

**Host country nationals' cross-cultural adjustment:
Their exchange relationship with expatriates and its spillovers**

Professor Snejina Michailova

Business School, The University of Auckland

s.michailova@auckland.ac.nz

Dr Anthony Fee

UTS Business School, University of Technology Sydney

anthony.fee@uts.edu.au

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ABSTRACT

Host-country nationals (HCNs) can experience cross-cultural adjustment as a consequence of their regular and sustained interaction with their expatriate colleagues. HCNs' adjustment patterns are distinct and worthy of investigation in their own right. Through the lens of social exchange theory, we analyse how HCNs, without changing their geographical and organisational location, can be targets of adjustive pressures and how HCNs' adjustment (or lack thereof) spills over to their relationships with co-workers and families. We conclude by outlining the research and practice implications of our theorising.

Keywords: host country nationals, cross-cultural adjustment, host country nationals' cross-cultural adjustment, exchange relationship, social exchange theory

INTRODUCTION

Over the last four decades or so, the International Management literature on cross-cultural adjustment (CCA) has overwhelmingly focused on expatriates (Malek et al., 2015). This is not surprising, bearing in mind that CCA is said to be felt most acutely by those who relocate physically to an unfamiliar cultural environment (e.g. Dabic et al., 2015). This expatriate-centric view has continuously overlooked the fact that CCA can occur in “both groups” coming into contact (Redfield et al., 1936: 147). Indeed, CCA encompasses processes and/or results of changes experienced by an individual whose primary learning occurred in one culture, but who begins to take on traits of another culture, typically resulting from sustained intercultural contact (Ward, et al., 2001) and this is not limited to the individual who relocates physically.

The present paper turns the light on host country nationals (HCNs). Instead of treating them as actors who support expatriates' CCA, we investigate how HCNs, without changing their geographical and organisational location, can be targets, knowingly or otherwise, of adjustive pressures as a result of engaging in regular and sustained intercultural interaction with their expatriate colleagues. Our conjecturing provides important counterbalances to the prevailing focus of CCA literature which has emphasised physical mobility as the trigger for adjustment – from “a familiar setting [...] (to) [...] an unfamiliar one” (Black et al., 1991: 301). We argue that HCNs can experience psychological and sociocultural disruptions that are akin to a form of ‘HCN CCA’. By treating HCN CCA as a phenomenon of interest in its own right and articulating some of the adjustment experiences of HCNs in unfamiliar social but not physical environments, we respond to calls that advocate for greater attention to the experiences of HCNs as focal persons in research (Takeuchi, 2010) and to recent invitations to explore how HCNs experience various forms of cultural disruption (Smale et al., 2015).

We treat an individual's CCA as sociocultural and psychological processes that result from intercultural exchange, and utilise social exchange theory (Homans 1958) to understand HCN CCA in particular. Theoretical and empirical interest in social exchange has tended to emphasise direct dyadic relationships and we follow this tradition by theorising HCN CCA as emerging from an exchange

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relationship with expatriates. Social exchange theory offers a valuable lens for examining the ways that the adjustment contributions of one party in an exchange relationship may disrupt or propel the adjustment of the other. At the same time, we also emphasise that a substantial component of the outcome of the exchange (in this case, HCNs' psychological and behavioural adjustment) is incidental, occurring in addition to, or perhaps in spite of, the intentions and actions of the exchanging parties and having spinoff effects on others beyond the dyad, e.g. HCN peers and family. At a practical level, a better understanding of HCNs' adjustive disruptions – both welcomed and imposed – is likely of interest to HCNs, expatriates, and managers tasked with overseeing international assignments as a way to foster more meaningful and effective expatriate-HCN relationships with the potential to benefit all parties involved.

