

# The analysis of collective mindsets: Introducing a New Method of Institutional Analysis in Comparative Research

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## ABSTRACT

This article presents a specific qualitative method – the Collective Mindset Analysis (CMA) – that is applicable within the frame of institutional analysis to map the cognitive and normative institutions at work. The purpose of this paper is to introduce and discuss the method and its methodology as well. The paper will elaborate on how the method is applied to international research and will provide concrete examples drawn from a bigger research project on economic elites in eleven countries. It will demonstrate the steps of interpretation of interview material from this project with the help of CMA, using concrete text sequences. The sequences have been extracted from interviews with Brazilian top managers that were conducted in the context of an international research project. The paper will show, how an institutional approach, that is relying on the sociology of knowledge, can be supported by a method, that helps to reconstruct the cognitive and normative rules in a given culture and to analyze, how these rules are translated in action orientations to solve culturally significant problems. Thus, the method can be a remedy for the shortcomings of institutional analysis in mapping and comparing the knowledge stocks in different cultures and a new tool in international comparative research.

**KEYWORDS:** qualitative methods; interpretation pattern; qualitative social research; analysis of collective mindsets; institutional analysis.

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## I. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

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In analyzing societies, cultures or economies, collective mindsets play an important role. They tell us about the spiritual construction and the knowledge stocks of a given society, culture or economy, how this knowledge stock is translated into action orientations, how these orientations change over time and how different they are in various cultures. To identify, map and compare the knowledge stocks in different cultures helps us to know more about how institutions and ideas travel, how globalization takes shape and how transcultural the cultural repertoires in fact are. More specific questions can also be answered *e.g.* about the collective mindsets of capitalist production in use, about social justice and politics and the change in political cultures as well.

In sociology, the analysis of collective mindsets is part of an institutional analysis of societies, dealing especially with cognitive and normative institutions. For Scott, cognitive elements constitute the social meaning of reality and the frames through which reality is perceived. Cognitive institutions provide a taken-for-granted perspective, natural habits and acknowledged rules about how to understand the world (see Scott 1995, p. 40). Normative institutions introduce collectively acknowledged rules about what is perceived as right and wrong and the obligations guiding action (*idem*, p. 37). Thus, collective mindsets are important elements of cognitive and normative institutions, providing the cultural repertoire of how to perceive problems and how to solve them. Any institutional analysis therefore relies at least on assumptions about the underlying knowledge stocks in a given culture at work and the collectively acknowledged rules. However, rarely, are these knowledge stocks and underly-

<sup>2</sup> There are different translations of the “Deutungsmusteranalyse” into English, like “Social Interpretation Patterns Analysis” or “Interpretation Pattern Analysis”. We prefer the term “Collective Mindsets”, because it is more instructive for an understanding of the sociology of knowledge-frame in use.

ing cognitive and normative rules systematically analyzed or mapped. More often, they are derived from a general understanding of the culture, from theory or formal institutions at work without any sound empirical proof. Against this backdrop, the article introduces the “Deutungsmusteranalyse”<sup>2</sup>, *i.e.* the “Collective Mindset Analysis” (CMA) as a qualitative tool to remedy the empirical shortcomings of the more general institutional analyses of societies, cultures or economies. This is its main objective.

The CMA is related to the reconstruction of social meaning and collectively acknowledged rules that cannot be stated from an “objective” observation post, but has to be reconstructed from the viewpoint of a member of the respective culture. In the frame of interpretive sociology, it has a particular status, not just because it entails a reconstruction of the subjective individual meaning, but because of the intersubjectively shared social meaning. The CMA is neither interested in individual attitudes and action orientations and how they are related to the social status in a society nor in the “objective” meaning of the formal structure of institutions. Its purpose is to reconstruct the collectively acknowledged cultural sense-making, the knowledge inventory and the normative rules behind the individual attitudes and opinions (see Ullrich 1999, p. 430; Stachura 2005, p. 167). The CMA is not just focused on explicit statements, arguments and ideas, but also on the “tacit knowledge” (Polanyi 1966), that is collectively shared, the hidden knowledge “frames” (Goffman 1974) that are at work in a culture. Thus, the focus of the CMA is on the collectively accepted, explicit and tacit knowledge frames that constitute social meaning in a given culture and instruct individual meaning, attitudes and action.

To introduce the CMA as a tool that can contribute to the analysis of cognitive and normative institutions, we start off with a chapter in which the sociological tradition and theory behind the CMA is depicted. In this section we also portray the German debate on the use of the method and the two basic versions that are applied (2). In the subsequent chapter, the application of the CMA is made more concrete, as we outline sampling methods, the type of survey and methods of analysis linked with the CMA (3). Using a case study that examines the neoliberal financial market mindsets of Brazilian Top Managers, and how these are represented in interview statements, we apply the CMA method by explicating and illustrating each step in the analysis (4). The concluding remarks discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the method and sums up how it contributes to institutional analysis (5).

## II. The sociological approach and two versions of collective mindset analysis

The CMA is a qualitative method originating in Germany. It is supposed to contribute to institutional analysis of societies and is rooted in the sociology of knowledge. It was originally invented by Oevermann (2001a; 2001b) in Germany, and further developed by Ullrich (1999), Schetsche (2000), Sachweh (2010) and others. Although the debate has mostly taken place within German sociology (Allert 1976; Arnold 1983; Dewe 1984; Lüders 1991; Meuser & Sackmann 1992; Lüders & Meuser 1997; Oevermann 2001a; 2001b; Plaß & Schetsche 2001; Sachweh 2010, etc.), it is very close to international debates on social cognition (Zerubavel 1997; Kunda 1999), cultural repertoires (see Holley 2011), sensemaking (Weick 1993; 1995) and discourse analysis (see Keller 2011).

The method is based on the frame of institutional action theory, which asks what are the culturally inherited rules that people use, when faced with the challenge of how to act. In the tradition of institutional theory, it is neither based on Rational Choice and on methodological individualism nor on system theory and methodological holism. Relying on the Sociology of Knowledge of Alfred

Schütz (1971), and Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1969), it lies in-between. Its purpose is to reconstruct and map the knowledge stocks in use, the rules of interpretation and action in a respective culture during a specific period of time.

