The dynamics of workplace relationships among expatriates and host country nationals in international development organisations

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Abstract

Purpose- This paper aims to explore the dynamics of workplace relationships between expatriates and host country nationals (HCNs) in International Development Organisations (IDOs) through the lens of the social comparison theory. These relationships are likely influenced by the way HRM practices are implemented among individuals from both groups.

Design/methodology/approach- We used an inductive approach and analysed qualitative data from ten expatriates and twenty host country nationals employed by five IDOs in Nigeria, a risk-prone context.

Findings- Our findings demonstrate that both expatriates and HCNs perceive that the HRM practices implemented by IDOs are more favourable to expatriates. This leads to further social comparisons between members of both groups, affecting their workplace interactions.

Practical Implications- The way expatriates and HCNs perceive and act towards these differential practices matters for the operations of IDOs. As such, we recommend that IDO management may consider acknowledging diversity in their workforce, enact inclusive practices, and make deliberate investments on learning opportunities and maximise the continued investments in expatriate use.

Originality/Value- This study contributes to expatriation literature by clarifying the extent to which the enactment of differential HRM practices in a risk-prone context can exacerbate upward social comparisons and significantly influence working relationships. We explore this outside the context of multinational enterprises, focusing on IDOs that play a valuable role in local societies.

Keywords: International Development Organisations; Expatriates, Host Country Nationals (HCNs), Social Comparison, Human Resource Management Practices, Workplace relationships

1

Introduction

International Development Organisations (IDOs) aim to bring development and

reduce inequalities in less developed host nations (United Nations, 2003). Although IDOs

and MNEs share some similarities in managing their international workforces (Tarique and

Schuler, 2018) and host country nationals (HCNs), the main difference between the two lies

in the fact that IDOs are non-profit driven, using their revenue to respond to social needs,

amongst other differences (Brewster and Cerdin, 2017).

In this study, we focus on IDOs with operations in Nigeria, a high-risk country,

currently ranked among the top ten recipients of gross official development assistance (ODA)

(OECD, 2019). Nigeria's current ranking in the global terrorism index indicates trends and

patterns of terrorist activities (Institute for Economics and Peace-IEP, 2019), placing IDO

workers in frequent danger. Furthermore, Nigeria's labour market is saturated, volatile, and

does not always firmly enforce labour standards due to the quest for attracting foreign direct

investment (FDI) (Okafor, 2011; Ogundare and Elijah, 2011). Consequently, IDOs can

potentially implement exploitative human resource management (HRM) practices among

their diverse workforces due to weak institutions (Okafor, 2011).

We focus on HRM practices implemented by IDOs, including rewards and staffing

practices. However, we pay particular attention to welfare-oriented practices to address

potential safety and security concerns, especially for expatriates (Fee and McGrath Champ,

2017; Willie and Fast, 2013). While the work of IDOs is often driven to deploy workers to

dangerous locations responding to crises, IDOs are not the only organisations with country

offices or subsidiaries in risk-prone countries. MNEs tend to avoid countries with high

instability (Bénassy-Quéré, Coupet and Mayer, 2007), but many still have operations in risk-

prone contexts, with important implications for their workforce, and bringing specific HRM

concerns as highlighted by Bader (2015) and Bader, Schuster and Dickmann (2019). We

build upon this body of research and further explore the specificities of managing people in

high-risk contexts within the IDO sector.

Furthermore, we are interested in the fact that, like MNEs, IDOs have a diverse

workforce, composed by a mix of expatriates (assigned or self-initiated) (McNulty and

Brewster, 2017) and host-country nationals. Previous research that discusses the role of HRM

on certain outcomes, are mostly unidimensional. For example, there is evidence of a

compensation advantage favouring expatriates (Bonache, Sanchez and Zarraga-Oberty,

2009), which can lead to HCNs' negative attitudes towards expatriates (Leonardelli and Toh,

2011; Leung, Wang, and Hon 2011). However, there is a lack of comparative empirical

research focusing on these two groups of employees in the IDO context, which is important

given the challenges of working in risk-prone contexts and dealing with societal demands.

We aim to explore expatriate's and HCN's experiences related to implemented HRM

practices among the two groups in light of the social comparison theory.

Our contributions are twofold. First, we contribute to the ongoing debate on expatriate-

HCN interactions (e.g., van Bakel, 2019; Varma *et al.*, 2012) and offer a comprehensive

assessment that clarifies the role of HRM practices affecting the perceptions and relationship

between expatriates and HCNs. Second, we go beyond the MNE-centric focus in

international business (IB) and international human resource management (IHRM) by

including IDOs' HCNs and expatriates to contribute to extant IHRM literature (e.g., Toh and

DeNisi, 2003; Leung, Lin, and Gee 2014; Oltra, Bonache, and Brewster, 2013; Bonache and

Zarraga-Oberty, 2017; Kang and Shen 2017). We use an exploratory approach to investigate

and understand these comparison dynamics triggered by potential differences in the overall

implementation of HRM practices on both groups.

HRM practices in a risk-prone context

When MNEs operate in high-risk contexts, their IHRM departments often take

precautions associated with minimising risks for their expatriates in international

assignments, namely housing them in compounds, not allowing them free movement, or

providing them bodyguards and chauffeurs (Bader, Schuster and Dickmann, 2019). The

compensation and the social support expatriates receive from the organisation and from co-

workers in high-risk countries is crucial for them to develop favourable work attitudes

(Bader, 2015). Bader *et al.*, (2019) designed the Situation-Response-Outcome framework for

HRM in high-risk contexts, considering factors at macro-, meso- and micro-levels. In this

study, we are particularly interested in how HRM practices are implemented (meso-level) and

on the work relationships between different groups of workers (micro-level) in IDOs.