THREE WAYS HCNs' ADJUSTMENT DIFFERS FROM EXPATRIATES'

First, HCNs go through a *less wide-ranging and more focused form of disruption* than most expatriates. Whereas expatriates experience an upheaval to all aspects of their life, HCNs retain home-culture social networks and living arrangements (Rogler, 1994), as well as the basic features of the organisational environment – including most colleagues and, typically, features of the job. For HCNs, the stress and learning triggers that are central to CCA are restricted to a relatively narrow range of direct and/or vicarious interactions with expatriates. Notably, such interactions are usually constrained to the workplace where exchange opportunities are confined by structural expectations and by situations that limit the variety of intercultural interactions (e.g. by preferencing particular types of information) or the breadth of learning that is possible (e.g. range of modelled behaviours and opportunities to reproduce these). This is different from the experiences of expatriates relocating to a foreign country, which allow a variety of both work and non-work intercultural exchange opportunities. Importantly, the nature and extent of HCNs' CCA will more directly relate to their contact with a small number of individual expatriates, and primarily in specific and controlled settings.

Second, somewhat counter-intuitively, HCN CCA may have a *stronger discretionary component* than expatriate adjustment. Intercultural interactions with people possessing different

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cultural norms values and language can be cognitively taxing, disrupt psychological wellbeing, and be difficult to sustain (Aichhorn & Puck, 2017; Carraher, Sullivan, & Crocitto, 2008). The relatively limited breadth of adjustment triggers for HCNs suggest that HCNs may find it easier than expatriates to cope psychologically and professionally by retaining home-country cognitive scripts and behaviours.

Finally, HCNs are likely to experience *disequilibrium in regards to exchange relationships outside the expatriate-HCN dyad* and this can make HCN CCA particularly challenging. Whereas expatriate adjustment occurs when an individual crosses a cultural threshold and is immersed in an all-encompassing host culture, HCN CCA is instigated when a foreign carrier of unfamiliar norms, attitudes and assumptions infiltrates part of their environment. Rather than widespread and generally consistent triggers of learning and stress that expatriates confront, HCNs may face competing psychological pressures to, on the one hand, adapt cognitively and behaviourally in response to exchange relationships with expatriate/s, and, on the other hand, retain existing scripts and behaviours to conform with HCNs with whom they associate, including colleagues, family and friends. Also, unlike expatriate families who may experience changes similar to expatriates, HCNs' families may lack the awareness or experiences to provide HCNs with emotional or informational support. In short, HCNs CCA introduces unique considerations, making it worth of scholarly examination and of interest to practitioners.

HCN ADJUSTMENT AS A HCN-EXPATRIATE EXCHANGE RELATIONSHIP

Social exchange theory as a lens for studying the HCN-expatriate exchange relationship

As a means of reconciling distinct characteristics of HCNs' and expatriates' CCA, we draw on social exchange theory, one of "the oldest theories of social behavior" (Homans, 1958: 597). Rooted in Economics, Sociology and Psychology, the theory focuses on social relations between actors who engage in transaction/exchange (Emerson, 1962). It postulates that individuals enter into reciprocal (usually dyadic) relationships of supporting and learning from others based on both sides receiving an outcome of value (Homans, 1958). The relationship is underpinned by actors consciously or subconsciously weighing the costs (effort, time) and benefits (acceptance, support) of the

relationships in which they engage (Blau, 1962). When one actor contributes favourably to the relationship, via positive initiating actions (Cropanzano et al., 2017), the other is more likely to respond via a positive reciprocating response. The relationship remains constructive to the extent that the contributions made and benefits received are balanced. High quality relationships are characterised by positive initiating actions eliciting positive reciprocating responses; low quality ones by negative initiating actions and responses. Actions aimed to restore equilibrium in the exchange can be either internally directed (behavioural, emotional or psychological change) or externally directed via, for instance, demanding greater contributions from the partners or withdrawing from the exchange (Adams, 1963).

In this paper we propose that establishing social exchange relationships with expatriates can provide the impetus for cognitive and behavioural changes in HCNs akin to a form of CCA. Through this lens, CCA is a mutual process emerging from social exchanges between two persons in intercultural relationships, impelled by the interpersonal rewards and sanctions that accrue from this. The next section discusses features of HCN-expatriate dyads that, we theorise, influence HCNs' adjustment.