The idea of “collective mindsets” has its roots also in the classics of sociological literature, that focused on the importance of “societal or cultural knowledge” or “social facts” (Durkheim). Durkheim put it as “Collective Representations” (1898; 1967), that are collective cognitive structures in a given society, which are supposed to change according to the collective rules of this society. In another frame of sociological theory, Pareto was addressed “derivations”, that provide seemingly reasonable frames of explanations to conceal the “irrational causes” behind (Pareto 1962). Max Weber stressed the role of ideas in history, pointing out, how they can push societal change in the frame of institutions and interests (Weber 1904). Last, but not least Karl Mannheim developed, in his sociology of knowledge, the perspective that every form of knowledge is dependent on social position in a society and the social strata that we are part of (Mannheim 1980).

This broader frame of references to the classical sociological literature, Schütz (1971) and Berger and Luckmann (1969) provides the central ideas behind the method. For Schütz, who took the natural lifeworld as a basic category for identifying the knowledge stock behind the action orientations, the “lifeworld” was the taken-for-granted, “common-sense reality” of the social world (see Schütz 1971). Thus, according to Berger and Luckmann (1969), habitualized actions, which “retain their meaningful character for the individual although the meanings involved become embedded as routines in his general stock of knowledge, taken for granted by him and at hand for his projects into the future. Habitualization carries with it the important psychological gain that choices are narrowed. While in theory there may be a hundred ways to go about the project of building a canoe out of matchsticks, habitualization narrows these down to one. This frees the individual from the burden of 'all those decisions', providing a psychological relief that has its basis in man's undirected instinctual structure” (Berger & Luckmann 1966, p. 59). By habitualization, the knowledge stock of a given society is generated and reproduced, providing routines and rules of interpretation (patterns, schemes) and action (scripts). Thus, this lifeworld is also “Wirkwelt”, a world that shall be influenced by our actions (Schütz 1979). It is constituted by collectively acknowledged ideas, practices, and scripts that can be enacted by actors, when dealing with the necessity to act. By this enactment, the cultural inherited ideas, practices, and scripts are reproduced or changed, once a significant number of actors within a particular culture, transforms the knowledge stocks in use.

In a sociological approach, the objective of the CMA is to identify, reconstruct and map these knowledge stocks and their changes. The sociological CMA addresses “objective problems” in a given society, culture or economy and the cultural repertoires available to cope with these “objective problems” (see Oevermann 2001a; 2001b). The CMA can also be applied in political science to analyze the line of argument in a political discourses (Francis 1965; Lepsius 1967; 1986; 1990; Stachura 2005), in media studies to the content analysis of media discourses *e.g.* on sexual abuse or satanic rituals (Schetsche 1992; 1997; Schmied-Knittel 2008) or in criminology to criminologist research on witness statements (Höffling, Plaß & Schetsche 2002).

In sociology, the “Deutungsmusteranalyse”, *i.e.* CMA, first elaborated by Oeverman in 1973 (Overman 2001a), was revised by Oevermann in 2001 (Overmann 2001b) and reconstructed as a new, “light version” by Ullrich in 1999. Thus, there are today two applications of the CMA in sociology, and oth-

ers in discourse analysis like Plaß and Schetsche (2001) and Keller (2011). For the purpose of this article, we concentrate on the two sociological variants, and demonstrate the application of the “light version” of Ullrich (1999) with some modifications introduced by us for international comparative research.

(i) The concept of collective patterns of interpretation, as introduced into sociology by Oevermann (2001a), originates in the earlier works of Francis (1965) and Lepsius (1967). Back then, the term was used in the sense of “conceptual order” (Oevermann 2001a; 2001b). An unpublished text of Oevermann was enough to revive a discussion on the concept. This text was written as part of a research project on the topic of “parental home and school” in 1973. According to Oevermann (2001b, p. 36), what was lacking at the time was a new way out of the traps of both materialist historiography - which only results in ideological disputes - as well as quantitative survey research - which fails to grasp emergent effects that go beyond the scope of attitudes and opinions. Among other things, the methodological aim was to break through the standardization within the quantitative paradigm - especially with regard to the arbitrary configuration of items - to enable the sociologist to account for the actual and complex motivations at work, in the background of a specific response. These complex motivations were considered as the structure of a collective unconscious (*ibidem*).

Right from the start, Oevermann (*idem*, p. 38) made the main idea of this “conceptual turn” very clear. For all the basic existential problems of a society that come up time and time again, potential solutions are to be found in the collective patterns of interpretation, to which all sufficiently socialized actors can turn in times of crisis and uncertainty. These patterns of interpretation are routines; they operate and evolve like implicit theories - without it being necessary to consider their validity during the application. Due to their problem-solving capability, they stand the test of time and consequently take on a life of their own.

This aspect is well illustrated by the following example: Starting from a very common action problem – e.g. the question of: How do I raise my child properly? – the socialized actor cannot start all over again and “reinvent the wheel”. The need for routines is extremely high for parents who try to do a good job, and so is the likelihood that their search for orientation will lead them to adopt traditional solutions - i.e. they draw on collective mindsets as cultural repertoire. The traditional way is not necessarily the easiest path that the parents thus choose, but it is a relief not having to think every step through in all of its consequences, especially when there is not much time to think. In contrast to the manifold objective action problems, we may therefore expect - like Oevermann (*idem*) - to find collectively established patterns of routine interpretation that are rooted in the respective environments and realms of experience. These routines allow for diverse action problems to be dealt with on a daily basis. For Oevermann (*ibidem*), interpretation patterns are predominantly cognitive representations - in the sense of Popper representations of world 3 (i.e. the world of objective thought contents, in addition to the outside world and the world of consciousness). These cognitive representations embody knowledge (*idem*, p. 51) but they are not explicit knowledge. It is therefore not possible to survey patterns of interpretation with a quantitative questionnaire. However, like any form of knowledge, the cognitive representations embody the experience of dealing with problems and crises that are passed on, by drawing on collective stocks of knowledge (*ibidem*). Oevermann prefers to speak of tacit knowledge, when the cognitive representations are neither consciously retrievable nor reflected, but nonetheless put ‘structuring’ into practice (*idem*, p. 56). Patterns of interpretation fall in this category of tacit knowledge, according to Oevermann. However, we must distinguish patterns of interpretation from the category of “latent

meaning structures” within the framework of objective hermeneutics. Latency refers to the methodological approach of the researcher, who has to render them accessible and manifest during the research process without being able to observe them directly (Oevermann *et al.*, 1979; Oevermann 1981). To be precise, the patterns of interpretation are the implicit representations of latent knowledge stocks.

