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Intercultural Knowledge Sharing Between Expatriates and Host-country Nationals in Vietnam: A Practice-based Study of Communicative Relations and Power Dynamics

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ABSTRACT

We examine the communicative enabling practices and power dynamics of intercultural knowledge sharing relationships between Australian expatriates and host-country nationals from a practice-based theoretical perspective. Drawing on the results of an empirical field study, including interviews with 20 Australian expatriates and 23 Vietnamese host-country nationals, we identify three discrete phases of the relationships: (1) relationship building, (2) reciprocal learning and (3) knowledge co-construction. These stages provide the basis for a theoretical model and propositions that articulate specific communicative practices of both expatriates and host country nationals in developing and maintaining productive knowledge sharing relationships. Central to this is a dynamic process of power renegotiation between expatriates and host-country nationals that goes beyond prescriptive notions of 'power distance'. Our findings extend current (expatriate-centred) research by showing how effective (two-way) KS relations are constituted through the discursive practices of both HCNs and expatriates in ways that are complementary, mutually reinforcing, and transformational.

1. Introduction

The international management (IM) literature has come to consider knowledge management as a key source of competitive advantage for global organisations (Gupta and Govindarajan, 2000; Ruisala and Smale, 2007). Expatriate assignments, in particular, have been identified as an important international knowledge transfer strategy (Hocking et al., 2004; Ruisala and Suutari, 2004). Expatriates can play a valuable role in developing the capacity of host-country national (HCN) staff while, at the same time, acquiring local HCN knowledge and feeding it back to other units through reverse knowledge transfer (Li and Scullion, 2010).

However, in spite of the recurring emphasis on the strategic importance of knowledge transfer, surprisingly little is known about the development of productive knowledge sharing (KS) relationships between individual expatriates and HCNs (Bonache and Zárraga-Oberty, 2008). The question of 'how knowledge integration unfolds on a micro-level and how it is constituted by the interaction between specific actors' (Becker-Ritterspach, 2006, p. 360) remains poorly understood. This is particularly important given the cultural differences, language barriers and power differentials that shape HCN-expatriate interactions (Hong and Snell, 2008; Peltokorpi, 2006; Peltokorpi and Clausen, 2014). A number of authors have thus called for research that examines more closely the social processes and practices involved in developing productive KS relationships (Becker-Ritterspach, 2006; Harzing and Noorderhaven, 2009; Hong et al., 2009). This includes a better understanding of how expatriates and HCNs negotiate cultural

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differences and power asymmetries (Hong and Snell, 2008; Primecz et al., 2011) when 'translating foreign knowledge and putting it into local use' (Hong et al., 2009, p. 540). In other words, how do the participants develop and sustain KS relationships in which expatriate *and* HCN knowledge are combined to address locally situated challenges and problems?

In this paper, we seek to address the above question by examining the *communicative practices* and *power dynamics* involved in facilitating productive intercultural KS relationships between expatriates and HCNs. Using a 'practice-based' theoretical lens which conceptualises KS as a process in which individuals need to actively participate and communicate to develop shared meanings (Gherardi, 2000, 2006; Hislop, 2013; Nicolini et al., 2003b; Wenger, 1998), we report on an empirical field study that examined the experiences of 20 Australian expatriates and 23 Vietnamese HCNs in intercultural relationships where KS was central; specifically, expatriate and HCN development workers involved in capacity development relationships in local (host) organisations.

The theoretical and practical contributions of our paper lie in three main areas. First, we offer an application of the practice-based lens to the study of intercultural KS relationships in international assignments from which we develop a new theoretical model of effective intercultural KS relationships. The model identifies three stages of development of the KS relationship and advances empirically testable propositions on the *communicative practices* that enable productive intercultural KS. Second, unlike other studies that have focused on the experiences of expatriates as suppliers of 'expert' knowledge, we include both expatriate and HCN perspectives in our analysis. Our findings extend current (expatriate-centred) research by demonstrating the ways in which communication practices, enacted by both HNCs and expatriates, are *mutually reinforcing* in the development of productive KS relations. Third, our study's findings call into question the narrow use of 'static', resource-based views of power in extant intercultural knowledge management and IM research. We examine power as a *relational force* thereby offering a better understanding of the ways in which power relations are discursively enacted and (re-)negotiated between expatriates and HCNs as their KS relationship unfolds.

The paper is structured as follows: Part 2 outlines our conceptual framework and reviews the literature on intercultural KS relationships between expatriates and HCNs. Part 3 outlines the research setting and methods used. Drawing on interview data, part 4 discusses the stages and practices involved in rendering KS productive in (intercultural) HCN-expatriate relationships. Part 5 offers a conclusion outlining theoretical contributions, practical implications, and also highlights limitations and areas for future research.

2. Literature review and conceptual framework

Research in cross-cultural (knowledge) management has been dominated by functionalist and essentialist research paradigms that view culture as 'a relatively stable, homogeneous, internally consistent system of distinctive assumptions, values and norms, which can be objectively described … something that members of a group, an organisation, or a nation have or bear collectively' (Gertsen and Søderberg, 2000, cited in Holden, 2002, p. 27–28). This prevalent notion of culture as a shared system of beliefs and values has led to 'cross-cultural' KS research that – guided by cultural taxonomies (e.g. Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 1980; Hofstede, 2010; Triandis, 1995) – is focused on testing (a priori defined) differences between cultural groups (Ardichvili et al., 2006; Boh et al., 2013; Ma et al., 2014; McAdam et al., 2012). Research, from this perspective, is predisposed to foreground cultural barriers and/or 'cultural distance' (Stahl and Caligiuri, 2005) among actors.

More recently, a growing body of research has begun to question the use of functionalist and essentialist perspectives, suggesting that such approaches are ill-equipped to account for the increasing cultural complexity that characterises the new international business landscape (Bjerregaard et al., 2009; Holden, 2002; Holden et al., 2015; Primecz et al., 2011; Søderberg and Holden, 2002). Approaches that consider culture as a decontextualised and stable variable are seen as particularly problematic in the context of intercultural encounters where interactions yield changes that may alter the participants' perceptions and the nature of their relationship (Bjerregaard et al., 2009, p. 208). In the context of HCN-expatriate interactions, specifically, a focus on country-level differences may help to understand initial barriers or points of conflict, but may do little to explain how the participants develop productive KS relations over time. Thus, the sustained influence of the static view on culture in IM has overshadowed an exploration of the practices that enable KS (and thereby the emergence of knowing) in HCN-expatriate relations.

In recent years, the so-called 'practice-turn' (Schatzki et al., 2001) in the wider social sciences has begun to transform the way issues of knowledge and knowledge work are conceived in management studies (e.g. Bechky, 2003; Blackler, 1995; Cook and Brown, 1999; Nicolini et al., 2003b; Gherardi, 2000, 2006, 2009; Nicolini, 2012; Østerlund and Carlile, 2005; Wenger, 1998). While practice-based studies constitute by no means a homogeneous field (for overviews, see Nicolini et al., 2003a; Nicolini, 2012), three shared principles of practice-based theorising may be seen to underpin this transformation (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011). These include the view that situated practices are implicated in the production of social structures; a rejection of dualisms (e.g. mind and body, cognition and action); and an ontology that considers social phenomena (e.g. knowledge, practices, culture, power) in relationships of mutual constitution. In applying a practice-based theoretical lens (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011; Gherardi, 2009; Nicolini, 2012) to the study of intercultural[1] HCN-expatriate KS relationships we shed particular light on: (1) KS as an intercultural communication practice, (2) the social and transformational nature of KS relationships as an 'ongoing accomplishment', and (3) the power dimension (asymmetries) of intercultural KS relationships. Each of these features is discussed briefly below.

2.1. Knowledge sharing as an intercultural communication practice

A practice-based lens draws attention to what people construct as relevant and perform habitually in specific domains or 'fields' of

[1] In this paper, we use the term 'intercultural KS' rather than 'cross-cultural KS' to signal our relational and interaction-focused, rather than comparative perspective.

practice (Bourdieu, 1990; Nicolini et al., 2003a). It shifts the focus from the *etic* study of the 'impact' of (pre-hypothesised) cultural differences on KS to the *emic* study of KS as an intercultural and discursive practice. By the latter we mean a focus on the regular and sustained ways of communicating that practitioners identify and construct as relevant in the development of knowledge in their intercultural collaboration. 'Knowledge' is here understood as the competence to enact *knowing* and participate skilfully in a specific context of relational forces and dependencies (Cook and Brown, 1999; Gherardi, 2000, 2006; Orlikowski, 2002; Østerlund and Carlile, 2005), rather than as a discrete object that is transferred from a sender to a receiver. Viewed this way, productive KS relations involve a communicative process of establishing 'shared meaning whereby … mutually dependent parties adapt to one another to generate common knowledge' (Ferguson and Taminiau, 2014, p. 903). From a practice-based perspective, such relations (and their outcomes) are not only 'social' accomplishments (Blackler, 1995; Nicolini et al., 2003a), but also interwoven with practitioners' identities (Wenger, 1998), i.e. they involve a process of *becoming* a competent intercultural practitioner.