The nature of the HCN-expatriate dyad and its impact on HCN adjustment

From a social exchange perspective, interactions between HCNs and expatriates provide the platform for the mutual exchange of initiating actions and reciprocating responses. HCNs' adjustment behaviours represent contributions to the exchange relationship. These adjustments can be either initiating actions, triggered by a desire to learn and develop or by anticipation of benefits derived from an exchange relationship with an expatriate, or a response intended to reciprocate a perceived contribution from the expatriate. In both cases, the contributions of actively engendering or passively accepting personal change (Torbiörn, 1982) are intended to maintain equilibrium in the relationship. In effect, adjustment pressures and responses contribute surpluses/deficits to the exchange relationship. For instance, unwelcome or unexpected pressure on a HCN to adjust behaviours (e.g. requests to communicate in a different style that increases cognitive or emotional load) may be

viewed as a negative initiating action. In contrast, adjustment pressures that are perceived as favourable (e.g. an opportunity to communicate in a foreign language that is viewed by the HCN as developmental) are more likely to elicit positive reciprocal contributions. In both cases, HCN adjustment as either a coping or learning response is, we posit, a contribution to the exchange relationship.

From an exchange perspective, a willingness for more regular contact with expatriates is conducive to productive relationships based on reciprocal sharing of information and other resources (Lawler et al., 2000). It also provides a firmer base for developing interpersonal skills (Hechanova et al., 2003) that are the foundations of behavioural adjustment. It does this by presenting repeated availability of modelled behaviour (Bandura, 1986) that can galvanise recognition of a skills deficit, and thus the disequilibrium that activates adjustment. This repetition of models is especially important to HCNs given the limited breadth of models available (in contrast to expatriates), making the learning richness of the HCN-expatriate relationship especially important.

In exchange relationships, contributions perceived as more positive generate stronger commitment to the relationship (Cropanzano et al., 2017), increase reciprocity obligations (Gouldner, 1960), and enhance learning through instigating attention to and retention of modelled behaviours (Bandura, 1986). Thus we expect that HCNs' willingness to adjust when working with expatriates will be strongest when they perceive they will accrue benefits from making adjustments to facilitate these interactions (Cropanzano et al., 2017). That is, HCNs are more willing to bear the costs of their own psychological and behavioural adjustment when a more valuable outcome results (Homans 1958). They are also more inclined to participate in positive intercultural exchange relationships, and so foster more frequent learning-rich exchange interactions with expatriates. To exemplify this, the following section considers how the nature of HCN and expatriate roles can influence HCNs' CCA.

Formal roles in the HCN-expatriate dyad and how they influence HCN adjustment

Inequality between HCNs and expatriates has been discussed in a range of contexts in expatriate research (Liu & Shaffer, 2005; Maley, Moeller, & Harvey, 2015), typically because

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expatriates often take on roles that place them in positions of seniority over HCNs (Edström & Galbraith, 1977; Michailova, Mustafa, & Barner-Rasmussen, 2016). In such circumstances, the ability to evaluate performance or impose rewards or sanctions toward HCNs allow expatriates, consciously or otherwise, to dictate the nature of norms and knowledge that are recognised as valuable (Hong & Snell, 2008; Liu & Shaffer, 2005; Maley et al., 2015). In these situations, less powerful HCNs are expected to be imbued with stronger instrumental and psychological incentives to adjust their behaviours and attitudes to sustain a positive relationship with, and/or receive social approval from, the more powerful partner (Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1991). These features raise the psychological benefit of HCNs feeling impelled to modify attitudes and behaviours in order to conform with the more powerful expatriate.

The formal work roles undertaken by HCNs and expatriates may also shape adjustment patterns. One prominent use of expatriates within multinational corporations is to develop HCNs' expertise and skills through, for instance, mentoring and/or transmitting cultural norms (Edström & Galbraith, 1977; Harzing, 2001). These organisational development roles are intended to improve performance by creating change in HCNs' behaviours (Riusala & Suutari, 2004; Vance & Paik, 2005). Shay and Baack (2006) found that expatriate managers whose primary objective was one of subsidiary control (e.g. supervising or training HCNs) triggered personal changes in HCN subordinates resulting from the types of behaviours that the expatriates engaged in. This empirical base suggests that working with expatriates who perform subsidiary development roles provides a strong motivation for HCNs to adjust. We expect these interactions to be characterised by consistent and repeated learning opportunities and so relatively stronger adjustment by HCNs.