According to Oevermann, the patterns of interpretation is influential for everyday cognition. The patterns themselves remain “tacit knowledge”; structures that require a logical architecture of arguments, built to sustain the respective practice or course of action (Oevermann 2001b, p. 36). They require a certain consistency and instructiveness for troubleshooting, which is why they are anchored in cultures, environments and lifestyles, and vary according to these. They form a cognitive element of the collective knowledge stocks and thus survive or change only collectively. As tacit knowledge, they generate individually different problem solutions, opinions and attitudes. In order for them to change, they usually have to fail at solving the objective action problem - this failure is more than an individual exception from the rule and of collective relevance. Against this methodological background, the interest in collective mindsets draws on the insight that individual attitudes and action orientations depend on the collective “supply” with collectively acknowledged interpretations. After all, the general research question is raised, which rules of interpretation and action apply with regard to a specific collective knowledge in a given society. The sociologist may uncover these rules through the method that is thus termed “collective mindset analysis”.

(ii) Like for Oevermann, the CMA of Ullrich is concentrated on the reconstruction of “social meaning”, and not of subjective reasoning. The focus is on the constitution of action orientations, on the conditions concerning the collective knowledge stocks (see Ullrich 1999, p. 430). In the frame of action theory, those action orientations are assumed to be constituted through a combination and crossover of cognitive, normative, evaluative and expressive dimensions (*ibidem*). These dimensions of the collective mindset need to be analyzed and demonstrated, how they are transformed in the framing of a situation and ultimately, translated into action orientations. Unlike Oevermann, Ullrich emphasizes the manifest or even stereotypical character of collective mindsets. It is assumed that the collective mindset can also be a reflected explicit form of reasoning and justification, like a scientific knowledge background that organizes the line of argument. Referring to Pareto, Ullrich called the individual adoption of collective mindsets, “derivations” (*ibidem*). Actors use these derivations to explain and justify their actions in a way that can be understood by others. Thus, actors refer to legitimate forms of knowledge, *i.e.* collective mindsets, that are shared in a given society, culture, or economy. However, only the derivations can be gathered and surveyed directly, not the knowledge stock of collective mindsets that lie behind (*ibidem*, p. 431). As a result, the CMA is an analysis of individual derivations, that need to be to be classified and typified using a method that helps to reconstruct the underlying cognitive, normative and evaluative logic in the line of arguments and upon which individual derivations are based.

On these grounds, the reconstruction of cognitive and normative rules can be a sound contribution to an institutional analysis focused on cognitive and normative institutions. This is not done by referring to a theory that instructs us in a deductive method about what lies behind those derivations. Rather, it is done by analyzing the self-representations of actors in an inductive method, reconstructing the knowledge stocks on the basis of the interview material available. For that starting point of qualitative research, Ullrich recommends methods of sampling, interview methods and methods of analyzing the inter-

views. Unlike Oevermann, his recommendations do not lead to the reconstruction of single cases with a strong effort of hermeneutical interpretation of the “objective meaning” of language, but instead focuses on reconstructing socially shared meaning through a cross-comparison of sequences of many interviewees related to a particular problem of action. These sequences are analysed using categorization, classification and type casting methods.

The method of Ullrich can thus be labelled a “light version” of Oevermann’s CMA, because its methodological prerequisites are not as complex and its hermeneutic efforts are not as exhausting as in the case of Oevermann’s CMA. Given that Oevermann’s hermeneutic method depends predominantly on language skills as well as idiosyncratic interpretations of single case studies, it does not seem suitable for international comparisons with a greater number of interviews. The opposite is true for the CMA of Ullrich. Therefore, the focus of our paper is on the application and modification of Ullrich’s CMA-approach to an international comparative research design.

### III. The CMA – method and methodology

Due to the fact that collective mindsets are forms of collective background knowledge in a given society, they need to be reconstructed using qualitative analytical tools. In this frame of interpretive sociology, we have to decide on the sampling methods (*i*), the type of survey; (*ii*) and the methods of analysis (*iii*), to be employed.

(*i*) Like Ullrich (1999, p. 433), we assume that the CMA can certainly not be executed as a single case-analysis, for then a generalization has to be left aside or done in another way (for example using other empirical studies, sources or scientific documents). As a general rule, the CMA needs more than one or two cases to prove, how “institutionalized” a collectively established pattern of interpretation is. This should not be misunderstood in terms of quantitative social research methods for we still operate with qualitative representativeness. Following in the footsteps of “grounded theory” (Glaser & Strauss 1967; Strauss 1987; Corbin & Strauss 1990) if there are few cases in the sample, it is recommended to work with “theoretical sampling”, which implies operating a method of permanent contrast that leads to a theoretical saturation point. Theoretical saturation is achieved once further analysis will not increase the variance in interpretation patterns or only by a little more. If only a few cases are available it is suggested to start with the method of minimal and maximal contrast. Following an interpretation generated by analyzing the first case, a very similar or a very dissimilar case is selected as the next case of analysis. Comparison with the similar case raises the question in what aspects differences can be found. Comparing with the dissimilar case raises the question whether there are similarities. In doing so, the selection of cases is always theoretically founded. Concretely, this means that one is always reflecting upon which types of differentiation or dimensions might be evident in the collective mindsets after the first case, the second case, the third case and so on.

In the case of a greater sample of interviews - we have altogether 277 interviews in eleven countries - a proportional quota sampling is an alternative, if data on the parent population are available. This is a non-probability sample in which the researcher selects people according to a theoretically chosen quota. The interviewees are selected into a sample on the basis of chosen characteristics in order to reach the same distribution of characteristics as in the parent population. The characteristics can be gauged by an inductive procedure. Nevertheless, this sampling method is already in between that of a qualitative and quantitative approach. Relying on the data of our standardized life course analysis in our case, the interview sample was selected using a proportional

quota sampling method related to age, sex, education, and international activities of the CEOs. To use only theoretical sampling as well as to select a probability sample was not possible in this field of research because you cannot randomly select interviewees out of the target population of CEOs from the Top 100 industrial companies. To reach a qualitative representativeness of the sample, proportional quota sampling seemed therefore to be the best solution.