We expand research conducted in the context of MNEs in high-risk countries, by

focusing on IDOs – international organisations where risks tend to be exacerbated due to their

social and humanitarian nature (Brewster and Cerdin, 2017). IDO workers are exposed to

increased risk (Fee and McGrath-Champ, 2017), such as the possibility of being killed,

getting wounded, or being kidnapped during fieldwork (Stoddard, Harmer, and Hughes,

2014). In such a context, the role of HRM is to implement welfare-oriented practices to

address potential safety and security concerns, especially for expatriates (Fee and McGrath

Champ, 2017; Willie and Fast, 2013). While expatriates' safety and security are critical (Fee,

McGrath, and Liu, 2013), HRM practices should however not be limited to well-being of a

expatriates, given the fact that HCNs are also exposed to similar welfare challenges. Such an

approach could lead to cynicism towards expatriates often categorised as the favoured group

(Al Ariss, 2014). Moreover, HCNs are important stakeholders with the role of hosting

expatriates and enabling expatriate adjustment (Vance, Andersen, Vaiman and Gale, 2014).

Enacting inclusive managerial practices is likely to provide the opportunity to engage in

learning opportunities and maximise their return on investment on expatriates (Fee and

Michailova, 2020).

International development organisation's diverse workforce composition includes a mix

of expatriates (assigned or self-initiated) (McNulty and Brewster, 2017) and HCNs, as earlier

indicated. However, the latter group have frequently remained outside the scope of IHRM

6

scholarship and practice (Takeuchi, 2010) even though they interact with expatriates through

work. Scholarly discussions on the relationships between expatriates and HCNs focused on

expatriate-centric outcomes (Takeuchi, 2010; Freeman, 1984), HCNs' role in supporting

expatriates (e.g., Pitcher, Varma and Budhwar, 2012; Varma *et al.*, 2011; 2012) or enabling

expatriate effectiveness (Bruning, Sonpar and Wang, 2012). While HCNs work under similar

working conditions, have similar relationships with expatriates, and exert significant

influence on expatriates, the IHRM literature typically overlooks them (Takeuchi, 2010). Yet

there is limited empirical work that has been done to explore these dynamics further (e.g., van

Bakel, 2019).

Considering the social agenda of IDOs, it is important to understand the impact of

HRM practices implemented on and perceived by both expatriates and HCNs, which can

have an impact of expatriate-HCN interactions at work. Fostering fruitful interactions

amongst both groups of workers can lead to more positive outcomes (Fee and Gray, 2020).

However, when there is perceived inequity in HRM practices implementation, it can lead to

negative outcomes. This can potentially also impede the socio-economic objectives of IDOs

(Eyben, 2004). Expatriates and HCNs may collaborate in other IDO projects in the future.

The quality of these relationships can play a role in the success of these projects.

Social Comparison between Expatriates and HCNs

We use the social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) as the theoretical basis for this

study. This theory is useful to enable us to understand how people categorise themselves and

others into specific in-groups and out-groups at work. These perceptions can be triggered

through differential practices implemented by IDOs and perceived by their workers. Social

comparison theory can guide in characterising expatriate-HCN interactions and identifying

potential sources of conflict likely affecting the attainment of IDO's goals in the host region.

Social comparison (Festinger, 1954) explains the way information gathered about one

or more people is used comparatively in making self-evaluations (Wood, 1996). The idea

behind these comparisons is that there is a "target" and a "comparer". The "target" is a

referent, or the person being "compared", and the "comparer" is the person that notices

differences or similarities from information gathered regarding the target on some specific

dimension, which often triggers behavioural reactions by the comparer (Gerber, Wheeler and

Suls, 2018). These dimensions can be linked to differences in the implementation of HRM

practices and to how these practices are perceived by employees (expatriates and HCNs)

working within an organisation (e.g., IDOs).

8

Overall, there are three patterns through which social comparison processes happen.

First through a desire to affiliate with others; second, through a desire for information about

others; and third, for explicit self-appraisal comparatively to others (Taylor and Lobel, 1989).

Work requires interaction between expatriates and HCNs to achieve organisational goals,

which generates some form of affiliation between members of the two groups. The

information-gathering process commences from employees' perceptions of HRM practices

implementation. People categorise themselves and others into specific in-groups and out-

groups at work, which can be triggered through differential practices implemented by IDOs.

When workers perceive these differences in HRM practices implementation, they are likely

to engage in social categorisations through upward and downward social comparisons.

Afterwards, individuals' self-appraisal outcomes become apparent based on a

comparison selection made by each group (Gerber *et al.,* 2017). A comparison selection refers

to the choice made by the comparer towards what is considered a desirable basis for making

such comparisons with the target or referent. This comparative selection can be, upward

(Collins, 2000) and/or downward (Wills, 1981) on a social comparison scale. Upward

comparison refers to a positive standard (i.e., better-off), and downward comparison refers to

a negative standard (i.e., worse-off). Therefore, a comparer can make a comparison selection

towards what is most desirable to them (i.e., a better-off/positive or worse-off/negative standard

on the social comparison baseline). What is considered desirable is decided by the comparer.

The perceptions of the implementation of HRM practices in IDOs can trigger

comparison selections towards a better-off (positive standard) or worse-off (negative

standard). Although people would likely make comparison selections toward a positive

standard (Collins, 2000) on some dimension, they can make comparison selections

downwards toward a negative standard, in a process of restoring their self-esteem that was

originally threatened (Wills, 1981)

Grounded on these theorisations, we explore the differences in the implementation of

HRM practices among IDOs' expatriates and HCNs as two separate groups who collect

information about each other based on how implemented HRM practices are beneficial or

detrimental to them. Goethals and Darley (1977) suggest that people prefer to choose similar

others in making social comparisons (for example, nationality, work experiences, and

qualifications). However, although expatriates and HCNs may be different in some ways,

they are members of the same organisation and can potentially make social comparisons

regardless of attributes they may have in common. These can trigger different outcomes.

10

Despite previous arguments that IDOs have limited resources to invest in HRM

practices (Brewster and Cerdin, 2017) and that some practices linked to safety and security

concerns are mostly focused on expatriates (e.g., Fee and McGrath-Champ, 2017), a deeper

understanding of HRM practices is needed as well as how expatriates and HCNs perceive

them. It is relevant to focus on both groups of employees, as social comparison mechanisms

can influence their attitudes and behaviours. Due to their need to work together, the success

of the IDO may depend on the quality of the relationships between members of both groups.