On the other hand, HCNs are often given responsibility for supporting expatriates' adjustment to the local culture (Mahajan & Toh, 2014) and/or host organisation (Toh & DeNisi, 2005, 2007). While on the one hand these roles involve HCNs reinforcing home-culture scripts and practices for the benefit of expatriates, studies show that it is not only newcomers who undergo socialisation; insiders involved in the process can also be socialised in unexpected ways (Feldman, 1994). These changes

appear to be triggered, at least in part, through opportunities to participate in social interaction and shared sense-making such that aspects of the newcomers' (i.e. expatriates') interpretation causes the insider (HCN) to re-evaluate and thus change their perspective (Lynton & Thøgersen, 2008). From a social exchange perspective, such practices may elicit positive reciprocating responses from expatriates that may facilitate a positive ongoing exchange relationship. Thus, supporting and socialising expatriates to adapt to the host culture and organisation may be an impetus for HCNs to experience CCA.

BEYOND THE HCN-EXPATRIATE DYAD: SPILLOVER EFFECTS OF HCN CCA

Dyadic expatriate-HCN relationships do not occur in isolation; adjusting individuals maintain simultaneous exchange relationships with other work- and non-work networks. HCNs continue to sustain existing webs of exchange relationships with colleagues and family in the home environment after their exchange relationship with the expatriate has begun. This makes the pattern of their adjustment differ in degree and scope from expatriates', who typically 'surrender' home country exchange relationships and form new relationships with actors in the host country. A feature of HCN adjustment, therefore, relates to potential spillover effects to different aspects of their lives outside the expatriate-HCN dyadic relationship (Williams & Alliger, 1994). That is, HCNs' adjustment, while contributing positively to the exchange relationship with expatriates, may interact with other exchange relationships that exist concurrently; notably, it has the potential to influence their relationships with others from the home-country, including family and non-work social networks (Caligiuri, Hyland, Joshi, & Bross, 1998) in ways that may disrupt those exchange relationships, and potentially undermine HCNs' professional and personal wellbeing.

We argue that the pressures for HCNs to adjust can increase work-to-co-worker and work-to-family crossover stress in two ways. The first comes from HCNs needing to devote additional personal resources to their adjustment. As with expatriates (Shahnasarian, 1991), this can divert resources from non-work roles, place additional burdens on family members, and consequently increase stresses in these relationships (Shaffer et al., 2001). In social exchange terms, these burdens mean that HCNs'

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ability to contribute positive initiating actions or reciprocating responses to the exchange relationship is diminished. Thus, whereas expatriates' adjustment may reduce work-to-family conflict (Takeuchi, 2010), we propose that HCNs' adjustment can have the opposite effect on family and co-worker exchange relationships.

The second crossover stress arises from the potential of inter-role stress caused by incompatibility between different expectations of HCNs' multiple roles – for instance, exchange relationships with family and co-workers on one hand, and with expatriates on the other hand – to the point where contributions to one are detrimental to the other (Shaffer et al., 2001). HCN adjustment may create behaviour-related pressures (Ford, Heinen, & Langkamer, 2007) arising from behavioural discrepancy; that is, the need to enact distinct behavioural and cognitive patterns in different settings; one when interacting with expatriates, and one when interacting with family/co-workers. Inappropriate transferral of behaviour from one setting to another has the potential to add to the psychological burden and engender conflict that can fracture the exchange relationship. HCNs' families and co-workers – without structured interventions and/or experience in similar exchange relationships – are unlikely to be able to provide HCNs with emotional or informational support that mitigates these conflicts.

While most expatriate research emphasises the benefits of social networks to expatriates' adjustment, some research documents detrimental impacts on expatriates' psychological adjustment, primarily in situations in which expatriates confront relationships with non-adjusting or maladjusting individuals. Typically these are family members who also experience varying degrees of adjustment in a host culture (Takeuchi et al., 2002), or distant home-country networks, which may trigger negative psychological stresses through their absence (a result of the expatriates' geographic relocation), or when expatriates attempt to reintegrate at the end of an assignment (Brabant, Palmer, & Gramling, 1990). In these cases, it is the disequilibrium in the exchange relationship created by different patterns of adjustment that can create tension which influences the relationship and the adjusting individual. Applied to HCNs, we propose that the equilibrium they seek in other exchange relationships can

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interfere with their exchange relationships with expatriates in ways that influence their CCA, and can result in stresses stemming from their own adjustment. To illustrate this, we consider HCNs' exchange relationships with two sets of social networks: other HCN co-workers and HCN families.