(ii) Concerning the type of survey, Ullrich (1999, p. 434) recommends carrying out a discursive interview. This is a guided, semi-structured interview with questions, aimed at evoking statements, arguments, and justifications. These questions can even be confrontational and provocative, in order to generate arguments. However, unlike Ullrich, we do not think that one is in need of just one specific method for the interviews. As long as we do not use standardized surveys, one can apply various kinds of interviewing methods that generate narrations, descriptions, explanations, justifications and argumentations on the topics, we are interested in. In principle, all texts and images generated by a given society, culture or economy can be objects of analysis for CMA. There are no further limitations regarding the material. However, there is a condition if the material embodies a marginal text only. Therefore, standardized and partly standardized methods of data acquisition normally generate poorly suited material for CMA. In contrast, the density of material is huge if narrative or problem-based interviews are carried out. In particular there are available narrative texts by being not much penetrated by argumentation. This permits the identification of differentiations, fissures and inconsistencies more easily. An open-minded, even artificial naivety is a precondition for the approach and the question, which collective mindset is to be analyzed, is a question that emerges from the empirical material itself. In order to carry out rigorous comparison within an international project certainly necessitates working together with native speakers. They have to execute the analysis or at a minimum, must participate while analyzing for otherwise the cultural contexts in the text risks being inadequately explored.

Since narratives are resistant to routines, regularities and standard-operating-procedures biographical narration tends towards experiences and worth-telling occurrences that gain prominence in life, thus generating meaning, balance and evaluation. Thus in terms of phenomenology, “meaningful” occurrences and the experiences of narrators are adequate to use for CMA. Some examples of elements that discharge in narration as occurrences as well as experiences that lead to narration on self-experienced episodes from life are: perceptible processes of transformation, projects that have a beginning and a definite end, crises, fissures and turning points. Concurrently, a problem-centered strategy of inquiry is appropriate for the subject. It allows interviewees to develop an “insider-perspective”. A strategy of inquiry that is selective and problem-based, helps gain a view into the organizational self-awareness of actors. This is based, on the one hand on a theoretical scientific pre-understanding and, on the other hand, on an empirical comparative perspective. That is, the themes activated in the problem-centered part of inquiry are systematically adapted, revised, supplemented and extended in the course of the survey. It is essential in any case to keep the aim of qualitative research in mind, which is to discover the unknown. Generating theory takes place during the research process, when procedures of action, meaning and perception are reconstructed. In the case of problem-based interviews, conversations combine – in terms of the research pragmatic – an open start plus a strategy of inquiry that generates narration with an initiation of conversation that is structured thematically by an interview guideline handled un-bureaucratically.

(iii) In the CMA-design, we now have access to the “derivations” – the material we need to reconstruct the collective mindsets that lie behind. One must

<sup>3</sup> Ideologies are related to status-based material interests of an actor or actor groups. Collective Mindsets are not generated, applied or reproduced by individual benefits and utilities. As cultural habits of thinking and acting, they are historical forms of knowledge, which do not evolve due to interests and benefits but because of historical opportunities, contingency and adaptive advantages. Habituation, internalization and naturalization are the mechanisms of their reproduction, not the realization of status interests or benefits.

always keep in mind that collective mindsets are not attitudes, opinions or ideologies<sup>3</sup> of individual actors. On the surface of speech and texts, we will find opinions and attitudes. These are rather fast changing interpretation patterns, related to a wide range of topics and rooted in the psychological make-up of an individual personality. They can be changed individually. They are easily figured out in empirical research. In contrast, collective mindsets are the collective forms of our background knowledge. They change according to our culture, and as part of the collective knowledge inventory, they cannot be changed individually. They are not rooted in the psychology of actors, but in the history of social groups, cultures or societies. They are not talk, but the grammar of knowledge about how to solve social problems in a given society. They are not easily detected at the surface of everyday talk, but have to be reconstructed in an elaborate method of qualitative analysis.

Thus, using the material of the transcribed interviews as a starting point, we now need to find out, what the background forms of collective knowledge are that lead to these narrations and argumentations related to the topics that we are interested in. By applying methods of qualitative content analysis, we exercise eight steps of interpretation:

1. Selection: We select sequences related to specific topics (according to our research interests);

2. Reformulation: We summarize and reformulate the arguments, explanations, and narrations in the sequences by rephrasing them;

3. Abstraction: We abstract the logical and normative structure, by eliminating what is not necessary to understand the basic categories of the argument, description or narration;

4. Abstraction of order: We abstract the logical and normative order in the flow of arguments, descriptions or narrations; we identify, what is evaluated as good or bad and trace it back to the underlying norms behind that judgments;

5. Comparison: According to our topics, we compare the chosen sequences in all interviews to identify the most common, shared and dominant cognitive and normative pattern;

6. Identification of Rules: Related to the social conditions, we identify the typical rules of interpretation and action that are common, acknowledged and dominant;

7. Contextualization: In order to find out, under which social conditions they are produced, we relate these cognitive and normative patterns to the social context of actor constellations, cultures, opportunity structures and constraints, in which they appear;

8. Explanation: Taking into consideration already established explanation frames and theories, we try to explain, why these rules are reproduced or changed in the social context that we analyze, and what the social consequences of these rules are.

The CMA, as we use it, does not work with cases, but with dimensions, that enables a cross-comparison of interviews with the help of encoded sequences. Our interpretation was carried out with the help of the content analysis software MAXQDA<sup>4</sup> that supports the encoding of sequences. It is executed both by interpretational groups with a heterogeneous structure and by native speakers. Where the interviews have been carried out in English or have been translated into English the interpretation is executed by groups composed of international team members. The reliability of encoding and interpretation is checked several times and showed satisfactory results for the focus of interest that is, the main

<sup>4</sup> MAXQDA is software designed for qualitative and mixed methods data, particularly for analyses of data from interviews, focus groups, online surveys, web pages, images, audio and video files, spreadsheets, and RIS data easily in academic,



scientific, and business institutions. The emphasis on going beyond qualitative research can be observed in the extensive attributes function and the ability of the program to deal relatively quickly with larger numbers of interviews (see Kuckartz 2012).

cognitive and normative patterns of argumentation and interpretation. In parallel, a linkage could be established between encoded passages at several important points in such a way that the narratives framing the patterns of interpretation became identifiable. As a result, CMA turned out to be applicable internationally and was practicable and efficient. The aim of the next chapter (4) is therefore to show case, how this method is applied practically in concrete scientific research.

