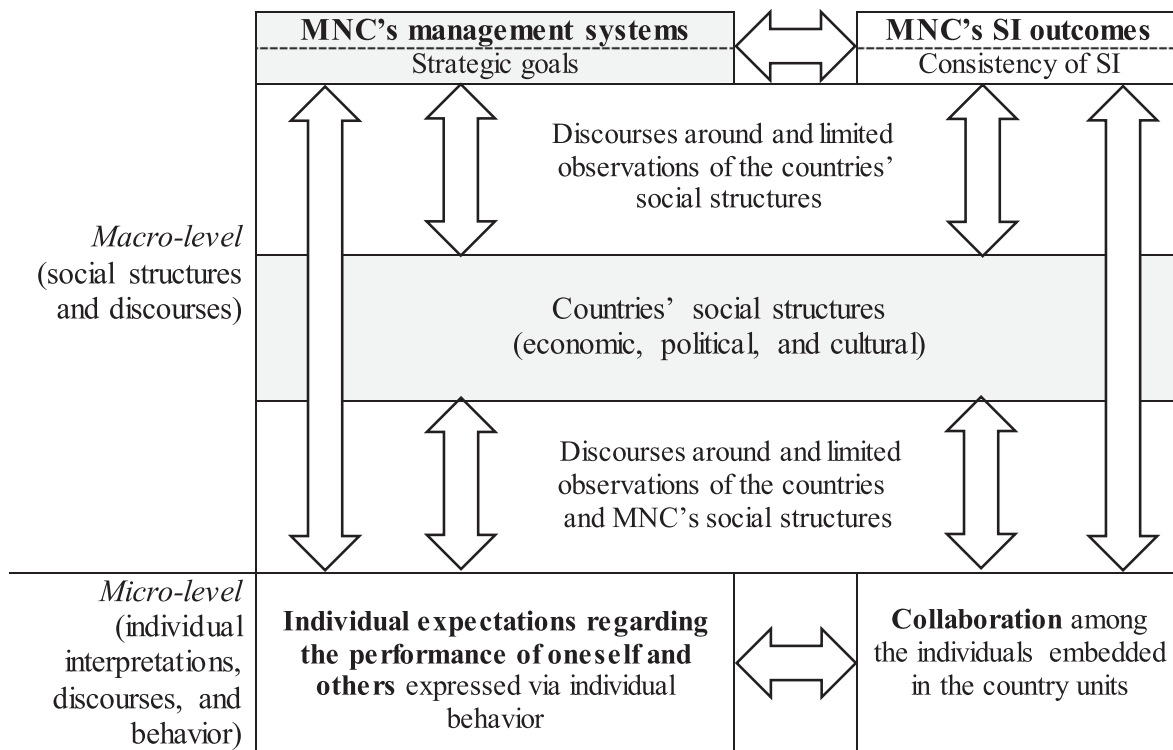


Fig. 3. Multilevel process of SI in MNCs.

level factors, such as social discourses and/or accessible observations of the economic, political, and cultural social structures of the countries in which MNC units are embedded.

Individuals (micro-level), who are influenced, but not entirely shaped, by these systems and discourses conclude by themselves about “who the other country units/colleagues are” (i.e., ascribe identity to them) and accordingly define “what they are capable of”. For example, we found that if the European MNC members ascribed an identity grounded in uniform negative discourses and observations about India to their Indian colleagues, they scarcely engaged with their Indian colleagues and failed to collaborate with them (received poor quality results and different from expected deliverables from their Indian colleagues). If the European MNC members explored diversity in the Indian unit and believed in the diverse abilities of their Indian counterparts, they succeeded in collaboration with them. The latter finding can be conceptualized and explained by referring to *Pygmalion* – the self-fulfilling prophecies about individual performance grounded in beliefs about an individual’s capability to perform (Livingston, 2009). If individuals believe that a colleague is able to perform, they will adopt behaviors that enable the colleague’s expected performance, and vice versa (*ibid*).