HCN cross-cultural adjustment: spillover to HCNs' relationships with co-workers

While substantial research has shown the favourable influence of support from co-workers on expatriates' CCA, we suggest that HCNs who become closely associated with an expatriate – for instance, as a protégé or cultural mentor (Toh & DeNisi, 2005) – may become the target of resentment from colleagues that leads to them being viewed as out-group members (Vance, Vaiman, & Anderson, 2009). This can weaken exchange quality, reduce affective support to assist HCNs' adjustment, and potentially result in social undermining (Vinokur & van Ryn, 1993), a form of negative social support manifested via negative affect and/or evaluation being directed at an individual. Co-worker resentment towards expatriates can be activated by a multitude of triggers ranging from expatriates' perceived privileged status and the practices they use (Khan et al., 2010) to them simply being different (Varma et al., 2009). This negative affect may transfer to HCNs strongly associated with the expatriate and lead to HCNs being viewed as outsiders to the in-group of local workers (Locksley et al., 1980). Direct resentment toward the HCN may also arise in situations where co-workers are envious of the opportunities arising from HCNs' association with the expatriate. In both cases, this negative affect creates stress in the HCN-co-worker interaction and weakens the exchange relationships and hence reciprocal support available (Berkowitz, 1989; Varma et al., 2016). This, in turn, reduces the coping and learning resources that HCNs have available for adjustment. In contrast, HCNs who experience positive support from co-workers are expected to be better equipped with emotional resources to cope with the CCA pressure emanating from their exchange relationships with expatriates.

HCN cross-cultural adjustment: spillover to HCNs' families

We argue that certain family conditions may be more conducive to HCNs' CCA by buffering some stresses and commitments inherent in HCNs' intercultural exchange relationships. Expatriate

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studies show that emotional support from family members can ease adjustment stresses (Van der Bank & Rothmann, 2006). Expatriates' families are typically experiencing similar adjustment challenges. Consequently, they are aware of the stresses being invoked and therefore have a relatively accurate understanding of the exchange demands being placed on the expatriate. They can therefore provide direct empathetic support and understanding within their exchange relationships (Westman, 2001), an interdependence which underpins positive exchange relationships (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959).

In contrast, HCNs' adjustment is more isolated to specific work exchange relationships that are not replicated at home. HCNs' families may lack the awareness or experiences to provide the emotional or informational support that mitigates these conflicts. Conversely, families with awareness of the acculturative stresses experienced by the HCN and who are supportive of the HCNs exchange relationship with the expatriate, are expected to be better equipped to minimise extraneous stresses that may derail HCNs' adjustment.

IMPLICATIONS

Research implications

This brief paper has aimed to turn the CCA spotlight away from expatriates and onto the HCNs with whom expatriates interact. It introduced and explained the concept of 'HCN CCA' and theorised that CCA, rather than requiring a geographic relocation or organisation-wide change, can be triggered by sustained exposure to a different culture in one's home base through intercultural exchange relationships with foreigners. In doing so, we attempted to systematically explain the HCN CCA phenomenon as a logical and coherent response to the demands of a salient intercultural exchange relationship with an expatriate.

We also suggested that in spite of the positive achievements to date, criticisms have been raised about the simplicity of existing CCA frameworks and models and their lack of recognition of the complexity of the adjustment experience (Hippler, Haslberger, & Brewster, 2018). Our theorising highlighted that new insights can be gained from examining the features of prominent exchange partners who may be salient determinants of an individual's adjustment, like the partners' role as well

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as from considering spillovers of CCA beyond the immediate dyad. Such a perspective is consistent with calls to acknowledge the importance of different domains within which adjustment transpires (Haslberger, Brewster, & Hippler, 2014). It shifts the emphasis away from CCA as being viewed as assimilating a static and deterministic macro-level milieu to one emerging from individual's participation in a multiplicity of rich intercultural experiences, within a particular context. From this perspective, the collective configuration of an individual's web of intercultural social exchange relationships at the micro-level, therefore, may be used to build a more nuanced picture of the adjustment forces and so outcomes being experienced by all adjusting individuals, including HCNs.