Accordingly, we pose two research questions:

RQ1: How do expatriates and HCNs perceive the differences in the implementation of

HRM practices in IDOs?

RQ2: How do expatriates and HCNs compare themselves to each other and how do

such comparisons influence their working relationships?

Methods

Inductive qualitative research design:

The study takes an exploratory approach to address RQ1 and RQ2. This approach is useful

because our research phenomenon and context are under-explored. It also offers the

opportunity to discover new realities, nuances, and granularity about expatriates and HCNs'

construction of their own experiences regarding the enactment of practices that can influence

their interactions with each other, rather than opting for an affirmation seeking approach of

pre-existing concepts used in quantitative research (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton, 2012). It is

also linked to the interpretive nature and novelty of our study (Dixon, Day, and Brewster,

2014). This approach has an interactive and open-ended nature which would provide a voice

for participants so we do not miss out on new concepts that can emerge from our data. Hence

presenting evidence in more systematic ways (Gioia, *et al*, 2012) through "how" and "why"

questions (Doz, 2011). Although qualitative research has been criticised to be devoid of

transferability-an aspect of trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), the effect of non-

verbal cues attributed to quantitative study was overcome by the utilisation of semi-structured

face-to-face interviews (Bolderston, 2012) and focused group discussion (FGD) in one case.

Moreover, the use of guided interview scripts helped to maintain consistency across all

represented interviewees.

We targeted ten expatriates and 20 HCNs from five IDOs (given pseudonyms IDO1 to

IDO5) and relied on triangulated responses from these respondents to obtain a fair

representation in our data analysis.

<insert Table (iii) and (iv) about here>

Interviews:

Data was collected during the summer of 2019. Initial contact was made with key

individuals in respective IDOs via email for access. A snowballing technique was applied to

gain further access to additional participants. Most interviews took place on the IDOs'

premises, but others were done outside of workplaces, as some respondents preferred their

lunchtimes to attend the interview. Interview guides including predetermined open questions

(Azungah, 2018) were utilised. This technique was valuable in directing conversation flow,

giving the interviewees more flexibility to express their views while keeping the research

objective focused (Vasileiou, Barnett, Thorpe and Young, 2018). It also allowed participants

to shape their own stories. Final interview guides for expatriates and HCNs covered four

main topics. These include some questions about participants' basic demographics,

participants' perceptions about HRM practices, participants' perceptions about their

counterparts' job roles, and participants' perceptions of working within a risky context.

While a focused group discussion consisting of two participants is considered small,

there was a specific case where the opportunity arose to have two people who work closely

together to explain some processes in more detail. These two participants also wanted to

speak together, and the interviewer was able to witness the interaction between members of

the two groups of employees (i.e., expatriate and HCN). Data were collected from two

different cities: Abuja and Jos, in Nigeria.

Profile of participants

Interviewees were between 26-38years old. They had high education levels: four had

bachelor's degrees, thirteen with master's degrees, three with PhDs, and two with Post

Graduate Diplomas In terms of years of experience within the sector (either less or more than

5years), IDO 1 expatriates had more experience when compared to HCN colleagues. Whereas

there was a good proportion in terms of years of experience for both groups of employees in

IDO2. Years of experience working within the sector can also influence the way specific

roles are allocated to expatriates (Lazarova *et al.*, 2021).

Data Analysis

Data were originally coded based on the way expatriates and HCNs perceived HRM

practices implementation, and on the social comparisons, they established as an outcome.

Interview transcripts generated from recorded interviews were filed using OneDrive

directories. This was supplemented with the Nvivo 12 software to account for the thematic

analysis techniques used (Braun and Clark, 2012). To support textual analysis, we continued

to engage in memo writing to help reduce bias and promote independence (Gibbs, 2018). The

continued use of open, axial, and selective coding was maintained (Charmaz, 2014).

Open coding commenced soon after interview recordings were transcribed- breaking

textual data into discrete parts and keeping interview protocol aligned with emerging themes.

Axial coding was maintained to draw connections between codes and selective coding helped

to link codes from analysis to further capture the essence of the research. Utilising

information from both our main database and the use of Nvivo 12 software, interview

transcripts were analysed and presented by first including selected quotes, which were further

separated based on identified themes using MS word document (please see Table vi and vii).

Adopting emergent, interpretive approaches and an iterative process, themes were

scrutinised, developed, and redefined (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Freeman and Lindsay,

2012). This enabled accentuating and aligning emerging themes with theoretical concepts.

Various data checks were done, through regular meetings with the authors to enhance data

validity (Miles and Huberman, 1994) and trustworthiness criteria in general (Lincoln and

Guba, 1985).

Results

Overview:

Research results (see Table vi and vii) are presented in three sections. The first section

presents the perceptions held by expatriates and HCNs regarding role allocation mechanisms

and pay and reward practices. The subsequent section presents the expatriates' and HCNs'

perceptions of safety-oriented practices. The third section presents the social comparison

outcome resulting from perceived preferences attributed to expatriates in the enactment of

specific HRM practices, followed by implications.

<insert Table (vi) and (vii) about here>

Results showed differences in the way HRM practices are implemented on and perceived by

expatriates and HCNs in response to RQ1. We show how these led to social comparison

selections made by expatriates and HCNs and how this influences their working relationships

(RQ2).

Perception of Role allocation mechanisms, pay & reward practices held by expatriates and

HCNs

Role allocation practices form the basis upon which pay, and reward practices are also

implemented. In IDOs, expatriates are typically required for higher management positions,

implying higher pay (Aid Leap, 2016). This can potentially trigger some reactions from HCNs

16

especially since host countries have progressively improved economically and socially. Their

employees now have the prerequisites, i.e., becoming more skilled and experienced, to be

allocated higher-level positions like expatriates (Toh and DeNisi, 2003). Expatriates and HCNs

perceived roles as discriminatory practices disfavouring HCNs and favouring expatriates-

meaning a relatively large pay gap and inequality (see HCN 10 and HCN 8 quotes). Most HCNs

felt disgruntled about these practices, although fewer participants including some expatriates,

found this a fair practice.