Culture, in this conceptual framework, is viewed as 'rays of interconnected practices', interwoven with different social categories (e.g. gender, age) and axes of power, rather than a coherent system of meaning (Bauman, 1973; Jensen, 2015). This view brings to the foreground not just norms that differ and may create barriers in intercultural communication but also the practices that are shared and/or developed reciprocally over time. This perspective offers a new way of thinking about intercultural KS relationships, as the role of (country-level) cultural standards is neither presupposed nor ignored. For instance, prior research has repeatedly drawn attention to the impact of Eastern cultural norms such as in-group orientation (Ardichvili et al., 2006; Chow et al., 2000; Peltokorpi, 2006), high context communicative norms (Ardichvili et al., 2006; Li, 2011; Michailova and Hutchings, 2006; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Peltokorpi, 2006), and high power distance (Boh et al., 2013; Peltokorpi, 2006; Yoo and Torrey, 2002) as factors that affect the extent to which knowledge is willingly and openly shared with Western 'outsiders'. A practice-based theoretical perspective extends these insights by giving attention to actors' situated interpretations and practices (Gherardi, 2000, 2006), which includes an interest in the local construction of (more widely dispersed) cultural norms if and when they are deemed important in the context of interaction. As such, our interest in the study of KS lies in the interactive communication practices that actors identify as relevant in developing shared understanding and in (thereby) developing the competence to enact or realise new forms of knowing.

2.2. Knowledge sharing as inherently social and transformational

A fundamental principle of practice theorising is that 'everyday actions are consequential in producing the structural contours of social life' (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011, p. 1241). In contrast to a perspective of cultural determinism (Hofstede, 1980, 2010; Triandis, 1995), this view positions actors simultaneously as social products and agents: i.e., individuals are seen as being heavily influenced by norms of 'appropriate performance' constituted by the existing structures and discourses into which they have been socialised, as well as being afforded with the capability to reflexively adjust to cultural difference (Jensen, 2015). The focus of research is here on the 'doings and sayings' (Schatzki et al., 2001) that actors consider as appropriate (or deviant) in their situated context and the ways in which they negotiate tensions related to different norms of appropriate performance, thereby creating new shared understandings (Jensen, 2015). In an intercultural setting, this principle directs attention towards the everyday practices through which both parties actively co-produce their relations and thereby negotiate what may be referred to as a 'third culture' (Brannen and Salk, 2000; Clausen, 2007). In contrast to the knowledge transfer perspective, the practice lens is thus sensitive to the 'transformation of meanings and practices in learning processes… and their social constitution' (Becker-Ritterspach et al., 2010, p. 9). By focusing on 'what knowledge workers do, rather than what kind of knowledge they possess' (Schultze, 2004, p. 50), the ways in which KS relationships are subject to variation and change over time become visible (Massingham, 2010), including changes in the nature of participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Informed by this view, intercultural KS relationships are seen as two-way relationships that are a) negotiated in relation to both existing and emerging social norms of appropriate performance and b) transformational through interdependent processes of mutual adjustment.

An important benefit of this perspective is that it draws attention to the often-overlooked roles and contributions of HCN staff in intercultural KS relationships. In the past, many studies have excluded HCN perspectives entirely and/or treated HCNs as passive recipients of knowledge (Hsu, 2012; Takeuchi, 2010). More recently, however, IM researchers have begun to address the roles HCNs play in supporting what is (again) conceptualised as successful 'knowledge transfer' in expatriate assignments, (Mahajan and Toh, 2014; Toh, 2007; Toh et al., 2012; Vance et al., 2014; Varma et al., 2009). Toh (2007) and Toh et al. (2012), for instance, highlight the important role of HCNs as 'socialising agents' that help expatriates adjust to the new cultural and organisational context and overcome uncertainty. In addition, Vance et al. (2014, 2009) theorise the various auxiliary roles of HCNs as cultural interpreters, communication managers, information resource brokers, talent developers and change partners. However, collectively, these scholarly contributions remain largely focused on the (subordinate) supporting roles of HCNs in enabling expatriate success, rather than developing a *two-way* perspective of HCN-expatriate relations.

2.3. Knowledge sharing and power

'IM research has recently been characterised as 'power blind' (Primecz et al., 2016; Romani et al., 2011) and, as we would suggest, frequently overlooks how intercultural dynamics are *interwoven* with power relations in ways that cannot be reduced to a single cultural variable (i.e. high – low power distance). Similarly, while practice theorising foregrounds power relations as constitutive elements of social interactions (Nicolini, 2012; Østerlund and Carlile, 2005), practice-based research in the context of situated knowledge (sharing) and learning often downplays or neglects power issues in empirical analysis (Heizmann and Olsson, 2015; Hislop, 2013; Kaerreman, 2010). In this article, we draw on a Foucauldian conception of power (Foucault, 1978, 1980), which alerts

us 'to the centrality of discursive and power phenomena as critical aspects in practice matters' (Nicolini, 2012, p. 198). For Foucault (1978, p. 101) discourse, enacted through communicative practices, 'transmits and produces power'. In other words, rather than a resource that one may possess, power is a relational force that operates through actors' (socially regulated) ways of communicating. It is in that sense that 'power is everywhere' (Foucault, 1978).

Viewed this way, power is an ever-present force in intercultural communication (Romani et al., 2011) and affects how expatriates and HCNs develop and sustain their relationships (Hong and Snell, 2008; Hong et al., 2006; Massingham, 2010). For instance, the literature suggests that 'Western' expatriates are often construed as 'experts' with superior knowledge and skills, underpinned by the view that their relationship with 'Eastern' HCNs is akin to that of a master and apprentice (Massingham, 2010). The resulting power imbalance may lead HCN staff to defer to expatriate authority without offering ideas and feedback of their own and/or to withhold local knowledge due to feelings of resentment (Li, 2010; Peltokorpi, 2006; Toh and DeNisi, 2005). Conversely, in contexts where English language proficiency is generally low, Western expatriates have been found to become dependent on those HCNs proficient in English, often leading to reverse power asymmetries (Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999; Peltokorpi and Vaara, 2014).

A practice-based theoretical perspective turns the focus away from subjective interests of actors in 'wielding' particular forms of power and towards the role that situated discursive practices play in constituting and/or transforming power relations. For instance, actors may communicate in ways that shift existing power relations by engaging in a discourse of 'co-equal partnership' (Hong and Snell, 2008) and creating what Holden (2002) has called a KS 'atmosphere' in which both parties feel psychologically safe to contribute. These discursive practices are seen as being constitutive of (and shaped by) broader regimes of truth (power/knowledge relations) (Foucault, 1978, 1980). In intercultural KS relationships, the ways in which expatriates and HCNs co-produce and negotiate existing power relations through their enactment of specific discursive practices thus become prominent (Nicolini, 2012).

In sum, the practice lens adopted in this paper leads us to be sensitive to the communicative enabling practices, social and transformational dynamics, and power dimensions of intercultural KS relationships between expatriates and HCNs. In the following sections, we present the methods and findings of our study, guided by the following exploratory research questions:

Research question 1: How do expatriates and HCNs communicatively develop and sustain productive intercultural knowledge sharing relationships?

Research question 2: How is power constructed and negotiated as the HCN-expatriate relationship is established and developed?

3. Research setting and methodology

The relatively unexplored nature of intercultural KS from a practice-based perspective and our aim to begin building theory in this area led us to design an inductive, exploratory study. The research design adapted the 'critical incident' technique (Flanagan, 1954) to elicit retrospective accounts of two different specific intercultural KS relationships: one that respondents identified as being memorably effective, and one that they saw as particularly ineffective *in relation to KS* (Chell, 1998). Through these incidents, we were able to examine multiple features of the discursive practices associated with these relationships from the perspective of both expatriates and HCNs. Our sample of KS relationships took place between Australian expatriates and Vietnamese HCNs in Vietnam.