#### IV. The case study: a lesson in analyzing neoliberal mindsets of top-managers in Brazil

As pointed out in the chapter before, the interpretation process of CMA is based on eight steps: selection, reformulation, abstraction, the abstraction of order, comparison, identification of rules, contextualization and finally, explanation.

The purpose of this section is to show, how the CMA method can be used in comparative research and in this case, particularly in an international context. Our intention is to present some aspects of CMA using concrete examples from our research on economic elites. Therefore we illustrate the steps of CMA using interview sequences carried out with top managers in Brazil in 2012/13. Altogether, we carried out 33 interviews with CEOs of the Top 100 industrial enterprises in Brazil. The sampling method was proportional quota sampling. Furthermore, in the selection of interviewees, an age cohort design was implemented, comparing three age groups: CEOs and Ex-CEOs born between 1930 and 1944 (older generation), between 1945 and 1954 and CEOs born between 1955 and 1964 (younger generation).<sup>5</sup> The type of survey was a problem-centered strategy of inquiry with open questions and enough space for narrations. As analytical strategy, we used the CMA in its light version as described above.

<sup>5</sup> The purpose of this age group comparison was to find out if there is an age cohort effect on the characteristics of the collective mindsets in use and to assess the changes in collective mindsets, although the project could not use longitudinal data.

The research project investigates the collective routines and scripts that channel top managers' interpretations as well as their search for solutions to common objective problems that they encounter in their profession, (for example the question of how to act in the frame of global financial markets (see Pohlmann & Lim 2014). The main thrust of this approach is also derived from Max Weber who was interested in habitual ideas and principles that composed a new spirit of capitalism. One purpose of the research project was therefore to challenge or provide empirical proof to the general assumption in globalization literature, that an emerging global economic elite acts as pacemakers of a new neoliberal spirit in the world, using neoliberal management concepts and techniques at the corporate level (see Boltanski & Chiapello 2005; Schmidt-Wellenburg 2009; Crouch 2011, etc.). By the way, the recent literature on neoliberalism shares the assumption that a spread of neoliberal ideas and a strong tendency of convergence towards neoliberal management thinking is occurring in the central regions of the world economy (Boltanski & Chiapello 2005; Crouch 2011, p. 92; Streeck 2013, p. 45-46, 58-59). Although numerous studies have already made the case for divergence or "path-dependency" in models of management and business systems (Whitley 1999; Hall & Soskice 2001; Amable 2003), "the convergence literature is the longest-established viewpoint" (Clegg 2012). For the purpose of this article, one important feature of neoliberal management thinking has been selected: the financial market driven economic thinking (a financial market mindset (see Schmidt-Wellenburg 2009, p. 327). This feature of neoliberal management thinking includes two basic indicators: an understanding of enterprises as financial market investments and a strong shareholder value orientation towards the market capitalization of the firm. It makes up one of the most important parts of neoliberal management thinking (*idem*, p. 325-335). In the following object lesson, we use

the interview sample from Brazil, but to provide a showcase, just one interview sequence is analysed intensely.

(i) **Selection:** The first step of the interpretation is to select sequences from the texts (in our case from the transcribed interviews) related to the guiding research question. These sequences should be possible answers to the significant and “objective” action problem that most actors have to cope with. In our project, the “objective” challenge for capitalist producers was: how to act when exposed to the global spread of financial markets. Generally those sequences might be easily detected if - in preparation - the whole interview transcript has already been coded based on a code tree generated in our case by theoretical considerations or inductively elaborated. Based on this, we chose one promising sequence on financial market orientation of a Brazilian Top Manager to begin with. It is not really important which promising sequence one starts with because a cross comparison of all promising sequences will be carried out anyway, in step 5.

“[...] here we have a situation with opportunities ahead. However depending on how you act, it could get a trap, a risk, a thread. [...] Financial market offers chances to capitalize your company. On the other hand, if you don’t have a clear position concerning your goals and strategies, the financial market leads you to short term orientation [...] if you are not able to make clear your position towards the Fund, you have to play the game of short term management, and this can be very risky” (Brazilian CEO, younger generation).

(ii) **Reformulation:** After this first step of choosing a promising sequence, the arguments, explanations or narrations from the text sequence need to be rephrased using other words than those of the interviewee. In this way, we try to create summarized and reformulated sequences. The rephrasing step makes it possible to attain a structure of the text that is more abstract so that the logical and normative aspects of the sequence can be identified. This is how we rephrase the sequence:

Financial Markets offer opportunities and chances to capitalize your company. There could be also risks and traps involved. It all depends on you. If you don’t have clear goals and strategies, financial markets lead you to short term management.

In our rephrasing, we exclude all information that is not absolutely necessary to understand the statement of the interviewee.

(iii) **Abstraction:** For this step it is not completely necessary to understand already the logic of the collective mindsets behind the basic line arguments of the sequence. The focus of our interest lies primarily in finding abstract categories – a precondition for the reconstruction of the causal (cognitive structure) and the normative relation to the knowledge stock which will be reconstructed. These abstract categories can just be enumerated, because in the next step we analyse the cognitive and normative structure by using the categories as stirrup holders for the reconstruction:

1. The Order and the Functioning of markets;
2. The role of market players (funds, owners, managers);
3. The consequences of financial market involvement for industrial managers.

(iv) **Abstraction of order:** Now we approach the level of reconstructing cognitive and normative structures in the knowledge stock by reducing and abstracting it to the knowledge forms and norms, that have generated the statement at hand, the “derivation”.

1. We first ask how the order and the functioning of markets is perceived in order to identify what kind of collective mindset is articulated:

Financial Markets imply the logic of short-termism. It is not an irrational system out of control for industrial managers. It can be played (controlled) by industrial managers in order to capitalize the company. It offers opportunities only under the condition of a clear strategy towards the funds. Confused and non-strategic players will be trapped. Short termism is a trap. *The cognitive structure thus relies on a game theory of markets, based on rational-choice assumptions about the control of the game and the success of strategic players.* Thus, it is the actor's fault, if the company does not succeed, not the fault of the financial market system.

2. We ask secondly, what typified role of market players lie at the center of the cognitive structure of the collective mindset:

The manager is at the centre of this game, not the shareholders or stockholders of the company. *He is willing to play the game also against the interests of the owners of shares in order to protect the company against them.* If he acts rationally, he will be in control of the market and its funds.