"…an expatriate intern takes home more than I do, 10 times over, and if I were to

judge I would say it's unfair" (HCN 10)

Or

"Pay is an issue. The international staff are paid ridiculously higher compared to

national staff." (HCN 8)

Furthermore, expatriates tended to give fewer details when asked questions related to

pay. Doing so might mean sharing sensitive information or that they earn more indeed which

justifies the existence of differences. While expatriates in IDOs tend to downplay these

benefits, and potential for career progression, they emphasize gaining international experience

17

in addition to their contribution towards social justice and taking up leadership roles, which

brings us to role allocation practices.

Expatriates in IDOs occupied more senior managerial positions relative to HCNs,

which is a common practice for most organisations. However, justifications provided for this

practice is that HCNs are perceived as unfit to occupy those positions, while demographic

descriptions of participants (e.g., experience) and responses from interviewees suggested

otherwise. The organisational criteria set in IDO 2 for this condition are based on lack of

knowledge of the language spoken (see quotation by Expatriate 6) in the headquarters of that

IDO, or restrictive Nigerian labour laws. IDO 2 engaged in role discriminatory practices

much more than IDO 1, and in some instances, reserved specific roles for their expatriate

staff (see the quotation from HCN 12 below). Conversely, IDO 1 HCNs did not react in the in

the same way, as demographics show that their expatriates had more years of experience on

the job or working within the sector and seemed more qualified for roles allocated

comparatively to HCNs.

"(…) going up the ladder, for specific positions, you just have to know the language our fund

*givers speak." (*English language is not sufficient). *(Expatriate 6)*

and

"(…) probably two years ago, an expatriate came in as an intern and within the next 6 months

is being represented as an Advisor and you would remain a Junior Advisor (…) an intern who

was fresh from school becomes a boss to one having 10 years' work experience and begins to

lead the team." (HCN 12)

The working language of IDO 2 in Nigeria is English, understood worldwide. Thus, it

might be fair to suggest that HCNs who are qualified based on educational qualification and

years of technical experience, can be allocated roles held by expatriates if the English

language was not considered insufficient and translation resources are available. Hence,

saving IDO operational costs.

Preferential implementation of role allocation and pay practices towards expatriates

have led to HCNs realising these differences. Hence triggering feelings of being exploited

and neglected as "*second class citizens*" (e.g., HCN 5 from IDO 1). While it is acknowledged

that the expatriates deserve to be rewarded for being foreigners in an unfamiliar host country,

HCNs contribute to IDOs' goals and expect to be treated fairly.

Perceptions of security mechanisms and other institutional support

For safety-oriented measures to protect staff (see table v), we focused our analysis on

expatriates and HCNs' vulnerability to risk and what organisational measures and practices

are put in place to protect IDO staff. We further analysed how these practices are

implemented and perceived by both groups.

<Insert table (v) here>

Apparently, expatriates received additional protection compared to HCNs due to the

expectation that HCNs are within their locality and would be more familiar with the context

(Peters, 2016) or that they do not necessarily cross borders (Vance, *et al.,* 2014). HCNs'

perceptions about such theoretical rationale differ. While most research participants lived in

the capital city of Nigeria (Abuja) and may seem less exposed to extreme security threats

such as attacks by Boko haram prominent in the North-Eastern parts of Nigeria, they are

vulnerable to these attacks including threats of being kidnapped and ransom being demanded,

herdsmen attack, robbery, and road accidents, when they travel on missions. Other risks

found in the capital city of Abuja include taxi scams, banditry (including violence during

political elections and demonstrations by the Shi'ite Islamic movement), and "*police*

harassment" especially for females (suggested by HCN 13).

There is also an indication that HCNs' vulnerability to risk increases because they

work for international organisations. Some participants suggested that because of HCNs'

association with expatriates perceived as "*wealthy people*" (e.g., Expat 1) or as those who

"*carry price tags*" (e.g., Expat 4, Expat 1, Expat 10; HCN 16), HCNs (including their family

members) become more susceptible to kidnapping. It is possible for kidnappers to abduct

family members of IDOs' HCNs as a ploy to demand random money.

> "*(…) when you work for an organisation like this, you are very attractive to them.*
>
> *They can pick you up and demand for ransom.*" *(HCN 9)*

In Abuja city, expatriates seemed less exposed to other risks such as taxi scams, as

they received more *logistical support* and do not require to commute a great distance to work

compared to HCNs. Expatriates mostly live in highbrow areas, while "*nationals can't afford*

to live in Abuja because it's too expensive, so they have to live further in the outskirts, and it

takes them longer to get to the office (…)" (Expat 7). Expatriates are offered accommodation

privileges and live in well-guarded, fenced, and protected houses. They are also "(…) *paid*

security allowances" (HCN 7), which HCNs are not entitled to. This is tied to the type of

contract (international staff versus national staff) during onboarding. Apparently, due to the

high cost of renting a place in highbrow areas, where their expatriate colleagues live, most

HCNs working in Abuja city cannot afford to live in those locations. Due to this, they

typically live on the outskirts, requiring substantial commute to and from work each day.

What is worse, those with specific contracts do not have access to car parking privileges,

which puts them at the risk of theft experienced by HCN 15.

"But for the national staff, they would travel for like one or even two hours in those areas, get

stuck in traffic or even like getting there, there is no real public transport. They have to wait

for a cab that takes them. This prolongs their journey home (…) I think a way of coming to

the office, is a way more stressful for them which might affect their work." (Expat 7)

or

"I'd say the risk of even getting to your house is there because you don't know the kind of

transportation you are entering, and you don't know the person who is carrying you."

(HCN 4).

Although HCNs might be entitled to some level of protection since they mostly travel

with expatriates during missions, HCN 10 indicated less privilege of being picked up by an

institutional vehicle from homes despite the commuting distance challenge between their

homes to the office- which is often their point of departure to the field. This further

exacerbates their exposure to internal city risks earlier highlighted. They can also get

physically fatigued.

"(…) if we are going on an official trip, for the national person, drivers don't go to their

house to pick them up, but the expatriates are picked from their houses by drivers. You (the

HCN) would be required to either come out to meet them up at a junction, where they would

just pick you up if it's on the way to the location. If not, you would be required to come to the

office." (HCN 10).