3.1. Research setting

Current research on intercultural KS in the Asia-Pacific region is drawn from just a small number of countries, primarily China and Japan (Ardichvili et al., 2006; W. Li, 2010; Peltokorpi, 2006). We extend this literature by examining intercultural KS in Vietnam, an emerging economy with one of the highest rates of international assignment failure (Brookfield, 2014, 2015). Currently classified as a lower-middle-income nation (World Bank, 2014), Vietnam's economic, health and social indicators have improved dramatically in recent decades, the result of political and economic reforms in the 1980s, the lifting of post-war economic sanctions by the United States Government (1994), membership to the WTO, and sustained foreign aid, receiving > 3% of its GDP (or US$4.1 billion) in development aid annually (OECD-DAC, 2014) for infrastructure, human resource capabilities, and health.

As well as different levels of economic development, the cultures of Australia and Vietnam vary in many ways. Country-level data suggests that Vietnam's culture is more strongly collectivist and hierarchical than Australia's (Hofstede, 2010) and Vietnamese organisations are often found to give emphasis to status and power differentials, as well as to nurturing and supporting social relationships and in-group harmony (Napier, 2005). Similarly, in-group conflict tends to be discouraged or avoided, and communication is typically indirect and context-dependent (Li, 2010; Peltokorpi, 2006).

All KS relationships in this study occurred within the context of international development projects. We actively sought participants from this sector due to the knowledge-intensive[2] nature of their work, which primarily revolved around improving development projects, organisational processes, systems, or the competencies of individuals and teams within a host organisation. All the expatriate placements were underpinned by the principles of interpersonal capacity development, which emphasise working collaboratively with a local counterpart and building on the existing capabilities of local managers and staff. Thus 'horizontal' KS with HCNs was central to the objectives of the placement.

This 'partnership' approach to development was reinforced through the placement structures. Expatriates were embedded in organisations staffed primarily, and usually entirely, by HCNs. Formal structures dictated that expatriates tended to be colleagues or

[2] For the purposes of this research, we follow Alvesson (2004, p. 1) in conceptualising 'knowledge-intensive work' as work revolving predominantly 'around the use of intellectual and analytical tasks', low in routinisation, and requiring 'a degree of creativity and adaptation to specific circumstances'.

peers with HCN counterparts, reporting to a (usually Vietnamese) manager or director. The KS intensity of their role, and their placement within local organisations, necessitated regular interaction between expatriates and HCNs. This, in turn, provided a range of contact experiences from which participants could draw when discussing critical incidents, and which may not be available to participants working in other (e.g. corporate) settings.

3.2. Sample

All participants were recruited through their involvement with an international NGO based in Australia, which oversees temporary expatriate placements in a range of organisations in developing countries. The NGO has managed almost 500 expatriate placements over a 30-year period in Vietnam by matching individual expatriates to placements in partner host organisations. The sampling frame required respondents to have a minimum of 6 months experience working in collaborative intercultural (Australian-Vietnamese) relationships.

The HCN sample (23) consisted of staff from 13 organisations (domestic NGOs, international NGOs, government organisations) that had been approached via the NGO (response rate: 13/16), all of which had hosted multiple Australian expatriates across multiple years. The organisations were chosen because of their proximity to areas (Ha Noi, Da Nang), which enabled the researchers to interview a relatively large number of respondents with some efficiency during the international fieldwork. All respondents had at least 10 months experience working with Australian expatriates and most had experiences with multiple counterparts from which to draw.

For expatriates, participation was sought via email (from the NGO) to individuals who had been on 'active' placements in Vietnam in the 12 months prior (42 in total), with a response rate of 48% (20/42). The expatriates came from corporate, government or NGO roles in Australia. Many had undertaken previous expatriate assignments. All were paid a salary, provided with pre-departure training, relocation costs, and insurance by the NGO (with contributions from the host organisation). All expatriates in the sample met widely-recognised definitions of expatriates; namely, that they temporarily lived and legally worked outside their home country for the duration of the placement (McNulty and Brewster, 2016).

Table 1 summarises key features of the expatriate and HCN samples. It shows that participants came from a range of professions, primarily 'business, human resources and marketing' (13 respondents) and 'management' (8). In combination, participants reported over 95 years' experience (mean = 26.6 months; standard deviation = 20.47 months) working in close intercultural relationships. As Table 1 shows, most KS relationships took place in international NGOs (18/43) or domestic (Vietnamese) NGOs (15/43).

An important feature of any qualitative research is ensuring that responses are accurate and free from response bias like misreporting on sensitive issues (Yin, 2015). Two elements were designed into the study to minimise the risk of response bias. First, the conscious decision was made to choose samples of non-matched rather than matched HCN-expatriate dyads. This decision stemmed from the sensitivity of the subject matter, which required respondents to discuss unfavourable experiences with specific counterparts. In short, we felt that being able to reassure respondents of the anonymity of the (counterpart) subjects of such incidents would

Table 1
Participant and placement details.

	HCN n (%)	Expatriate n (%)
1. Participant gender		
Male	16 (70)	10 (50)
Female	7 (30)	10 (50)
2. Participant profession[a]		
Business, Human Resources and Marketing	9 (39)	4 (20)
Design, Engineering, Science and Transport	1 (4)	4 (20)
Education	2 (9)	4 (20)
Health	2 (9)	2 (10)
Legal, Social and Welfare	3 (13)	3 (15)
Management	6 (26)	3 (15)
3. Assignment duration[b]		
< 12 months	2 (9)	6 (30)
12–24 months	9 (39)	11 (55)
> 24 months	12 (52)	3 (15)
4. Employer organisation (type)		
Domestic NGO	8 (35)	7 (35)
Government	5 (22)	4 (20)
International NGO	10 (43)	9 (45)
5. Interview medium		
Face-to-face	23 (100)	3 (15)
Skype (video)	0 (0)	9 (45)
Telephone	0 (0)	8 (40)

[a] Australian Bureau of Statistics: *Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations* (ANZSCO).
[b] For expatriates this refers to the duration of the expatriate placement. For HCNs, it refers to the duration that the participant worked with an expatriate counterpart.

provide for more frank, complete, and hence valid responses. For the same reason, we specified incidents relating to past, rather than current, experiences in order to reduce the potential for biases associated with duress or embarrassment (Fontana and Frey, 1994). Both decisions were informed by discussions with practitioners, NGO staff, and experienced cross-cultural qualitative researchers (see also Tourangeau and Yan, 2007) and were explicated in the 'human ethics application' approved by the human research ethics committee prior to data collection. While these decisions introduced other potential challenges – e.g. reducing the pool of potential respondents, introducing potential recall biases – we believe they provided a stronger platform for rapport building, trust and open disclosure that contributed to, rather than detracted from, the data quality.

3.3. Data collection

Data were collected during field research in both Australia and Vietnam in 2014. Participants were recruited via email invitations outlining the purpose of the study and requirements on participants, including its voluntary nature. Contact was facilitated via country managers in the international NGO. All participants signed consent forms (available in English and Vietnamese language versions). Expatriate interviews were conducted in the English language. While all HCN participants spoke English as a second language with varying levels of fluency, a Vietnamese-English language translator was used at five interviews at the request of participants to assist the interview process. Digital audio recordings were made of all interviews and later transcribed (ranging from 2384 to 10,143 words).

The semi structured interviews ranged from 40 to 75 min duration, using a variation of the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954). Participants were asked to identify examples of effective and ineffective KS relationships with (expatriate/HCN) counterparts and to describe their experiences with these in their own words. Among the issues discussed were the role of KS to their work, the challenges and enablers of the intercultural KS relationship, and the ways in which participants went about sharing and applying ideas with their counterparts. A copy of the interview schedule is attached at Appendix 1.

The critical incidents described by respondents (86 in total, 43 effective, 43 ineffective) related to two broad categories of capacity development activities. The first set occurred in situations we classify as 'interpersonal capacity development incidents', in which the knowledge sharing was primarily directed at improving the personal knowledge and skills of staff in the host organisation (e.g. discussing improved patient treatment methods, providing developmental feedback on work, mentoring in particular skills). The second group related to incidents during which expatriates and HCNs were directing their capacity development efforts at organisational processes, systems or products/services (e.g. devising policy, reviewing strategies, conducting field work, treating patients). We classify these as 'organisational capacity development incidents'.

3.4. Data analysis

The data were analysed using an inductive approach, guided by the research questions and looking at patterns of themes across the full data set (King and Horrocks, 2010; Miles and Huberman, 1994). Thematic analysis began during data collection, which allowed the researchers to identify emerging themes and follow up on these in subsequent interviews. The final data underwent multiple initial readings by the two lead authors. These led to the development of within-case memos that summarised the experiences of each participant (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Expatriate and HCN data sets were then coded into descriptive and thematic categories for both effective and ineffective relationships. This process led to the creation of first and second level themes (open and axial nodes) that through iteration and refinement formed the basis of our findings. Drawing from the most commonly reported themes (2nd level) and aggregate dimensions (1st level) across the expatriate and HCN data, we identified three expatriate practices (*Tuning in – Eliciting input – Exploring and Integrating*) and three HCN practices (*Orienting – Mediating – Reshaping*) that the participants constructed as relevant in enabling productive KS relationships. To exemplify this process, Tables 2 and 3 present the key dimensions and themes that emerged.