3. In the third place, we ask how the consequences of financial market involvement of the company is classified in this collective mindset:

If the manager has a clear position and strategy towards the funds/owners, he can play the financial markets with gains. Confused and non-strategic players will be trapped. Short termism is a trap.

Concerning the cognitive structure of the collective mindsets in use, we now have to realize, that the knowledge inventory activated, is on the one hand a simple version of actor rationality in a trivial market game, leaving out all structural effects that are also very often addressed in the case of financial markets. On the other hand, it reflects the role of the managers as the only agent, who acts for the sake of the survival and expansion of the company. Even without the ownership of significant stocks or shares, managers are taking over the functional role of the old style entrepreneur.

Subsequently, we have to analyse the normative order that is organizing the statement. To get to know better, how to do this, we should concentrate on value- or belief oriented dimensions. We are asking now what is right or wrong, not in an instrumental reasoning, but in an ethical dimension, of how one should act in this situation in order to cope with this problem, independent of whether it will lead to success. The underlying norm in this statement is to relate the manager's action to the responsibility for the company, its survival and expansion. It is an entrepreneurial norm, which managers should follow, if he does the right thing, because owners don't do anymore. Thus, the manager is in charge for the company's long-term orientations. His responsibility is also to avoid short termism, although short termism could be profitable and in the interest of the owners. In the normative structure of the collective mindset in use, *the norms of ethically good behaviour are defined in a very traditional way as if the manager were the captain of the ship that should not be wrecked by the owner's economic (profit-oriented) interests.* It is his ethical duty not to follow the owner's interests and to steer the ship through the strong currents of the financial markets, siren calls and pitfalls included.

(v) **Comparison:** Within the same interview the sequences are now to be compared with each other to analyze and identify the most common, shared and dominant cognitive and normative patterns of interpretation. In a second step, this comparison can be made among sequences of different interviews in the same economy and in a third step, a cross comparison can be carried out be-

tween different interviews from different economies. The purpose of the fifth step is already to generalize the findings in identifying a common and dominant cognitive and normative pattern. Equipped with findings about the text's cognitive and normative structures and having them confirmed by consulting further sequences of the respective interview, it is then easy to cross-compare those findings with other interviews to identify similarities or differences. In the case of financial market orientation – just to illustrate this step of analysis, not showing the analysis of the sequences itself – the following interview sequences show a similarity in structure.

“You have to analyze, what you want. There are different kinds of funds, and then before you open your company for a fund, firstly you should know, what you want from your partner, what you expect from your business partner. You want a fund that is just speculative? [...] nobody will buy part of his business for fun, but so that the company perpetuates, or towards you can do that the company grows, that the company develops” (Brazilian CEO, younger generation).

“I think, the capital market is important for company's growth [...] I'm in favour of the financial market, I think that the financial market is indispensable, I think it is ideal. Today there are a lot of companies that have lost control. Their stocks are available openly to be bought and sold. [...] I think, that is correct, but it is necessary to be careful with this [opening up of your company] [...] I think that is the way for big companies to grow and to get stronger, but you have to avoid exaggerations” (Brazilian CEO, older generation, retired).

The aim of comparing the analyzed sequence with other segments of text in the same group of interviewees is to adjust and refine the findings elaborated so far. In addition to that, this step is useful to analyse, whether the analysed interpretation pattern can be found in the structure of other interviews. In both quotations above, we find almost the same features of the collective mindset in use that we reconstructed from the first quotation: *a trivial model of financial markets with a fiction of control and the manager's role of taking care for the company, and not just for the profits of the owners*. Of course, if we would check now on all 33 interviews, we would find some variations and differentiation of the collective mindsets in use as well as some minor collective mindsets that are more in favour of shareholder value orientations. But by and large, the dominant collective mindset in use is one of financial markets that are identified as hazardous opportunities for strategic players with the dominant operating rule: to play the game for the sake of the company and not merely for the sake of the shareholders.

(vi) **Identification of Rules:** The main objective of this step is to find common rules of interpretation and action in the analyzed sequence group (Table 1).

In this step, we approach even more the center of an institutional analysis focused on cognitive and normative institutions by identifying the collectively accepted rules on how to interpret and how to act in the frame of financial markets. Comparing these rules with the two basic indicators for a neoliberal financial market mindset: an understanding of enterprises as financial market investments and a strong shareholder value orientation towards the market capitalization of the firm, we find that only the first one – although very ambivalent – is confirmed by our findings related to the knowledge stocks in use and the cognitive and normative institutions at work in the Top Management of Brazilian big business groups. The hypothesis about the spread of shareholder value orientations has to be rejected for the Top Management in Brazilian companies. Of course, there may be some tendency towards neoliberal collective mindsets at work, but the dominant collective mindset in use is, that managers should play the financial market system by, not following the short-term economic interests of their shareholders.

Table 1 - Identification of Rules

<b>Dominant Rules of:</b>	
Interpretation	1. Financial markets are games with opportunities that can be controlled and played by rational actors. 2. Managers are in charge of the company's wellbeing in the long run, not the shareholders and owners.
Action	1. Play the game strategically for the sake of the company, not for the sake of the shareholders.

Source: The authors.

(vii) **Contextualization:** We now need to check under which social conditions the collective mindsets are produced and reproduced. Related to the cognitive and normative patterns are the social context of actor constellations, cultures, opportunity structures and constraints, in which they appear. In the case of financial market orientations, on the one hand, we refer to the context of the analyzed interviews, such as the structure of the companies in relation to the financial market, the ownership structure, the economic sector and branches they are in etc. On the other hand, we elaborate on the corporate governance system in Brazil, especially concerning the role of financial markets. Here we deal with the business system and its historical development in Brazil.

To avoid going beyond the scope of this showcase only a brief summary of this step of analysis is presented.

#### 1. Informations Concerning the Firms and the CEOs

The sequences used in this showcase were selected from interviews with different native Brazilian CEOs. All interviews were carried out with Top-Managers of big industrial companies especially in the chemical, petrochemical and fuel sectors. The specific context of this institutional as well as the concrete historical background needs to be examined.

The company that the CEO in the first interview sequence presides over is one of the biggest companies in Brazil in its branch. It was founded long ago as a family firm and became soon after a shareholder owned company. Actually this firm is part of a conglomerate group that owns more than 50% of the total shares of this company. The other roughly 49% are owned by different funds. The third interview sequence was carried out with a retired CEO of the same enterprise. This retired CEO is a member of the owner's family group. The second interview sequence was carried out with a CEO of a big Brazilian company in the fuel sector. The company was founded after World War II as a cooperative and is since the 2000s, listed at the stock market. Most shares are owned by the former members of the association, just 1% of the shares are dispersed in the public stock market.