Another risk expatriates and HCNs are vulnerable to include car accidents which

could lead to death or injuries that would require emergency access to health care facilities.

Interestingly, IDO staff are categorised regarding the type of *health insurance benefits* they

received, which HCN 9 in the following quote considered a disadvantage. This is associated

with the type of contract they have with the IDOs.

"We have category A, B, C (…) But we are on category B, and we have limitations on

the kinds of hospitals that we can use. For category A, hospitals are first class when

you categorize the hospitals in terms of health facilities in Nigeria. So yeah, we are

not in that category. So, it means there are some limitations we have in terms of

healthcare." (HCN 9).

What is even worse, access to health insurance benefits in some IDOs is non-existent

for HCN consultant staff. Expatriates also have access to *evacuation insurance benefits*. They

have the privilege of being flown out of the country for things like the "*dog bite*" experienced

by Expat 1, to access immunity against rabies infection. Some IDOs have *a safe- haven/house*

which is a bullet-proof room offering a place of refuge for employees in the event of danger

while at work. This safe-haven could be located in the nearest safest country to Nigeria.

However, HCN 14 suggests that priority was given to expatriates when such a need arose.

"But then at the same time, you would have to ask yourself, if things are so bad that you need

to evacuate your international staff, why are you comfortable in leaving your national staff

who are exposed to similar kinds of risks, and they are colleagues. Why are you comfortable

leaving them (...) because it's a safe house you are taking them to, you are not taking them to

their home countries." (HCN 14).

In sum, although there seems to be parity in the way expatriates and HCNs received

travel advice and had access to armoured institutional vehicles and police escorts during

missions (measures 2 and 5), differences were largely perceived in the implementation of

other safety-oriented practices (see table v).

Social comparison mechanisms between expatriates and HCNs

Our findings here respond to RQ2, which is to understand how expatriates and HCNs

compared themselves to each other and how this influences their working relations. Making

social comparisons can either be harmful or beneficial to interactions between expatriates and

HCNs in IDOs. Regarding comparison outcomes, we found that HCNs selected expatriates as

their referents and made upward social comparisons. Individuals who make upward social

comparisons consider those they compare themselves with, better-off based on set criteria

used for their assessment (Gerber *et al.*, 2018). In this case, HCNs considered expatriates

better-off than themselves because of their perception that preferential HRM practices were

implemented on expatriates. Expatriates were clearly allocated favourable roles,

paid/rewarded higher, and received better safety-oriented practices. Although HCNs

categorised expatriates as being better-off, expatriates also believed they were better-off

indeed and in such instances were making downward social comparisons as indicated by

Expat 4.

"(…) expatriate colleagues come with the notion that they are superior or the notion that they

know everything (…) discriminating certain positions." (Expatriate 4)

By contrast, HCNs felt relatively deprived because they were not allocated favourable roles-

were paid less and did not perceive parity in the implementation of safety-oriented practices

compared to expatriates. Therefore, they categorised themselves as being worse-off.

"(…) I could see so it gives some people some sense of superiority over others, which I feel

is not healthy. (HCN 12)"

The implication of these upward and downward comparisons can trigger negative

attitudes and behaviours. This is reflected when HCNs "*retract back into shells*" (e.g., HCN

12) exhibiting hesitance towards contributing meaningfully to the team's progress. HCN 10

specifically mentioned that they demonstrated hesitance towards sharing knowledge with an

expatriate intern who was brought in to gain some experience, intending to allocate a

preferential higher role later. Yet that "*expatriate earned ten times higher compared to HCN*

10 who was providing the training and support" to intern. There were other negative

outcomes such as high employee turnover as indicated by HCN 9 below:

"So, there is this high employee turnover and organisations are not ready to pay well. And it's

not only the pay but also the relationship with your people." (HCN 9)

Other implications include the creation of toxic work environments when expatriates

and HCNs begin questioning each other's trust and exhibiting incivilities at work such as

"*resorting to exchange of words violently*" in IDO 2 for example (quoted by HCN 12)

between an expatriate manager and some other HCN team members. Stereotypical

behaviours between members of both groups have also been exhibited. For safety-oriented

26

practices, HCN 7 has used comments such as "*entitled big white man*". In trying to justify

why HCNs seemed relatively deprived, Expat 7 mentions that *"Nigerians have hierarchical*

fears (…) and are not as lucky and as privileged as they were to receive good education".

HCN 12 also mentioned how some expatriates have considered HCNs to *"lack quick-*

expression or do not go straight to the point". These are all stereotypes that can be created

due to a lack of trust which can be further exacerbated when differences are obvious.

Although the foregoing suggests negative outcomes from upwards comparisons,

especially from the HCNs' perspectives, there were indications of upward social comparisons

yielding to other beneficial outcomes reflected in HCNs' self-enhancing behaviours. HCN 13

assumes that expatriates who are allocated favourable roles can act as mentors to them and

"*help in grooming them knowledge-wise*". Self-enhancing behaviours are valuable in

improving the quality of workplace relationships between expatriates and HCNs; whilst also

ensuring that the harmful impacts of upward social comparisons are minimised.

Discussion

Overall, our results highlight the differences in the perceptions of expatriates and

HCNs regarding how HRM practices are implemented across sampled IDOs. Differences

were found in specific practices such as role allocation (including pay/reward) and safety-

oriented practices. HCNs perceived that there were more favourable roles allocated to

expatriates, leading to better pay and rewards attributed to them. These align with evidence

from previous research on HCNs' neglected status (e.g., Takeuchi, 2010). However, we find

differences in safety-oriented practices which can further exacerbate the quality of

relationships. Although it seems that the IDOs we studied take the right measures to protect

expatriates and HCNs, it is evident that more significant investments were made in protecting

expatriates compared to HCNs. These differences have the potential to further exacerbate the

negative outcomes found from differences in role allocation practices and from paying HCNs

lower wages, in line with their local economy. Such perceived differences triggered upward

social comparison outcomes among HCNs. Aligned with the social categorisation theorists'

perspective (e.g., Kawakami & Dion 1993), IDO expatriates and HCNs became more aware

of their group identities and engaged more in out-group social comparisons. This

subsequently influenced the expatriates' and HCNs' attitudes and behaviours (Kawakami and

Dion, 1993, van Bakel, 2019) such as demonstrating hesitance in contributing meaningfully

to teams' progress, hesitating to share knowledge, exhibiting incivilities, and stereotypical

behaviours.