As part of the analysis we also reconstructed the 'process' through which KS unfolded using descriptions provided by participants and punctuated with time markers like adverbs and prepositions (before, after, later, next etc.). This iterative process involved 'constant comparison' between cases (Corbin and Strauss, 2008), as well as cycling back and forth between data, emerging theory, and respondent and placement characteristics (e.g. assignment duration, timing and context of relationship). In examining the emerging time and case-ordered data, we found that specific enabling practices were particularly relevant at specific stages of the relationship and were linked to shifts in the construction of power relations (discussed in more detail in Section 4). To increase the internal validity of these emerging findings, the identified patterns and categories were continuously revisited and crosschecked (a) between the researchers and (b) against the participants' case memos (Miles and Huberman, 1994). As a final means of corroboration, we provided participants with a draft of our findings, along with a request to offer feedback and/or suggestions for amendment (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

4. Findings

While none of the participants described KS as a linear step-by-step process, the data suggested a clear incremental progression through three stages (entry, diagnosis and transformation), which incorporated three enabling dynamics (relationship building, reciprocal learning, and co-construction of knowledge). Each of the phases involved particular discursive practices used by expatriates and HCNs to develop and sustain a more productive KS relationship. Conversely, it was the absence of these practices that characterised relationships that respondents identified as ineffective.

Table 2
Expatriate practices (expatriate and HCN perspectives combined).

Component	Dimensions (level 1)	Most commonly reported themes (level 2)	Sample quotes
'Tune in' *(getting to understand HCN needs and organisational and cultural praxis)*	1.1 Acquiring and disclosing non-work related knowledge (exchanging cultural and personal knowledge)	• Investing communicative energies in relationships rather than focusing on task (relationship work). • Exchanging non-work related information with HCN colleagues, including personal and general cultural details (personal disclosure). • Providing support or expertise to assist HCNs outside work role; for instance, English coaching outside formal work role (discretionary behaviours).	*If you do no work for the first six months, or what we would consider to be work, – if all you do is focus on building a close relationship with the person you're working with and anything you do after that six months is just going to be gold.* (EXP#3)
	1.2 Acquiring knowledge to understand organisation and context	• Taking time to listen, observe and understand HCN staff and the host organisation, including its current capacity levels (context knowledge). • Harvesting information to reduce uncertainty; e.g. being able to ask questions in different ways to get to pertinent information (uncertainty reduction behaviours).	*I said to her [expatriate], 'just go and work as observer for several meetings first, don't contribute anything, just observe, thinking and maybe note things down' … I think it's important for [the expatriate] so they can understand and identify the needs of the counterparts.* (#HCN4)
'Elicit input' *(creating a relationship in which HCNs feel comfortable and are active contributors)*	2.1 Creating a relationship where HCNs feel comfortable contributing knowledge as a peer	• Reinforcing a 'two-way learning' perspective during discussions with HCNs (signalling shared learning). • Demonstrating respect for and willingness to understand HCN perspective (empathetic listening). • Listening closely to HCNs and concept checking ideas to ensure they are understood (active listening).	*It has to be a two-way learning process, your counterparts need to have that sense as well, rather than being the receiver from the benevolent westerner, it's got to be seen as a two-way learning experience.* (EXP#1)
	2.2 Using strategies to build HCN confidence in contributing 'applied' knowledge	• Explicitly validating HCNs' voice (expressing appreciation). • Identifying HCN strengths and inviting contributions in those areas (building on HCNs' strengths). • Inviting and encouraging HCN contributions, particularly in informal situations and styles (elicit input). • Using communicative strategies to assist HCNs from non-English speaking backgrounds; e.g. using 'boundary objects' like whiteboard to facilitate and understand HCNs' contributions (bridging language differences). • Demonstrating sensitivity to HCNs' concerns about loss of face (face work).	*I think just listening to her and reassuring her that she's doing the right thing. Like I was always conscious to say yes you're doing a good job – don't doubt yourself so much … you're doing a great job.* (#EXP17)
'Explore and integrate' *(supporting a genuine exchange of ideas with HCNs as a way to ensure the development of locally relevant knowledge)*	3.1 Sharing knowledge in recipient-oriented ways	• Adjusting how ideas are presented or issues resolved to communicate less directly than normal (indirect communication). • Adjusting how ideas or advice is communicated to make it more acceptable to recipients; e.g. indirect suggestions or questions (suggestive dialogue). • Consulting with HCNs informally prior to introducing new ideas (consulting with HCNs). • Demonstrating the practicality and benefits of ideas to recipients (demonstrating practicality).	*We're often afraid to get their [expatriates'] feedback … sometimes they [local staff] are not happy because the [expatriate] … is too frank, too direct, or too hot tempered.* (#HCN2)
	3.2 Demonstrating flexibility and openness to adapting ideas to ensure local context is considered	• Communicating flexibility in relation to timelines or forms of implementation. • Encouraging and supporting HCNs' efforts to integrate ideas within organisational capacities or cultural characteristics.	*They (expatriates) should be flexible, understanding and listening to the needs of the organisation they work for and the person they're working with.* (#HCN2)

Table 3
HCN practices (expatriate and HCN perspectives combined).

Component	Dimensions (level 1)	Most commonly reported themes (level 2)	Sample quotes
'Orient' *(helping expatriates to feel comfortable in their new environment and supporting their learning about HCN needs and organisational and cultural praxis)*	1.1 Providing information to expatriate to reduce uncertainty and assist adjustment	• Demonstrating sensitivity and empathy to signs that expatriates feel isolated or over-burdened (empathetic behaviours). • Providing explanations of cultural context, norms and behaviours (cultural translation). • Helping expatriates to understand organisational capacity and procedures (organisation socialisation).	*There are a lot of things that they may not understand so I'm going to have to try to find out what is it, what is the specific thing in Vietnam and also in my University and to help them to understand and adapt to the environment.* (HCN#14)
	1.2 Helping make expatriates feel included	• Communicating and engaging with expatriates outside regular work; e.g. during social events, lunches, field trips (socialising behaviours). • Encouraging interactions between expatriates and HCN staff in the organisation (relationship facilitation). • Taking steps to include expatriates as part of the 'team'; e.g. addressing expatriates as members of 'family' or organisation, involving expatriates in formal and informal office meetings (in-group behaviours). • Contributing to an open and friendly information culture (sharing behaviours).	*We try to share as much as possible. For example, with morning tea, one person will sit next to [an expatriate] and try translate briefly about the content, so that we don't make the [expatriate] feel isolated.* (HCN#15)
	1.3 Clarifying shared expectations and roles	• Helping expatriates to understand work roles and objectives (role clarification). • Discussing and resolving misunderstandings about expectations with expatriates and/or managers (expectation clarification).	*Always right at the beginning, we welcome [the expatriate], introducing them to the staff. … I talk with them about the expectations for the position … and when … they need something who they should communicate with who, who they will come to for example.* (HCN#2)
'Mediate' *(supporting expatriates in developing and sharing culturally appropriate ideas)*	2.1 Sharing 'applied' cultural knowledge with expatriates that is specific to the task/project	• Instigating information and feedback on the efficacy or appropriateness of expatriates' practices or ideas (provision of task-specific feedback). • Helping expatriates to understand contextual and cultural factors relevant to their role or the task at hand (task-specific cultural informant).	*She was able to help me and save heaps of time by directing me to specific things that [otherwise] I would still not know about.* (EXP#8)
	2.2 Facilitating expatriates' relationships and ideas with other HCNs (boundary spanning)	• Acting as a language translator for expatriate during discussions with other HCNs (linguistic translation). • Helping other HCN staff to understand expatriates' practices or ideas, and vice versa (knowledge translation). • Advocating for expatriates' practices and ideas with other HCN staff where appropriate (knowledge advocate). • Consulting with other HCN staff about expatriates' practices and ideas (idea consultation).	*He (HCN) played an important role in kind of explaining that perspective to … both the local staff and the building out in the village where this walkway was going to be built. … he was there trying to explain why we were doing it this way.* (EXP#19)
'Reshape' *(participating in a genuine exchange of ideas with expatriates as a way to ensure locally relevant knowledge is developed)*	3.1 Collaborating with expatriate as a peer	• Seeking to understand the value of expatriates' ideas by listening actively, asking questions and clarifying uncertainties (active listening). • Facilitating a shared understanding with expatriates about practices, ideas, and their appropriateness to the organisation. • Being willing to share criticisms or negative feedback (from self and others) with expatriates (proactive feedback provision). • Being willing to proffer ideas and suggestions to expatriates, even if feeling uncertain about how these comments will be received (proactive knowledge-sharing).	*We always have open discussion with the [expatriates] and it's the chance for them to contribute more and to express their ideas and for us to come to an understanding.* (HCN#8)