All quotations are from CEOs of Brazilian company groups, that have been exposed themselves to the financial markets, but still are in control of the major shares. Their corporate strategies in front of the financial markets have obviously been to keep control of the shares, and not to open up the companies fundamentally to investment funds, although in the first case, shareholders with a significant share of stocks are already able to intervene. But we'll see that the corporate strategies – concerning the challenge to “control” the financial markets – fit to the collective mindsets in use.

All quoted interviewees had an insider career, having in average more than 15 years tenure in the same firm. Thus, we now have informations on the bio-

graphical context that help to understand, why the survival and the expansion of the company is so important in the collective mindsets applied.

The CEOs of the first and second interview sequence hold a bachelor and a master degree in economics whereas the retired CEO holds a bachelor degree in law studies. This is important, because the basic idea on the diffusion of neoliberal spirit is that economic sciences and business administration are the seedbeds of neoliberal ideas in corporate governance, promoting their diffusion. Concerning the collective mindsets in use, we cannot confirm this hypothesis for our sample of 33 Top-Managers in Brazil.

## 2. The Corporate Governance System in Brazil and the Role of Financial Markets

In the 1980s liberalisation became more important in Brazil's policy and though Brazil was the last country in Latin America to implement a neoliberal economic policy (Figueiras 2000), it attracted foreign investors as the Brazilian economy became more open (cf. Gonçalves 2001, p. 279). Concurrently many state owned enterprises passed into private hands. The so-called liberal age had begun - this period is the basis for the subsequent implementation of a neoliberal economic and financial policy. The transnationalization of big national conglomerates was promoted as well as acquisitions of shares in Brazilian companies. Brazil seemed to be then more dependent on international capital flows (see Figueiras 2000) and critical authors believe that Brazil's economic structures have become more and more dependent on international capital markets (*idem*) and, that due to globalization Brazil's industry was de-nationalized and subordinated at the global level. In accordance with Figueiras (*idem*) Brazil's economy is dominated by finance capital respectively by big international banks and their products like pension funds and investment funds. The benefits of the new corporate governance system are said to be achieved only by a few national companies (cf. Bresser-Pereira & Diniz 2013), that are either competitive enough or have merged with foreign investors or are itself positioned multinational or transnational.

As a consequence of this neoliberal policy, Brazil's industrial sector was fundamentally restructured. Bankruptcies, corporate mergers of Brazilian enterprises and acquisitions by multinationals were characteristic of this period. All in all, there was a de-nationalization of the former national Brazilian economy. This resulted in increased number of transnational enterprises and companies as well as conglomerates (see Figueiras 2000; Bresser-Pereira & Diniz 2013).

Concerning ownership structure, the Brazilian state still is one of the predominant owners of the largest Brazilian firms, irrespective of the economic sector. The second most relevant owners amongst the largest Brazilian firms are families. Such family-owned business groups can be in control of many corporations at the same time. In the Brazilian case, the most common structure of such business groups is a pyramidal ownership. This kind of ownership structure is an important instrument to keep control of a firm's shareholders. The pyramidal ownership structure is used to separate the cash flow ownership from their control rights by shares with different voting rights (Rabelo & Vasconcelos 2002; Rabelo 1998). Brazilian companies as a rule have "clear control blocks formed by a small group of shareholders" (Rabelo & Vasconcelos 2002, p. 324). In summary, the main actors in the Brazilian economy are the state, local family-owned business groups and affiliates of multinational corporations. Even though foreign affiliates play an important role in Brazil's economy since the beginning of the 1960s, local family-owned business groups dominate the Brazilian economy. Therefore, the ownership structure in Brazil is till now rather concentrated. What we've found out, when we checked the context of the

individual firms, can now be generalized for the corporate governance system in Brazil. It fits to the collective mindsets in use and helps to explain, why we don't find a strong shareholder value orientation in the collective mindsets behind the corporate strategies.

(viii) **Explanation:** Checking the context of the interviews, we already identified some crucial factors that help us to explain what kind of knowledge inventory was evoked when Top Managers were confronted with the challenge of how to act in the financial market system. In particular, we took the careers of the CEOs, the corporate strategies, and the corporate governance system in Brazil into account. In the following, we present theoretical foundations to corroborate the explanation of our findings. In our case, we draw on the institutional theory of organizations and economies:

1. Analysing the regulative institutions of corporate governance system in Brazil, their impact on the articulation of collective mindsets by Brazilian Top Managers was striking. The cognitive and normative institutions at work are thus influenced by the regulative institutions in a country and the institutional environment of the company. These findings confirm that we have to take the unwritten institutional rules, cognitive frames and belief systems in use seriously into account (see Streeck & Yamamura 2001; Whitley 1999) to explain, why we did not find proof for the convergent spread of neoliberal mindsets with regard to financial markets all over the global economy. From a sociological perspective, institutions not only prevail because of the advantages that firms have when operating in line with regulative institutional settings and rules (see Hall & Soskice 2001). They also require habitualization, based on internalization and socialization processes, which forms a culturally inherited knowledge stock that is telling us how to act, *e.g.* when faced with the opportunity of more or less financial market participation. Thus bearing the comparative research framework in mind, this line of reasoning helps us to explain why the collective mindsets vary across countries and do not show tendencies of convergence (see Pohlmann & Lim 2014).

2. Concerning the neoliberal management mindset and the adoption of neoliberal management techniques, new institutional theory correctly points out that organizations very often adopt what is modern and the flavour of the year, without applying it to the degree where operations and procedures are substantially changed. Window dressing, gaming the system, hidden agendas and unwritten rules are all very common features within new institutional theory (Meyer & Rowan 1977; DiMaggio & Powell 1991, etc.). The application of the idea of "playing the financial market system" is limited, to the extent that the Brazilian managers are still able to control the logic of the financial market system. When confronted with the uncertainty of markets, managers tend to use fictions of control or causal maps in order to ensure their ability to act (see Weick 1995). These are cognitive institutions that are established *e.g.* as "trivial models" of markets to ease the burden of complexity and to stabilize the collective mindset, which assumes that rational players with strategic capabilities will play the financial markets successfully.