28

HCNs' perception affirms this notion of "relative deprivation" (Runciman, 1966)

when they began to compare themselves to expatriates. Their continued categorisation of

expatriates as a main referent group. Hence, HCNs referenced expatriates as "better-off" and

themselves as worse-off. This expands on knowledge, which suggests that assimilating

upward can have positive or negative implications (Gerber *et. al.,* 2018). Positive, in a way of

triggering a better sense of self-worth and motivating HCNs to strive towards achieving these

"better-off" positions themselves. Negative in a way that it negatively impacts their sense of

self-worth especially when they see themselves as possessing similar attributes with their

referents, such as having equitable years of work experience, similar qualifications, and

capabilities; and yet are unable to find themselves in similar positions.

Conversely, for expatriates, the most salient HRM practices that most influenced their

perceptions were practices linked to safety and security. Other interests include boosting their

international experiences. Perhaps some elements of adjustment to the host country and

getting to know the local culture. This is related to what we already know about expatriate

management in literature suggesting that expatriates seek work experience and other global

management skills for international assignments which are pre-requisites to obtaining the

benefits that are associated with it such as attaining specific "executive suites" (Takeuchi,

2010, p.1041). Additionally, some IDO expatriates have a sense of devaluing rewards and

seemed unwilling to divulge pay information. So far, we are yet to find evidence within the

literature that aligns with this finding, except for the justifications that seem to be provided

for the compensation advantage that expatriates have linked to working in difficult contexts

with culture shock and career uncertainties (e.g., Dickman, Doherty, Mills and Brewster,

2008). Expatriates demonstrated interest in pursuing social justice, whilst taking up some

leadership roles. Expatriates neither perceived relative deprivation nor wanted to engage in

making comparison selection downwards, as that is considered a worse-off position. This also

conforms with the notion that comparisons are generally upward, except in situations where

self-esteem is threatened (Wills, 1981). Expatriates did not feel threatened as allocating more

favourable roles gave them hegemony. Expatriates' ability to witness the perceptions and

reactions of HCNs and knowing that they are better-off indeed, increases their hegemony

within these IDOs, hence influencing policies affecting both parties. This further leads to

expatriate self-enhancing behaviours.

Limitations and recommendations for future studies

While our research brings novel findings of HRM implementation in IDOs and their

effects on both expatriates and HCNs, it has limitations that should be acknowledged. First,

we focus on the context of IDOs in Nigeria, which may limit the generalisability of our

findings. Future research should explore how similar IDOs operate in other African countries

and other world regions such as Latin America and some parts of Asia as those may vary

considerably. Their economic and social advancement can potentially establish some

differences and similarities with our findings. The cultural and ethnic proximity of expatriates

and HCNs could also be explored with larger samples, to understand social comparison

mechanisms. Some of our limitations are associated with the IDO types targeted. However,

we believe this is a good representation of the main IDO types (as per Table ii).

Second, our research has not evaluated specific characteristics that facilitate or inhibit

interactions between expatriates and HCNs' interactions, such as cultural distance, perceived

as an expression of similarities between both groups (van Bakel, 2019). Future research could

use a similarity-attraction paradigm (Byrne, 1971) or what Fee *et al.*, (2015, p.11) refer to as

"similarity-equality" to access how certain characteristics of expatriates and HCNs can

facilitate closeness and successful expatriate and HCN interactions. Additionally, IDOs

employ expatriates that originate from different nationalities that may not necessarily be the

same as the home country of the IDO headquarters (Lazarova *et al*, 2021). Although our

study identified some differences in nationalities of expatriates, it would be worth examining

how these differences can strengthen or weaken expat-HCN relationships. Future studies can

therefore consider the diversity of IDO expatriate nationalities to understand whether this can

influence HCN's receptiveness to their network and vice versa.

Third, other factors such as gender and nationality (e.g., Varma *et al.,* 2011) can be

considered for future study. Gender and nationality are entwined, especially given Nigeria's

patriarchal culture that values men over women. There is the perception that women are

inferior to men on the job market, resulting in unequal opportunities and rights (Bako and

Syed, 2018). This increases the likelihood of pessimism towards a female expatriate

supervising a Nigerian male HCN colleague, for example. Based on the similarity-attraction

paradigm, future research can explore how such dissimilarities can exacerbate conflicts in the

interactions between in-group and out-group members at work. Other attributes linked to

nationality include accent and skin colour. From our findings, these attributes have been

suggested by one of the HCN participants, as potential sources of conflict in their interaction

with expatriate colleagues. It was suggested that expatriates with specific accents would

make the same suggestion previously made by an HCN, but their suggestion would be

considered more valuable. We did not reflect this in the main results section because it was

not included in our interview protocol, and it was less emphasised by HCN participants in

general. Due to the general lack of emphasis on skin color and accent (attributes of

nationality), this aspect was not further explored. We recommend that future research should

examine the extent to which these two characteristics or attributes can further influence the

attainment of "executive suites" (Takeuchi, 2010, p.1041) relative to HCNs and how this can

be mitigated if it leads to negative consequences in their interpersonal relationships.

Lastly, we had a low sample of expatriates due to some safety and security concerns for

one of the researchers during the data collection stage. It was difficult to travel to some

remote areas within Nigeria and reach out to some of the respondents. To remain compliant

with ethical standards, except for those working in safer parts of the country like Abuja, we

were unable to access more expatriates on the ground. Due to these safety and security

concerns, some IDOs were more restrictive than others in allowing access. This, therefore,

provides room for future research with larger samples and increased budgets to account for

safety and security concerns. While we have focused on IDO workers with regular paid

contracts, future research could also consider the management of volunteers working in

certain IDOs.