(continued on next page)

Table 3 *(continued)*

Component	Dimensions (level 1)	Most commonly reported themes (level 2)	Sample quotes
	3.2 Managing conflict	• Communicating with expatriates regularly to ensure misunderstandings or disagreements do not build up (conflict prevention). • Being willing to raise and discuss differences of views with expatriates, rather than avoiding conflict (conflict resolution).	*If we have a different opinion we will talk with each other, feel free to share, try to find the best solution, not keep it in our mind.* (HCN#17)
	3.3 Demonstrating flexibility and openness to adapting ideas to ensure local context is considered	• Adjusting communicative style to present feedback or ideas to expatriates in a more direct manner than usual (direct communication). • Being appreciative of and open to different ways of doing things (openness).	*And maybe the recommendation, the idea, the thought is not suitable to apply into the culture. So I will speak out … bring my thought that maybe can help you to enlarge your mind about the issues.* (HCN#18)

4.1. Entry stage: relationship building

Power asymmetries played an important role in the way expatriates and HCNs described the entry stage of KS relationships. For expatriates, being perceived as 'Western' experts caused barriers in getting to know local staff and thus in coming to learn from their counterparts about the local context.

> At that time … I really understood that there was in fact, in her mind somehow an inequality. I was coming in, I was apparently an expert and she was there to learn whereas I was saying that actually I wanted to learn, I didn't know everything and step one for me had to be that I needed to learn first because how could I make suggestions if I didn't understand what was there in front of me already? (EXP#5)

Perceptions of power differentials could lead to feelings of isolation on the part of expatriates, compounded by issues with settling in, language barriers and an uncertainty about cultural norms and practices. '*As an English speak(er) … I often do not know what is happening; I just don't know*' (EXP#5). Conversely, HCNs frequently expressed a lack of confidence about interacting with Western expatriates and constructed their own status as inferior ('*I think (foreigners are) at a higher level and a little bit scary*', HCN#1). Thus, initially, a sense of uncertainty and psychological distance prevailed on both sides. What differentiated productive from ineffective relationships and helped overcome these initial barriers and difficulties were expatriates' and HCNs' efforts to make each other feel comfortable in the relationship. Each partner played a subtly different role in this: (1) the expatriates demonstrated through their communication behaviour that they were willing to *tune into* the local context and culture, and (2) HCN staff communicated in ways that helped their counterparts to *orient* themselves in the new environment.

4.1.1. Expatriates tuning in

Prominent in responses of both HCNs and expatriates was the importance of expatriates devoting time and effort to *tune into* the new environment at the beginning of their placement, i.e. to develop relationships with locals and build contextual awareness. In effective relationships, this was seen as a necessary precursor to task/project-oriented KS. One feature of this was an adjustment on the part of expatriates to delay immediate assignment objectives and prioritise (at least initially) information seeking and listening to the needs of HCN staff.

> I spent the first couple of months just observing, taking on board what's going on, just slowly building relationships with local counterparts, not really doing anything outlandish … listening and asking questions. (EXP#1)

Supporting this, HCNs frequently emphasised the value of sharing personal and cultural knowledge with expatriates unrelated to their work projects or roles. HCNs described these personal exchanges as an important means of learning about each other, and, as a result, becoming '*comfortable*' in working with foreigners (HCN#1).

> And I think it's good that we had time to talk outside work at the start. … When we do the social activities together, we will discover many things about ourselves and about each other. We will feel happier to work with each other in a more relaxed way. (HCN#9)

> In Vietnam … you need to start building the relationships with people … (without that) you can't do anything in terms of the objectives of an assignment. (EXP#05)

In contrast, in ineffective relationships expatriates were described as too focused on tasks and outcomes, too '*bossy*' or '*arrogant*', and/or too reluctant to give up their expert status ('*Some [expatriates] don't know how to show weakness in front of people … they like to be important. So they want to keep that image.*' (#HCN6). Yet in those cases where expatriate efforts to *tune in* were absent, it was

difficult to achieve good outcomes at a later stage. For instance, one HCN described the case of a relationship where the expatriate had presented himself as an expert on local issues without demonstrating a willingness to initially get to know people, listen and learn about host organisational needs. As a result, his relationships with HCN staff were largely unproductive.

> It's important to respect the community, understand the people, identify the needs of the [HCNs] before you give any suggestions for change. …Many [expatriates] don't believe that and they skip that process; they jump directly into the technical parts and they really want to do something and have some deliverables. But … if you skip that process … the deliverables are not good. (HCN#4)

4.1.2. HCNs orienting

Vietnamese staff played an equally critical role in the entry stage by communicating (verbally and non-verbally) in ways that offered informational and emotional support to expatriates. This came via providing practical information on settling in; connecting expatriates with other staff; and helping them understand the host organisation and its processes. '*She helped me get to know people, direct me to specific resources or information around a particular issue, made sure I was comfortable.*' (EXP#8) In those cases identified as effective by the participants, HCNs clarified shared expectations and roles and actively took steps to include expatriates as part of the 'team'. '*We try to … treat foreigners as local staff, we try to make them feel that they are working in a big family.*' (HCN#17) Thus, HCNs' orienting efforts not only helped expatriates familiarise themselves with their new environment, they also appeared to play a critical role in reducing their outsider status in the host organisation.

Conversely, in KS relations where *orienting* practices were not part of HCNs' communication behaviour, expatriates developed feelings of isolation or boredom and found themselves unable to contribute in a meaningful way. Expatriates identified not only language barriers but also differences in gender and age as a critical underlying issue in this regard. For instance, one female expatriate related the case of a placement where the local manager avoided including her in work meetings and discussions, organising his work in ways that would occur outside of the shared office.

> I realised that he actually didn't trust me in lots of ways … Now in Vietnam of course men are the superior gender in all sorts of ways and so I do think the manager at Da Nang was probably unable to cope with a female who would be at his level and as he would see it, advising him (EXP#5)

Thus, while expatriates were generally constructed as high in status ('*Western experts*'), social norms around gender and power (and in other cases, age and power) could lead to tensions between female expatriates and male HCNs. As in this case, these were rarely openly discussed and yet appeared to play an important role in hindering the development of collaborative KS relationships.

4.2. Diagnosis stage: reciprocal learning

Our analysis suggested that the communicative practices described above (*tuning in* and *orienting*), laid the foundations for a second *diagnostic stage*, which involved both parties' engagement in more work/task-focused conversations that helped the expatriate gain an understanding of local issues. Expatriates and HCNs constructed productive KS relations in this phase as 'two-way' and, yet, achieving this dynamic involved conscious efforts in re-negotiating existing perceptions of power differentials.

> I'm constantly unpacking that terminology to say I've got experiences and knowledge in this area but … you have expertise and knowledge as well. So I'm constantly rearranging that balance because it's handed over to us in, really a … sometimes uncomfortable way. (EXP#12)

Two communication practices, in particular, enabled this important reciprocal learning stage of the KS relationship: (1) Expatriates *eliciting input* from local staff in culturally sensitive ways, and (2) HCN staff *mediating* between expatriate and local perspectives.

4.2.1. Expatriates eliciting input

In those relationships identified as effective, expatriates tended to be proactive in encouraging local staff to put forward ideas and making them feel 'safe' about challenging expatriate ideas without risking a loss of face or breach of social norms.