Our theorising provides opportunities to expand the application of social exchange theory to adjustment arising from intercultural exchanges. For instance, viewing adjustment as (a series of) exchange relationships rather than physical relocation focuses attention on particular relationships or exchange activities (positive and negative initiating actions and reciprocating responses) that may be especially powerful propellants of adjustment. Doing so opens the door for further examinations to address the influence of intercultural exchange relationships on the CCA patterns and outcomes of the individuals involved.

Implications for practice

Understanding the nature of HCN CCA is, we argue, of interest to multinational corporations, HCNs, and expatriates. Just as expatriate assignments are being used as career pathways (BGRS, 2016; Caligiuri & Bonache, 2016), so too are assignments for HCNs who work with expatriates. By supporting these in the same way that expatriate assignments are supported, multinational corporations may accrue multiple benefits, including reducing the negative stresses associated with HCN adjustment and facilitating positive outcomes of this adjustment in the guise of learning. By acknowledging HCNs' CCA experiences, multinationals will be better positioned to support HCNs' (and expatriates') psychological and sociocultural adjustment, and contribute to more meaningful and effective exchange relationships. For instance, it may be that HCNs' adjustment, and therefore performance, can be facilitated if organisations are able to replicate in cost-effective ways some of the support

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mechanisms that are currently reserved for expatriates. Gouttefarde (1992) suggests that communication, training and feedback for HCNs prior to and after the expatriates' arrival may help to minimise the potential of HCNs' culture shock. Efforts to curate expatriate-HCN dyads so that HCNs are favourably disposed towards the expatriates' expertise and/or role may support HCNs' adjustment.

Similarly, training or support for aspects of HCNs' non-work adjustment might limit the negative consequences of work-to-home spillover (Westman, 2001). This may include organisations taking responsibility for providing support to HCNs' families in the same way that expatriates' families are often involved in pre-departure training. Likewise, ensuring expatriates recognise the full gamut of HCN contributions to a dyad – including the (potentially negative) impacts on HCNs' relationships with their co-workers and families – is likely to elicit more favourable reciprocal contributions, and thus contribute to positive exchange relationships.

We suggest that the personal and professional development that HCNs can undergo through their interaction with expatriates may be beneficial to multinational organisations via, for instance, supporting and mentoring other HCNs through adjustment experiences. The question of whether organisations should facilitate or shield HCN CCA is pertinent. Organisations sometimes choose to configure living and work arrangements to screen some expatriates from the pressures and strains of adjustment (Glasze, 2006); similarly, organisations not wanting (particular or all) local staff to acculturate may consider ways to 'protect' them from the potential forces of adjustment that we outline.

Our theorising also hints at ways that organisations might ensure patterns of mutual adjustment are productive rather than counter-productive. A simple example of this is framing how HCNs perceive the process of their own adjustment. Individuals who anticipate and perceive a more positive exchange relationship are more likely to reciprocate through contributing resources to the relationship (Homans, 1958). HCNs who view their own adjustment favourably – for instance, as a process of personal and career development rather than a disruptive cost borne on behalf of the

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organisation – can be expected to contribute to the wellbeing, adjustment and performance of expatriates. Accordingly, multinational corporations might benefit from more careful selection and preparation of HCN staff involved in intensive intercultural exchanges with expatriates.

At the same time, it is important for organisational actors to be cognisant of underlying power dynamics that may shape such social exchanges (Emerson, 1962). Dependence on an exchange partner for particular resources, or the discharge of deficits accrued through an exchange relationship, can lead to subordination that creates and/or reinforces structural inequality. Compounded by the greater potential for misunderstanding or conflict to emerge from intercultural interactions, commitment to mutual adjustment, rather than the assumption of one-sided adjustment, is a useful starting point.

CONCLUSION

Cross-cultural adjustment has been, is, and will remain a critical determinant of the success of multinational organisations' global staffing strategies and operations. We establish the somewhat counterintuitive argument that the socio-cultural landscape and distinctive exchange relationships experienced by HCNs, while often hidden, may lead to adjustment patterns that are unique and less predictable, and hence worthy of examination in their own right. In short, HCNs should no longer be the forgotten people in the multinational organisations when it comes to CCA.

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