Individual-level experiences about inter-unit collaboration are further escalated throughout the organization (to macro-level) by relating them to the social discourses and available observations about the systems in which country units are embedded. This process largely leads to consistent or inconsistent (macro-level) outcomes, i.e., implementation of strategic goals within MNC. Knowing the above, the ability to manage ascriptions of social identity to colleagues becomes a decisive factor in the transnational SI process. Consequently, utilizing the idiosyncratic context of India (Khanna, 2009; Mukherjee et al., 2022) central to our study and the CRTI (Sánchez, 2006), we elaborate on the potential powers shaping identity ascriptions.

### 5.2. Individual ascriptions of identity to a country: The case of India

The CRTI (Sánchez, 2006) suggests that individuals can observe only

certain discourses and parts of social structures, which limits their ability to realize the entire truth about a specific entity (see Fig. 2), such as a country. In our study, individuals in Groups A and B made their identifications of their Indian colleagues according to the discourses and social structures’ parts that they were capable of observing. In this regard, it is essential to understand what discourses and observable facts about India were prominent in influencing the individual ascriptions of identity. By knowing this, more informed expectations about India and Indians can be set.

Traditionally, IB scholars have applied uniform cultural and economic models to India and have treated India mainly as a single unit of analysis (cf., Rienda et al., 2011). Western scholars have subsumed India’s belief system under the singular view of Hinduism (e.g., Carstairs, 1957; Taylor, 1948), while Western media have issued decontextualized reports that reassure the West’s position of India’s homogeneity (e.g., Economist, 2021). Western models of culture almost exclusively suggest that India has one set of cultural traits: a high-power distance and a relatively high score in masculinity, which means that Indians are expected to appreciate hierarchy and open displays of success and power (e.g., Hofstede Insights, 2020). Adding to the Western views, several well-known Indian scholars (Pattanaik, 2013; Pillai, 2012) have selected ancient scriptures and presented them to the West as representing the “Indian way” of management/thinking, which has reinforced stereotypes about the uniformity of India’s values and beliefs. Thus, simplifications of India’s social systems in scholarly work has created pervasive discourses promoting a uniform identification of India and its nationals.

Furthermore, the content of public economic and political discourses about India strongly points to the country’s shortcomings. For example, India remains a famous location for outsourcing (Kedia & Mukherjee, 2009) rather than making headlines as an innovator. The Western business press has continually picked on the shortcomings of India’s economy, spreading images of it being a low-development country (e.g., Easton, 2020). Moreover, the British colonial administration significantly contributed to creating a contemporary Western perspective on India’s identity, particularly regarding India’s need to be monitored and directed by those more capable (Robb, 1997).

Consequently, when MNCs communicate their goals about inter-unit collaboration with Indian units, individuals within the units embedded in Western countries have strong references upon which to build their expectations of their Indian counterparts. However, the adoption of the CRTI and its concept of “identities-in-difference” (Bhaskar, 1993) extends the existing approaches to social identity in IB (cf., Raskovic & Takacs-Haynes, 2020) and goes beyond the uniform models imposed on India (cf., Mukherjee et al., 2022; Rienda et al., 2011). We further present some of the less debated observable facts about India’s social systems that reveal internal diversity within India. The latter should be considered in inter-unit collaboration with India.

First, India’s population comprises “all the five major racial types” and many local cultures; the Indian constitution recognizes 22 local languages (Indian Government, 2019). Hindi is spoken by only 30% of the population, and people in some parts of India (e.g., the south) have limited capabilities with this language (Thomas & Philip, 1994). Such diversity leads to Indian adaptability to linguistic diversity while still thinking in English and potential managerial preferences to foster inclusion (Gopalakrishnan & Banerjee, 2018). Our findings also revealed the ability of Indians to collaborate with European units despite having limited language skills or materials that available only in a foreign language. In the Indian unit, several practices were adopted to tap into the diversity of the workforce.

Second, India is a cradle of many religions. Hinduism is the religion of most Indians, but India also contains a significant population of Muslims and other religious groups, such as Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, and Jainists (Indian Government, 2019). Moreover, the value and belief structure in India is complex. For example, Hinduism is practiced differently among castes, ethnic communities, and frequently families, although it adheres to certain general principles. The fourteenth-century philosopher Madhava Āchārya systematically discussed 16 systems of thinking within Hinduism, including the Cārvāka (or Lokayata), representing *atheism* and materialism (cf. Cowell & Gough, 1914). In addition to the Vedas (Sanskrit), the Tirukkural (cf. Cutler, 1992), written in Tamil by Dravidian Thiruvalluvar, is a sacred text that has had considerable influence; however, other important texts exist as well. The “Indus valley civilization ... flourished well before the timing of the earliest Hinduist literature, the Vedas,” while Sanskrit (the language of the Vedas) arrived with the Aryans (Indo-Europeans) from *outside* India (cf., Sen, 2012). Thus, identifying Indian management solely with Vedic principles (e.g., Pattanaik, 2013) is erroneous and myopic.