> It's not a case of Moses coming down from the mountain with the tablets. (HCNs) have the idea about what they want to do … I can say, "This is what I would do in my culture but maybe it won't work in yours, maybe there's a better way to do this; **what do you think, what's your opinion?"** (EXP#3, emphasis added)

We identified a variety of ways expatriates sought to create a 'relationship of equals' (thus gradually shifting extant power dynamics), including explicitly validating their counterparts' ideas, expressing a desire to learn about the local context, and adopting a suggestive style of communication (Girgis, 2007). '*The way I present it is that "this is just a suggestion…have you thought of…?" or "I wonder whether?" or "how about we try this?"*' (EXP#9) Vietnamese staff described this informal approach favourably, particularly when compared to a more top-down advisory strategy: '*He worked with us like a friend really, not an advisor of staff… I learned a lot from him.*' (HCN#18)

In contrast, examples of ineffective KS relations showed that in those cases where power asymmetries were not addressed, HCN staff tended to withdraw from expatriates and sometimes engaged in what was described as '*deceptive*' behaviour by expatriates. For instance, one expatriate recalled an example where a HCN had confided in her about the inappropriate and '*bossy*' attitude of Western expatriates:

She (HCN) said to me: "You know it's very common for us never to pay any attention to foreigners; we just don't, we nod our heads but we don't do anything they say…The way to do it better is not to instruct us in the workplace all together, in a formal way, but just to talk to us as friends and maybe outside the office and then we can listen more to you." (EXP#13)

This comment highlights how public deference to expatriates did not always equate to agreement and/or a follow-through on suggestions.

4.2.2. HCNs mediating

The data also showed that in effective KS relationships, HCN staff contributed prominently to the diagnostic stage by translating and mediating between foreign (expatriate) and local perspectives. HCNs' active contributions at this stage reinforced the importance of locally held knowledge and skills and helped counter tacitly held assumptions about an unequal power relationship where HCNs would play a passive role. The most effective cases surfaced when HCNs were adept at helping expatriates communicate their ideas to local staff and partners.

I helped him understand more about what Vietnamese people think and try to make him see the point of view from the Vietnamese colleagues and what they really thought. … My role at that time was to be some kind of … middle man between [expatriate] and the people in the program area. (HCN#3)

On a basic level, Vietnamese HCNs acted as interpreters for their Australian counterparts. Yet this work transcended mere linguistic translation. HCNs helped expatriates understand which suggestions were appropriate in the local context and how they needed to be framed when interacting with other local staff and partners. '*I have to explain …so that (local partners) don't feel frustrated*' (HCN#22)

She (HCN) is aware of what Vietnamese culture is and what the Western expectations are and she knew what visiting delegates would expect in terms of say for example information support. (EXP#8)

In effective KS relations, HCNs were thus active contributors who clarified differences in cultural frames of reference and helped expatriates promote their ideas in the local context. In contrast, ineffective KS relations were characterised by HCNs not supporting expatriates with (language and cultural) translations, thus creating a reverse power dynamic where expatriates felt excluded. For instance, an expatriate recalled '*frustrations*' and difficulties in contributing to local meetings in the absence of HCNs adopting a mediating role. '*The Vietnamese would break into Vietnamese (language), clearly because they thought they could move the discussion along faster and we foreigners would sit there looking dazed or uncomfortable or sometimes bored.*' (EXP#16)

4.3. Transformational stage: co-construction of knowledge

The previous stages allowed expatriates to build relationships with locals and gain increasingly tacit cross-cultural know-how (Holden, 2002) about the host organisation, its people and its needs. Drawing on our data, we define the third stage of the KS relationship as transformational, characterised by task and/or project-oriented communication between expatriates and HCNs that often led to the generation of new approaches and ideas, drawing from the cultural perspectives of both participants.

There was sort of the clash of the cultures, where we … we talked and we discussed it, discussed it from our cultural standpoints and then came to, what we thought was the best conclusion and then moved forward. (EXP#4)

Given the problem-focused nature of these interactions, this was also a stage in which 'productive differences' (Gergen et al., 2004) needed to surface. This was achieved with greater ease in relationships where expatriates and HCNs had previously re-negotiated power imbalances and where the relationship was evolving towards a co-equal learning partnership (stages 1 and 2). We identified two discursive practices, in particular, that characterised productive KS relations between expatriates and HCNs at this stage: (1) expatriates *exploring* and *integrating* jointly-constructed ideas, and (2) HCN staff *reshaping* recommendations in ways that made them applicable to the local context.

4.3.1. Expatriates exploring and integrating

In productive KS relationships, expatriates generally adopted a collaborative approach that led to the shared creation of context-specific knowledge between expatriates and HCNs. For expatriates, this required adjusting their communication style (i.e. sharing knowledge in suggestive, informal, and/or less direct ways), consulting with HCNs and regularly seeking their feedback. By way of example, one participant had been working for a grassroots NGO that trained disadvantaged youth in repairing motorcycles. His account highlighted a circular process of exploring, exchanging ideas, and learning by doing that led to continuous improvements:

'I would talk to the staff, I would observe what they were doing, I would prepare the training plan and give it to (counterpart) to vet, who would then actually run lessons as pilot lessons before they were set in concrete. We'd then get feedback from the staff and use it to make things better.' (EXP#9)

The accounts of local staff suggested that HCNs valued this collaborative communication approach where expatriates introduced new ideas while staying flexible and open to alternative cultural views and suggestions by HCN staff.

In contrast, where expatriates did not demonstrate such flexibility and openness, feelings of resentment about the (implicit) power imbalance tended to surface ('*You advise me, I can hear you, I'm not happy with this situation but I have to listen to you because you come*

from Australia, right?', HCN#6), often leading Vietnamese staff to withdraw from joint discussions or work and/or engage in delaying tactics without explanation. While HCN staff adopted these strategies to avoid '*offending the foreigner*' (and protect face), this led to unproductive KS relations where expatriates were left investing energy and time in solutions that were unlikely to be adopted by HNC staff. In these circumstances, expatriates often attributed cause to (macro-level) cultural differences:

> Expats call Vietnamese a 'Yes/No' society. Vietnamese in being polite will say 'Yes', but what they are saying yes to is 'Yes I understand you'. We misinterpret this as 'We agree with you'. So you'll go through this long process of getting their agreement for something and think that they are agreeing, but when it comes to doing something they'll say 'No'. (EXP#11)

4.3.2. HCN staff re-shaping

While expatriates were normally the ones initiating ideas and suggestions, HCNs played an important role in directing how these could be practically applied in the host organisation. In effective KS relationships, this involved refining and reshaping the expatriates' knowledge and ideas so that they were more congruent with the local context, thus leading to new (co-constructed) solutions:

> They bring their knowledge from the West… they develop a plan with our staff … a recommendation for how to improve the services at this program. But sometimes the staff think 'No, this is too much. This is completely new for Vietnamese people and it's hard to apply into the Vietnamese community'… Then we discuss together … until everyone understands … what our aim is. And then we can all come together with a new way. (HCN#18)

However, examples of ineffective KS relations showed that, to succeed, this required a willingness to instigate conflict and/or express disagreement in communication with expatriates if necessary. For instance, a Vietnamese participant related how an educational psychologist had sought to introduce a '*pillow fighting game*' as part of an educational camp developed for HIV-positive children. This form of '*aggressive*' play was seen as inappropriate by Vietnamese staff who resolved to adopt a more '*peaceful*' version of the game:

> In Vietnam it's not really good for the children. … [So] instead of implementing the pillow game we changed it – okay we can use the pillow – but [we will] not use the pillow for fighting … [we will] just sit here and talk to each other. (HCN#1)

In this instance, while HCNs had found a more appropriate local solution, they had also avoided direct confrontation with expatriates and thus prevented a more genuine *shared* understanding in subsequent activities. In contrast, in cases of productive KS relations local staff openly shared their views with expatriates, even if these differed from Western standpoints: '*in Vietnamese culture we are very hesitant to give negative comments … but after a long time working with [a Western counterpart] I learnt how to (do that).*' (HCN#3)

5. Discussion and conclusions

Drawing from our practice-based theoretical framework, the primary contribution of this study is an extension of the limited empirical foundations addressing the practices and processes of intercultural knowledge sharing (KS) relationships over time. The study does this by employing a relatively unique research design – notably, by focusing on micro-level communicative practices and relational dynamics of a sample of distinctively 'knowledge-intensive' HCN-expatriate collaborations – that enabled 'up-close' analysis of 86 effective and ineffective intercultural KS relationships. The results of this analysis, summarised in Fig. 1, lead us to propose an empirically-derived model of the communicative relations and power dynamics of effective (East-West) HCN-expatriate KS relationships. The model is grounded in and offers particular insights into intercultural KS relationships between (Australian) expatriates and (Vietnamese) HCNs in Vietnam. Collectively, our findings showed that effective intercultural KS relations in this context took the form of an incremental progression through three stages (entry, diagnosis and transformation), which incorporated three enabling dynamics (relationship building; reciprocal learning, and co-construction of knowledge). Our findings suggest that these dynamics help sustain and foster productive KS relations and may be activated by specific communicative practices on the part of both expatriates and HCNs. The data also highlight the important role of power asymmetries at the outset of HCN-expatriate relations and the ways in which these were constructed and (re-)negotiated over the course of the relationships.