Practical Implications & Conclusion

The managerial implication for the foregoing is that, although IDO HCNs who feel

relatively deprived (Runciman, 1966) can renegotiate their employment conditions, this may

not necessarily be feasible in the short run due to the pervasiveness of ethnocentric pay

practices by global players (Toh and DeNisi, 2003), partly justified by the competences that

expatriates bring to their role (Lazarova *et al.,* 2021). It may be relevant to communicate

clearly on the competencies expatriates bring to explain status difference or pay gap between

them and HCNs (Lazarova *et al.,* 2021).

IDOs could focus on other practices such as safety-oriented practices likely to reduce

the negative effect of status differences between group groups. Other practices might include

HCNs given similar opportunities, such as engaging in short-term international assignments

to gain the relevant developmental experiences offered to expatriates, rather than simply

fulfilling staffing needs (Solomon, 1995). Moreover, if HCNs are allowed to spend some time

abroad for training, it increases their learning opportunities and offers them a better sense of

self-worth. They would also feel less relatively deprived and the use of expatriates as their

referents because of differences in HRM practices enactment, may become less obvious (Toh

and DeNisi, 2003), or less of their concern. Expatriates' efforts would also be more effective

if their status difference with HCNs is minimised (Fee *et al.*, 2015).

In our study, we discovered that HCNs, especially those who live in Abuja, cannot

afford to live in highbrow areas where expats live. As they commute long distances to and

from work, they are further exposed to risk and stress. Interactions between expatriates and

HCNs may be negatively affected by these challenges. To solve this dilemma, IDOs can

reduce these logistical challenges and pressures by re-examining expatriate and HCN living

conditions and by introducing housing systems that are beneficial to the latter. Providing

housing closer to work or adopting hybrid working arrangements would reduce commute

times and improve quality of life for HCNs. Since the Covid-19 pandemic, hybrid work

arrangements have become increasingly popular. To provide their workers with flexibility,

IDOs can continue to offer the option of coming into the office only for team meetings and

field trips. In this way, they are less vulnerable to risk and have fewer transportation costs to

worry about. Furthermore, pay disparity can be minimised by harmonising positions so that

pay scales correspond to tax systems and living costs in specific countries.

Triggers of stereotypical behaviours can be investigated by studying specific

demographic characteristics such as nationality (Bonache, Langinier, and Zarraga-Oberty,

2015), often linked to culture. Hence how each group might be more culturally sensitive (Cyr

and Schneider, 1996), can be promoted during induction training. This can influence

perceptions about how employees see themselves in different roles, hence minimising

conflicts that often seem to arise as a result.

Additionally, the implementation of HRM policies and practices that practically reflects

inclusivity rather than what has been postulated rhetorically, should be prominent and have a

positive effect on IDOs' performance. This is important because corporate investments in

diversity and inclusion programmes tend to be associated with favourable employee attitudes

(Madera, Dawson, and Neal, 2018), with a potential implication for organisational

performance too.

In conclusion, we argued that the perceptions of specific in-group members within

sampled IDO workforce regarding the enactment of dissimilar HRM practices- giving

preferences to specific out-group members mostly triggered more upward and less downward

comparison outcomes. Our results inform not only researchers but also practitioners about

some of the key aspects that can be accounted for in managing a blended workforce in IDOs.

This is a relevant predictor of the performance. Although some HRM practices were more

salient for each group, this is not to suggest that IDOs or other organisations, should solely be

focused on these salient practices for each group in such ways. Hence, IDOs' collaborative

participation to minimise the effects through a personal responsibility programme (Fee and

McGrath Champ, 2017) advocated by the IDOs for expatriates can also be extended to HCNs

in a more nuanced way.

We believe that the result from this study would be useful for HRM practitioners in

the implementation of their HRM and related organisational practices in IDOs. Although

individual needs differ, it is pertinent to acknowledge the relevance of individuals'

perceptions as this influences their awareness regarding the social comparisons which in turn

reflects in their attitudes and behaviours. This then spills over reflecting on their quality of

work in general, relating to wider organisational goals.

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Table i: *IDO classification based on aid channels*

Aid Channel	First-level implementing partners	Examples
Bilateral		
Public sector	Donor governments*-central state and local institutions.	Development Ministry (of DAC or non-DAC countries)
	Aid recipients-central, state, and local institutions	Ministry of Finance (e.g Canadian Ministry of Finance)
		Ministry of Foreign Affairs (e.g FCO now merged with DFID
Non-governmental	Non-profit entities	Cooperatives; Foundations
Public-private partnerships	Private actors; Bilateral/multilateral agencies	Development Finance Institutions; Challenge funds
Other	For-profit entities	Consultancies; Think tanks*
Multilateral		
Multilateral	Inter-governmental Institutions	World Bank; UN; EU; ECOWAS; CGAIR research centres e.g IFPRI

Source: OECD, 2013

Note: Within donor governments, there is often more than one government body that can be an implementing partner with spending authorities held with central agencies. If budgetary authorities are formally transferred from central aid authorities to other public sector agencies, the channel will be determined by the latter's first-level implementing partners.

Acronyms: FCO-Foreign and Commonwealth Office; DAC-Development Assistant Committee; DFID - Department for International Development

Table ii: *An Overview of sampled IDO Classification*

IDOs	Bilateral	Multilateral	Nature of core activities
IDO1		✓	Financial services
IDO2	✓		Diverse developmental areas

IDO3	✓	Think tank Research-oriented
IDO4	✓	Think Thank Research-oriented
IDO5	✓	Emergency responses/humanitarian

Table iii: *Demographic profile of HCN Participants*

IDOs	Employee type	Sex		Marital status		Years of experience working in IDOs	
	HCNs	*Male*	*Female*	*Married*	*Single*	*<5years*	*≥5years*
IDO1[M]	10	5	5	4	6	7	3
IDO2[B]	7	2	5	5	2	3	3
IDO3[M]	2	1	1	1	1	1	1
IDO4[M]	0	-	-	-	-	0	0
IDO 5[B]	1	1	-	1	-	0	1
Total	20	9	11	11	9	11	8

Note: "< or >" *Reflects the number of participants "greater or less than" in category size.*

Acronyms: [M] and [B] *connote IDO as either a Multilateral or Bilateral based on earlier classification shown in Table 1*

M-Male; F-Female; Md-Married; S-Single; Expats-Expatriates; HCNs-Host country nationals.