Third, in our study, the Indian managers identified themselves or were identified with historical Indian leaders who exposed, as Gopalakrishnan and Banerjee (2018) define, India’s “soft power” upon the world, i.e., the capability of spreading influential ideas and philosophy. For example, Ashoka (third-century BCE) promoted libertarian rights for everyone, going beyond the ancient Greek thinkers. Many Muslim rulers of India (with some exceptions) promoted religious diversity, culminating with King Akbar, a sixteenth-century Mughal (Muslim) ruler of India who was a major theorist of tolerance (Sen, 2012). This historical importance of a leader leaving a legacy significantly affects Indian managers’ engagement with their organizations and their treatment in corporate governance (Gopalakrishnan & Banerjee, 2018). Supporting Indian unit managers’ aspirations stemming from the discourses around this heritage is necessary. HQ top management approaches to ILMT in MKMC realized the latter, creating grounds for seamless inter-unit collaboration with India.

Fourth, Indian thinkers and leaders of diverse origin have advocated “values such as tolerance, liberty, and reciprocal respect” traditionally assigned to Western civilization throughout history (Sen, 2012). Gandhi’s concept of India strengthened Indian identification with these values even further. Western managers must realize that the latter values are a significant part of the social structures with which many Indians identify. Moreover, community (e.g., family, village) rather than central power has traditionally united Indian society (Gopalakrishnan & Banerjee, 2018). Therefore, mission, purpose, personal values, and seeing

employees as assets are observed within Indian management (e.g., Cappelli et al., 2010; Nayar, 2010). All this translates into the behavioral expectations of Western and local leaders. In our study, European managers’ ability to show trust and respect to their Indian colleagues and their willingness to search for solutions *together* were of great importance for transnational SI. Regardless of values inherited from India’s history, Indians may prefer performing repetitive tasks in innovative ways (Gopalakrishnan & Banerjee, 2018). In our study, Indians preferred to be positioned as innovators. Thus, *jugaad*, i.e., frugal innovations, resilience, and the ability to create with limited resources (Cappelli et al., 2010), may affect Indian identifications.

To conclude, India’s businesses and management practices have been shaped by diverse forces over various periods: rejecting Indian traditions and adopting Western approaches (1960–1980); a shift back to indigenous management practices grounded in cultural heritage and spirituality (1980–2000); recognition of the global success of Indian companies (2000-onward); and a “holistic” understanding of Indian management that comprises all three of the earlier stages (2010-onward) (Sharma, 2015). Consequently, when managing and collaborating with MNC units in India, Western counterparts should be ready to explore the identification of their Indian colleagues rather than impose their own identifications on them.

To this end, the concept of “identities-in-difference” (Bhaskar, 1993) in the IB field explains the findings that contradict dominant, uniform discourses in research and media about India. For example, Pereira, Hsu, and Kundu (2005) find that conceptualizing and measuring certain constructs may be more complicated in India than in other country contexts. Awasthy and Gupta (2004) observe Indians’ preference to see themselves as partners rather than engage in a submissive hierarchical inter-unit relationship. Gertsen and Zølner (2012) demonstrate that Indian employees positively receive Danish corporate values such as “flat hierarchies, consensus, delegation of decision making, and open communication” (p. 125). Budhwar et al. (2006) reveal that call centers in India have human resource management systems similar to those in developed countries. We further discuss how these theoretical observations support MNC managers from Western countries in implementing inter-unit collaboration with India.

### 5.3. Managerial implications

This study offers several suggestions on how to approach an MNC’s SI process and inter-unit collaboration with India. Managers should avoid utilizing structure, control and coordination tools exclusively to manage the SI process. MNC managers must be aware that individual beliefs significantly influence individual and organizational outcomes. Once managers or non-management employees ascribe a specific identity to their foreign colleagues, they adopt practices and change their behaviors according to that ascription. Such identification and behavior may not represent the preferences of their foreign colleagues and, therefore, may hamper transnational SI.