5.1. Theoretical implications

At a holistic level, the model extends intercultural KS literature beyond uni-directional conceptions of knowledge 'transfer' and static national-level cultural differences (Bjerregaard et al., 2009). It does this by revealing intercultural KS to be a distinctly *communicative* process that progresses through multiple stages, each advanced by a range of discursive practices that gradually transform the KS relationship. The model further provides a more *balanced* understanding of the expatriate and HCN practices that make up the building blocks of effective intercultural KS relationships, and explains how these work *reciprocally* to create a productive KS atmosphere (Holden, 2002) that allow genuine two-way KS to flourish. Finally, the findings that underpin the model illustrate empirically the important role of power as a *relational force* in intercultural KS relations, thereby responding to recent calls to address the prevailing 'power blindness' in IM research (Primecz et al., 2016; Romani et al., 2011) and (practice-based) studies in the field of knowledge (Heizmann and Olsson, 2015; Hislop, 2013).

In the following sections, we build on the contributions described above to develop more specifically three distinct themes in our

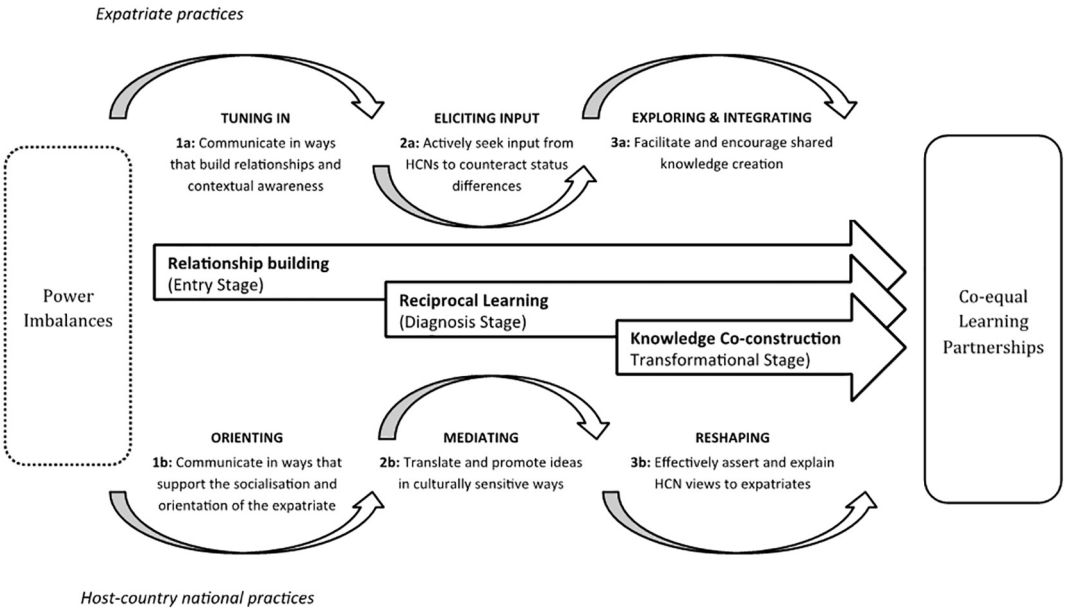

Fig. 1. Communicative relations and power dynamics of effective intercultural knowledge sharing relationships.

analysis, each explicating fresh insights about the communicative practices that enable intercultural (East-West) KS relationships by buttressing: (a) the foundational role of relationship building to the trust and openness that underpins KS roles, (b) the creation of 'co-equal' learning partnerships through discursively addressing power differentials, and (c) the two-way (rather than one-way) co-construction of knowledge between HCNs and expatriates. From these, we distil a series of propositions, labelled in Fig. 1, that represent a nascent step towards theory building in this area.

5.1.1. Relationship building as a foundation

A key finding was the importance of communicative practices that led to relationship building and improved contextual awareness at the outset of (East-West) intercultural KS relations. In ineffective KS relations, HCNs kept expatriates at a distance and refrained from exchanging cultural, personal, and organisational knowledge. In part, this finding can be seen in the light of previous research on East-West KS relations (Ardichvili et al., 2006; Li, 2011; Ma et al., 2014; Moeller and Svahn, 2004; Peltokorpi, 2006), which highlights norms of in-group orientation in collectivist cultures that lead to a common reluctance to share knowledge with Western 'outsiders'. Similarly, competency gaps in the shared language used, concerns for face and perceptions of power distance have also been previously highlighted as important barriers to East-West KS (Ardichvili et al., 2006; Ford and Chan, 2003; Li, 2010, 2011; Peltokorpi, 2006; Yoo and Torrey, 2002). However, the practice-based lens adopted in this paper offers insight beyond 'static' cultural norms and barriers, which reinforce the notion of culture (and language) as a problem variable (Holden, 2002). Our findings show how in productive KS relations, expatriates and HCNs engaged in reciprocal communication practices (*tuning in – orienting*) that allowed them to become familiar with each other and build an 'atmosphere' conducive to KS (Holden, 2002). Expatriates could thereby be seen to consciously cast off their expert status and assume the role of novice learners (i.e. enter a state of legitimate peripheral participation) in the local communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). This required not only a willingness to observe, listen and ask questions, but also to prioritise relationship building over task outcomes (Gesteland, 2012). Conversely, Vietnamese HCNs played a key role as 'socialising agents' (Toh, 2007), communicating in ways that alleviated uncertainty and helped expatriates adjust to the host organisational environment (Bakel et al., 2015). The participants' inferences suggest that this reduced the expatriates' initial outsider status and laid the groundwork for the development of 'co-equal' learning partnerships (Holden, 2002; Hong and Snell, 2008). Collectively, we contend that the reciprocal practices at this stage acted as social foundation or 'glue' for the development of new forms of 'knowing' (Nicolini et al., 2003a) at later stages. Our findings thus lead us to make the following propositions:

Proposition 1a. East-West KS relationships will be more effective when expatriates engage initially in communicative practices that build relationships and contextual awareness.

Proposition 1b. East-West KS relationships will be more effective when HCNs communicate in ways that support the socialisation and orientation of the expatriate during the early phases of the relationship.

5.1.2. Development of co-equal learning partnerships

Our study further contributes to an emerging body of literature that sheds light on power imbalances in intercultural relations in ways that go beyond prescriptive notions of 'power distance' (Hong and Snell, 2008; Primecz et al., 2016; Romani et al., 2011). While

our findings reflect extant KS research in highlighting the important role of perceived power differences as a barrier to intercultural KS (Ford and Chan, 2003; Peltokorpi, 2006; Yoo and Torrey, 2002), we extend this research by drawing attention to the more complex power dynamics and shifts that KS relationships undergo as they unfold.

Discursive constructions of power differentials along the lines of a master-apprentice dynamic (Massingham, 2010) resulted in Vietnamese HCNs initially positioning expatriates as 'Western experts' and in turn lacking *confidence* in offering contributions of their own (Napier, 2005). At the same time, we also observed reverse power dynamics where HCNs were seen to enact power attached to other social categories (e.g. gender, age) which left expatriates unable to contribute knowledge in meaningful ways. Power imbalances were thus a common feature of ineffective KS relations in the participants' accounts. Importantly, however, our findings also showed how a range of communicative practices could help renegotiate these existing perceptions of power asymmetries. For instance, expatriates were able to proactively foster the development of informal learning partnerships by communicating in ways that built HCN confidence and counteracted perceived status differences (Mahajan and Toh, 2014; Peltokorpi, 2006). Further to this, HCNs helped reduce existing power differentials by acting as 'cultural interpreters' (Vance et al., 2009) for expatriates and thereby not only assuming an important 'boundary spanning' function (Kostova and Roth, 2003) but also contributing to (and co-producing) a relationship of equals (Hong and Snell, 2008). Thus, while the high power distance orientation in Vietnam reported at the national level (Hofstede, 2010) implies a cultural preference for 'top-down' advisory communication, our findings suggest a more complex interrelationship between cultural values, discursive practices practices and power in intercultural KS relationships. This leads us to propose the following:

Proposition 2a. East-West KS relationships will be more effective when expatriates actively seek input from HCN staff using strategies such as (informal) suggestive dialogue that counteract perceived status differences.

Proposition 2b. East-West KS relationships will be more effective when HCNs engage in boundary-spanning communication by translating and promoting expatriate ideas in culturally sensitive ways.