3. The Top Managers in Brazil are "organizational men", who spent most of their career in one company. When the owners, shareholders or principals no longer take an active interest in the survival and expansion of the company, only the top managers are left with the task to protect the company. Thus, the professional role of top managers - understood as organizational men or women, who have mostly climbed the career ladder within a particular company - is rather a barrier to the spread of a neoliberal mindset at the group level and within the real economy. The cognitive institutions at work did change, however. The collectively favoured role-model is no longer to be acting as an agent for the princi-

pal(s), but instead: to behave like an old-style entrepreneur in charge of the company's survival and expansion. Of course, the global financial crisis since 2007 has had a strong periodic effect on the revival of this collective mindset that places special emphasis on the "entrepreneurial self" of managers, too.

Neoliberal management thinking is of course only a small cog in the big wheel of neoliberalism. However, our empirical findings show that top managers in Brazil do not act as neoliberal "switchmen" who were expected to accelerate the trend towards a financial market-driven economy. A deep empirical investigation is crucial to explore further and demonstrate how collective mindsets become resilient and culturally rooted vis-à-vis the claims of mainstream globalization literature.

## V. Conclusions

The objective of this paper was to introduce the method of CMA, which was developed and used within the scope of a research project on economic elites. We gave a concrete example from the research project on economic elites in Brazil. Analysing the collective mindsets helped us gain deeper insights into the institutional conditions of social action and interaction. It served to identify types of collective knowledge and partly the conditions that are required to activate them.

From this perspective, the advantages of the CMA-method are:

(i) The CMA in its "light version" supports a comparative institutional analysis of various societies, cultures or economies. It complements the focus on regulative institutions that are predominantly addressed by researchers in institutional analysis.

(ii) In analysing collectively acknowledged cognitive and normative rules (institutions) it is a valid and reliable method. It helps to remedy the shortcomings of the rather idiosyncratic approach to cognitive and normative cultures within the mainstream literature on institutions.

(iii) It does not rely on a few single case studies that would require intensive efforts at reconstruction. With the cross-comparison of interview sequences, it is well-suited for an expansion towards the cross-comparison of many interviews in different countries, thus mapping the knowledge stocks in a given society, culture or economy.

(iv) Although, at first glance, the effort of interpretation seems to be high, this method is very efficient. In our experience, most of the time there are not many collective mindsets in use. The reconstruction of one collective mindset is very often seminal for the classification of many interview sequences.

(v) The CMA allows for the application of a strictly qualitative design as well as of a mixed research design, with a bigger number of guided interviews to be analysed.

(vi) The method of the CMA is very close to a scientist' method of interpreting scientific texts, when analysing studies of fellow scholars or other scientists. Thus, every scientist has already experiences in the analysis of cognitive and normative structures with regard to scientific texts.

But of course the CMA has also certain limitations or disadvantages:

(i) Just like any other qualitative method, it is not easy to generate a collectively shared understanding of the technique; especially of how the process of drawing conclusions can be made transparent and controlled. The need for training all the participating analysts is certainly high.



(ii) The need for training is also high, because the analyst has to avoid what very often comes natural: to elaborate on the subjective meaning, or on the potential motives of the interviewees. Also, it is not easy to dismiss all information on the context and the social position of the interviewee that is available (except those that are necessary to understand the sequence at hand), when starting with the interpretation.

(iii) Working in international and culturally heterogeneous interpretation groups with a dominant role of native speakers, sometimes the inter-coder reliability has to be checked. At least two separate interpretation groups should then work on the same interview sequences independently and compare their findings and conclusions.

(iv) The level of abstraction of the interpretation can differ greatly, depending on the scientific competence, experience and data interpretation skills of the analysts. Eventually, this process is only to be controlled by the interpretation group.

(v) Applying the CMA to map collectively accepted knowledge stocks doesn't answer the question about the conditions at work that activate or enact these knowledge stocks (by forming individual attitudes). Thus, a macro-micro-macro link isn't conceptualized theoretically.

(vi) Checking the results of our CMA in various cultures, it was striking that the method is biased towards elaborating archetypes of knowledge, and is not that sensitive to the more recent forms of collective mindsets. That is why the derivations – *i.e.* individual attitudes – were strongly influenced by the socialization of an actor.

Despite these limitations, we assume that the CMA is a useful method for cross-cultural comparison and a seminal part of thorough institutional analysis. It provides clear results without excessive hermeneutical efforts. According to our experience, the method has turned out to be practicable and suitable to international comparative research. In particular, due to the following three reasons: It enables us to understand the various cultural framings that modify the approach to the knowledge stocks. It provides a clear framework for comparisons that is avoiding the flaws of a point-by-point method of comparison. It further enables us to reconstruct the cultural “software” of collectively accepted knowledge stocks and generates new insights into the institutional order of a society. Thus, the CMA is - based on our experience - a seminal qualitative method for an institutional analysis that aims at an appropriate methodological approach to the cognitive and normative frames of action in a given society, culture or economy. It should be employed on a regularly basis to complement the analysis of regulative institutions.

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## RESUMO

O artigo tem como objetivo apresentar um método específico de análise qualitativa – *Collective Mindset Analysis (CMA)* – aplicado na análise e mapeamento de instituições cognitivas e normativas, dentro de uma abordagem institucional. Tanto o método quanto sua metodologia serão introduzidos e discutidos ao longo deste trabalho. Apresenta-se como o CMA pode ser aplicado em pesquisa internacional comparada, apoiando-se em casos concretos (entrevistas com executivos brasileiros) e tendo como pano de fundo uma pesquisa sobre elites econômicas realizada em 11 países. A análise demonstra como a abordagem institucional, apoiada na perspectiva teórica da sociologia do conhecimento, pode ser sustentada por um método, o qual contribui para a reconstrução das regras cognitivas e normativas de interpretação e ação em uma determinada cultura, assim como para a análise de como essas regras se traduzem na orientação da ação desses atores, empregada na solução de problemas culturalmente significativos. Esse método pode ser, portanto, uma solução para as lacunas existentes em se tratando de análises institucionais empregadas no mapeamento e na comparação do conhecimento formado e acumulado em diferentes culturas, além de ser uma nova ferramenta para pesquisas de investigação comparativa internacional.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** método qualitativo; padrão interpretativo; pesquisa social qualitativa; análises de *collective mindsets*; análise institucional.