Managers should avoid searching for a single denominator that represents all Indians. Indian colleagues may identify with diverse social structures present within the country, each offering new observations of what ‘Indians are like.’ Thus, identifying them with the uniform negative discourses, frequently promoted by the Western media or research, may create significant challenges to cross-border collaboration. When utilizing economic conditions for outsourcing and offshoring, MNC managers from Western countries must design communication about these strategic preferences within the MNC by building discourses on global unity rather than socioeconomic diversification.

### 5.4. Limitations and suggestions for future research

We recognize that the conclusions drawn in this study rely on a single case of a successful transnational SI in three country units and stories provided by 45 individuals. The scope of our study provides contingent

generalization to a theory rather than a population. Nevertheless, the existence of similar challenges observed in other studies on European-Indian inter-unit collaboration (e.g., Awasthy & Gupta, 2004; Gertsen & Zølner, 2012; Koppman et al., 2016; van Marrewijk, 2010) brings confidence to our work and opens new paths for future research. For example, we acknowledge that ascriptions of India’s identity are likely to vary across industries and MNCs; therefore, the influence of this micro-level factor on the SI process in MNCs should be further explored in multiple other contexts, deepening the understanding of how this theoretical mechanism works. The ascription of identity is likely to be affected by various individual characteristics (e.g., openness, global mindset) that we did not investigate in this study and that need to be discovered in further research. Building on the suggested theorization of the multilevel SI process in MNCs, multiple other macro- and micro-level factors should be included, and their interactions and effects on the production of SI outcomes should be explored.

Our study mainly focused on one country example – India, which is defined by a significantly diverse and socially rich society. To what extent and in what ways do ascriptions of identity affect the SI process when the country has more homogenous social structures or less visible social discourses about them? These questions are essential not only for IB scholars investigating the SI process in MNCs but also for researchers theorizing about MNCs’ national identity dilemma (e.g., Munjal et al., 2018) and national consumer identity (e.g., Kipnis et al., 2019). If the effects of identity ascription appear to be consistent across phenomena, the existing theorization on those topics will be altered.

5.5. Conclusions

Managing an MNC’s transnational SI process only by considering macro-level factors is likely to produce inconsistent SI outcomes due to the multilevel nature of SI. Thus, micro-level factors (e.g., the individual ascription of identity) and their interaction with macro-level factors should be managed simultaneously. Such multilevel interactions may significantly affect the implementation of inter-unit collaboration central to achieving the competitive advantage of a transnational MNC. For example, in inter-unit collaboration with India in the transnational MNC, it is essential to explore the individual identifications of Indian colleagues instead of ascribing a specific identity to them based on visible discourses. This is because Indian nationals are likely to identify with the diverse examples of Indian work and management styles that coexist and change due to diverse influences at a given time.

**Table A1**  
Interviewee profiles and interview details.

Hierarchical level in the line organization	Organizational role(s) of the interviewee	Date of the interview and type (face-to-face (FTF) or online)	Length of the interview (hours : minutes)
<b>Finland</b> (16 interviewees; 20 interviews)			
Top management	Top management team (TMT) member (MKMC Group) and chief executive officer (MKMC group)	(No = 2) I. 18.1.2017 (FTF) II. 17.2.2017 (FTF)	(No = 2) I. 1 : 12 II. 1 : 22
Top management	TMT member (MKMC Group) and human resource manager (MKMC group and Finland)	24.2.2017 (FTF)	2 : 11
Middle management	Human resource manager (Finland) who was appointed to facilitate the fieldwork	(No = 3) I. 6.2.2017 (FTF) II. 7.2.2017 (FTF) III. 7.2.2017 (FTF)	(No = 3) I. 0 : 43 II. 0 : 27 III. 0 : 28
Top management	TMT member (MKMC Group) and communication manager (MKMC group and Finland)	23.2.2017 (FTF)	1 : 16
Middle management	Unit operation manager (Finland)	20.2.2017 (FTF)	1 : 08
Middle management	Project management function manager (Finland)	21.2.2017 (FTF)	1 : 17
Middle management	Function manager A (Finland)	9.3.2017 (FTF)	1 : 06
Middle management	Team manager (Finland)	9.3.2017 (FTF)	1 : 24

(continued on next page)

Consequently, identifying Indians with the uniform, negative discourses visible in Western research and media is likely to hamper the implementation of inter-unit collaboration.