5.1.3. From knowledge transfer to knowledge co-construction

Much of the writing on HCN-expatriate KS relationships privileges expatriates as suppliers of expert knowledge – viewing knowledge sharing as the transfer of knowledge objects from expatriates to HCNs (Jiacheng et al., 2010; McAdam et al., 2012; Moeller and Svahn, 2004). In contrast, our findings suggest that effective intercultural KS relationships are developed over time through a series of interactive communication practices, which, reciprocally, give rise to collaborative relations in which knowledge is *co-constructed* (Gherardi, 2000, 2006). This involved the development of a negotiated 'third culture' (Brannen and Salk, 2000; Clausen, 2007) of co-equal learning partners, which underpinned the transformational stage of productive KS relations. The important contribution of a practice-based lens is here that knowledge sharing and learning are viewed as 'social' activities, which may only be achieved through active participation of the parties involved (Blackler, 1995; Nicolini et al., 2003a; Wenger, 1998). Indeed, in productive KS relations, HCNs were not just passive recipients of Western knowledge but played an active role at different stages: i.e. by initially orienting and socialising expatriates (Toh, 2007; Toh et al., 2012), by acting as 'cultural interpreters' who mediated between foreign and local knowledge, thereby assisting the diagnosis of local issues (Vance et al., 2014, 2009), and finally, by acting as 'change partners' (Vance et al., 2014, 2009) that helped reshape knowledge in ways that made it applicable to the local context. HCNs' contributions thus went beyond a mere supporting role as productive KS relations involved the *shared* creation of culturally appropriate solutions that combined the generic professional expertise of the expatriate with the cultural and contextual knowledge of HCNs. Consequently, the model presented in Fig. 1 places the focus not primarily on the agency of expatriates as 'knowledge disseminators', nor on the 'absorptive capacity' of HCNs in receiving knowledge, but on the *interactions* between the two parties and the interdependent *discursive practices* that enable competent knowing and doing (Cook and Brown, 1999; Gherardi, 2006).

Our (practice-based) analysis extends previous research in this vein (Toh, 2007; Toh et al., 2012; Vance et al., 2014, 2009) by suggesting that, while expatriates and HCNs played subtly different roles at each of the identified stages, the communicative practices they engaged in were *mutually reinforcing* in the establishment and maintenance of productive KS relationships; and manifested a trajectory of *becoming* competent as intercultural practitioners through a series of relational adjustments (Jensen, 2015; Østerlund and Carlile, 2005; Wenger, 1998). Indeed, while the participants' accounts manifested prior socialisation into social norms of 'appropriate performance' (e.g. HCNs not being comfortable with asserting their views directly, expatriates initially communicating in task-oriented ways), they also demonstrated the capability to reflexively adapt to cultural differences (Jensen, 2015). In the transformational stage of intercultural KS relationships, this required two-way adjustments in the communication practices of expatriates and HCNs, leading us to propose the following:

Proposition 3a. East-West KS relationships will be more effective when expatriates are able to communicate in recipient-oriented ways that facilitate the shared creation of knowledge between expatriates and HCNs.

Proposition 3b. East-West KS relationships will be more effective when HCNs are able to effectively assert and explain their views to expatriates.

5.2. Practical implications

In spite of the importance attributed to knowledge transfer for the success of multinational enterprises, existing knowledge-based approaches neglect the relational and communicative dimensions of KS that may undermine broader 'knowledge transfer' objectives.

Our findings provide an impetus to redress this by offering insights into the ways in which management may encourage and facilitate the type of communication and interaction processes that will help to improve HCN – expatriate knowledge sharing.

We focus our discussion here on two important managerial implications. First, the stages and enabling practices outlined in Fig. 1 provide a framework for organisations to examine and improve their HCN-expatriate KS relationships. This includes guiding principles that might be used to facilitate effective (and prevent ineffective) HCN-expatriate KS relationships, as well as specific communication practices that could form the basis of expatriate and HCN selection (Waxin and Panaccio, 2005; Zhang, 2012) and/or training in relation to explicit knowledge objectives, increasingly important for MNEs (Harzing et al., 2015; Li and Scullion, 2010). In this regard, our results extend well-established information about East-West cultural differences (e.g. relationship- vs. task-focus) to include elements such as the renegotiation of power dynamics, the establishment of a reciprocal learning culture, and the skills and techniques to achieve both. For instance, our findings show that the adoption of a top-down knowledge transfer approach can create resistance among HCN staff and undermine the successful implementation of ideas and recommendations. Thus, expatriates may benefit from pre-departure training programs that raise awareness of power asymmetries and teach communication techniques like suggestive dialogue (Girgis, 2007) to elicit suggestions from counterparts (stage 2).

Second, our findings suggest that equal care should be taken in preparing HCNs for the arrival of and collaboration with expatriates. Indeed, HCNs have been 'overlooked and underutilised' by multinational organisations (Mahajan and Toh, 2014, p. 484). Their role in enabling KS processes via socialising, mediating and reshaping foreign knowledge therefore warrants more explicit consideration in the HRM practices of international NGOs and firms (Mahajan and De Silva, 2012; Mahajan and Toh, 2014; Toh et al., 2012). Targeted cross-cultural training for HCNs prior to the arrival of expatriates might include insights on the expatriates' cultural background, common expatriate and HCN challenges, and training designed to build confidence in communicating with expatriates (e.g. assertiveness skills, advanced language training). Perhaps most importantly, it should also include raising awareness of the different 'roles' HCNs play at different stages of the relationship, and so reinforce their own contributions to the collaboration's success.

5.3. Future research

While empirically derived, the tentative model of effective intercultural KS relations introduced here requires further theoretical refinement. In particular, we propose two additional lines of research that build on our initial theoretical platform. First, while our interviews unearthed the sequential aspects of the intercultural KS relationship, longitudinal research is needed to further explore and test the relationship between the dyadic practices and its temporal dimensions. Such research may find nuances and variations that we have not been able to verify with our inductive approach. For instance, our findings indicate an incremental progression through different stages of the KS relationship between expatriates and HCNs. However, rather than being a uni-directional progression, it is feasible that particular stages may need to be revisited at different times as the relationship develops; for instance, rebuilding trust or gaining a more thorough understanding of specific problems (Napier, 2005). Similarly, it is likely that the participants' motivations, attributes and experiences (e.g. willingness to adjust and/or re-negotiate power, language fluency, prior cultural and intercultural socialisation experiences) will affect the nature or speed of progression through the KS stages. For example, it is possible that Australian expatriates were particularly prone to deploying status minimisation strategies in their communication as a feature of their egalitarian home culture orientation (Hofstede, 2010). While our focus was on the situated practices in which the participants engaged, further research is thus needed to ascertain the degree to which differences in participants' motivations and cultural orientations affect the intercultural KS dynamics.

Second, our purposive sample consisted of Australian expatriates and Vietnamese HCNs working in the field of development cooperation, chosen because of the knowledge-intensive nature of their relationships. However, features of this sample may limit the transferability of our findings to other settings. For instance, it is feasible that the sample perceived power asymmetries as particularly pertinent given the broader circuits of resource-dependency in which development practitioners operate (Contu and Girei, 2014; Ferguson et al., 2010). Future research is needed to examine the study's propositions in a range of professional settings where KS is valued, including corporate and government workers. On this point, while our focus has been on the intra-relationship factors involved, these unfold within an open system. The external environment introduces enablers and constraints that can influence the nature of the relationship. Thus, future research may consider expanding the scope of the study to incorporate variables at the team, subsidiary and organisation level.

Appendix 1. Interview schedule

1. **Interview administration and permissions** (introductions, overview of interview structure and objectives of the interview, importance of confidentiality, security; independence of researchers, concept check (of understanding) and permissions (sign consent form), questions/issues before starting).
2. **Overview of critical incident technique** (defining critical incident for respondents and purpose, identification of 2 x critical incidents)
3. **Critical incident discussion (repeated × 2 – one positive, one negative)**
   a. **Brief overview of incident** (respondents' description, own words)
   b. **About the relationship:** Characteristics of roles and responsibilities, extent and nature of interaction (e.g. frequency, context, long/short term)
   c. **Factors that influenced the relationship**: Main factors contributing to relationships (challenges/enablers at individual,

situational, external levels)

d. **Impact on you:** Type and extent of knowledge sharing (examples), impact on you and ways you perform your work (e.g. learning/positive changes; stresses/negative changes), supporting evidence
e. **Impact on the project, organisations, interactions with others:** Influence on performance, evidence of impact; capacity building outcomes
f. **Improving knowledge sharing:** Based on experience, suggestions to improve or support
g. **Additional background information:** Clarify missing contextual detail, as required

——————————— [opportunity for break at end of first incident if desired] ———————————

4. **Wrap up** (additional information: important detail that we have missed, reiterate confidentiality/security, outstanding questions or concerns, what happens next)

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