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**CRedit authorship contribution statement**

**Aušrinė Šilenskytė:** Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Project administration, Visualization, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing. **Marko Kohtamäki:** Conceptualization, Writing - review & editing. **Charles Dhanaraj:** Conceptualization, Writing - review & editing.

**Declaration of Competing Interest**

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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**Appendix A**

See Table A1.

Table A1 (continued)

Hierarchical level in the line organization	Organizational role(s) of the interviewee	Date of the interview and type (face-to-face (FTF) or online)	Length of the interview (hours : minutes)
Top management	TMT member (MKMC Group) and project manager (Finland)	8.3.2017 (FTF)	2 : 02
Non-management employee	Global project manager	(No = 2) I. 20.1.2017 (FTF) II. 22.2.2017 (FTF)	(No = 2) I. 0 : 26 II. 1 : 14
Non-management employee	Project manager	24.3.2017 (FTF)	1 : 27
Non-management employee	Employee with project management responsibilities	8.3.2017 (FTF)	2 : 13
Non-management employee	Employee	29.3.2017 (FTF)	1 : 01
Non-management employee	Employee	29.3.2017 (FTF)	0 : 40
Non-management employee	Employee	30.3.2017 (FTF)	1 : 09
Non-management employee	Employee	30.3.2017 (FTF)	1 : 15
<b>Russia</b>			
<b>(6 interviewees; 6 interviews)</b>			
Top management	TMT member (MKMC Group) and unit manager (Russia)	19.4.2017 (FTF)	1 : 55
Non-management employee	Team manager	19.4.2017 (FTF)	1 : 08
Non-management employee	Project manager	18.4.2017 (FTF)	1 : 30
Non-management employee	Employee	18.4.2017 (FTF)	2 : 04
Non-management employee	Employee	19.4.2017 (FTF)	1 : 09
Non-management employee	Employee	20.4.2017 (FTF)	0 : 46
<b>India</b>			
<b>(23 interviewees; 24 interviews)</b>			
Top management	TMT member (MKMC group), Indian local management team (ILMT) member, and unit manager (India)	13.6.2017 (FTF)	1 : 12
Middle management	ILMT member and unit human resource manager (India)	(No = 2) I. 4.4.2017 (online) II. 12.6.2017 (FTF)	(No = 2) I. 1 : 13 II. 0 : 26
Middle management	Unit communication manager (India)	7.4.2017 (online)	1 : 14
Middle management	ILMT member and unit project management function manager (India)	3.4.2017 (online)	1 : 05
Middle management	ILMT member and function B manager (India)	10.4.2017 (online)	1 : 23
Middle management	The section in function B manager	5.4.2017 (online)	1 : 32
Middle management	Team manager	12.6.2017 (FTF)	1 : 10
Middle management	Global quality manager (MKMC Group and India)	7.4.2017 (online)	1 : 24
Middle management	The section in function C manager	5.4.2017 (online)	1 : 47
Middle management	Design manager	6.4.2017 (online)	1 : 28
Middle management	Design manager	12.6.2017 (FTF)	1 : 42
Middle management	Team leader	13.6.2017 (FTF)	1 : 27
Non-management employee	Project manager	20.6.2017 (FTF)	1 : 24
Non-management employee	Project manager	21.6.2017 (FTF)	1 : 21
Non-management employee	Senior employee	14.6.2017 (FTF)	0 : 49
Non-management employee	Senior employee	16.6.2017 (FTF)	1 : 19
Non-management employee	Senior employee	16.6.2017 (FTF)	0 : 35
Non-management employee	Senior employee	19.6.2017 (FTF)	1 : 27
Non-management employee	Senior employee	19.6.2017 (FTF)	0 : 27
Non-management employee	Senior employee	20.6.2017 (FTF)	1 : 50
Non-management employee	Employee	14.6.2017 (online)	0 : 54
Non-management employee	Employee	15.6.2017 (FTF)	1 : 08
Non-management employee	Employee	15.6.2017 (FTF)	0 : 33

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