49

Table iv: *Demographic profile of Expatriate Participants*

IDOs	Employee type	Nationality	Sex		Marital status		Years of experience working in IDOs	
	Expatriates		*Male*	*Female*	*Married*	*Single*	*<5years*	*>5years*
IDO1[M]	3	(1 American, 1 British & 1 Congolese)	1	2	1	2	0	3
IDO2[B]	5	(1 Spanish, 3 German & 1 Bulgarian)	1	4	4	1	1	2
IDO3[M]	1	(British)	1	0	1	0	0	1
IDO4[M]	1	(Ivorian)	1	0	1	0	0	0
IDO 5[B]	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Total	10	4	6	7	3	1	6

Note: *"< or >" Reflects the number of participants "greater or less than" in category size.*

Acronym: ^{M} *and* ^{B} *connote IDO as either a Multilateral or Bilateral based on classification shown in Table 1*

M-Male; F-Female; Md-Married; S-Single; Expats-Expatriates; HCNs-Host country nationals.
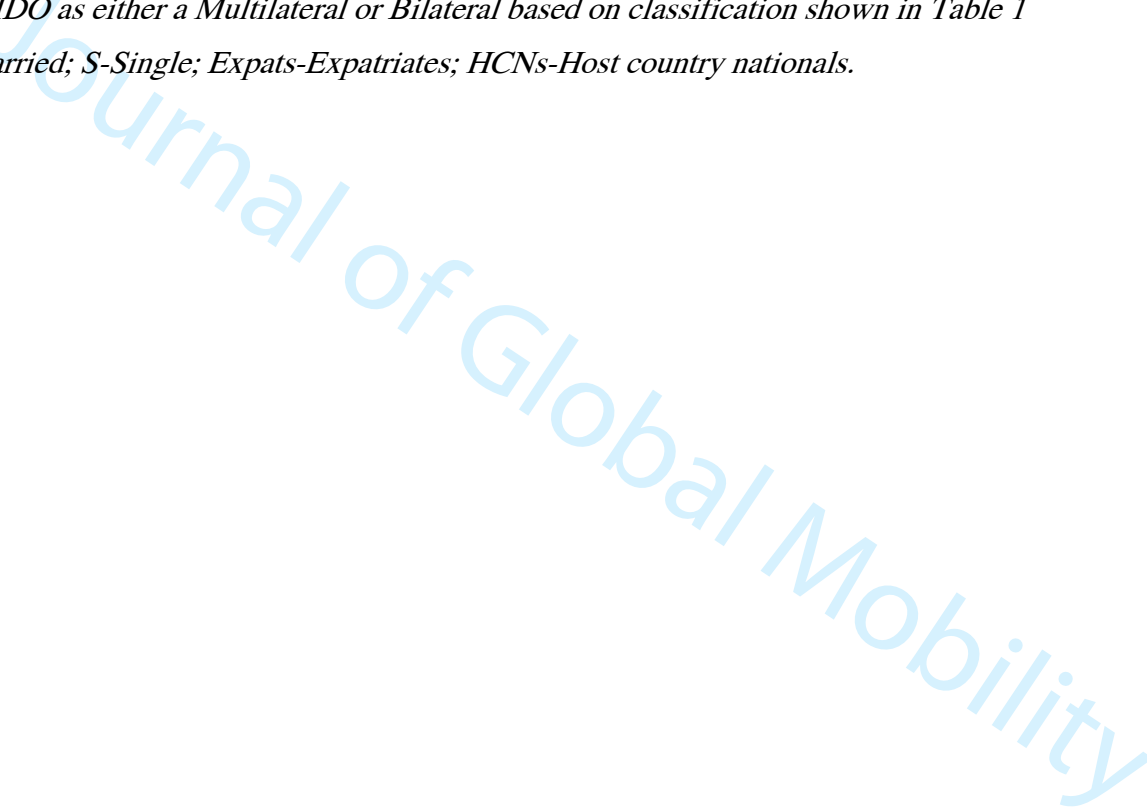
Table v: *Safety-oriented measures and perceived differences between expatriates and HCNs*

Code	Measures	Expatriates	HCNs
1	Logistical support	Live in highbrow areas and receive accommodation privileges	Mostly live in city outskirts due to high cost of living. Hence commute long distances to work.
2	Institutional vehicles with police escort	Offered to expatriates and HCNs on field trips	
3	Health insurance coverage (Category A, B & C)	Access to health insurance & evacuation insurance	Less access due to health insurance categorisation
		Expats are in category A meaning access to first-class hospitals	Are in lower categories with restricted access to health
4	Evacuation insurance & safe havens	Prioritised over HCNs during evacuation	Considered as second-class citizens during this practice
5	Regular updates and travel advise	Offered to expatriates and HCNs	
6	Security Training	Offered additional layer of training (e.g., safe training specifically designed)	Offered training with no additional layer
7	Contract types	International contracts	Local contracts
8	Car parking privileges	Parking restrictions do not apply to them	Consultants (mostly HCNs) are restricted parking
9	Time away from work (TAFW)	Offered one month off after working 3 months based on working in FGDs (Fragilities, Civil wars, and other things)	Do not have this privilege
10	UN passport ownership	Possession of UN passport and UN plate number	Not entitled

Table vi: *Coding of expatriates' interviews*

Research questions	Interview questions	Main Themes	Initial codes
How do expatriates and HCNs perceive the differences in the implementation of HRM practices in IDOs?	Nature of HR practices implemented	Role allocation practices	Contract types
			Job title
			Job ranking/grade
			IE
			Pay practices
		Safety-oriented practices	Vulnerability in a risky context
			Logistical support
			Health insurance cover
			Security training
			TAFW
			Evacuation Insurance
			Travel Advice
			Institutionalised vehicles
	Perceived differences in Implementation of practices in both groups	Privileges	Allocated senior managerial roles
			More opportunities
			Overly protected
		Relative deprivation	Perceived inequity in pay for HCNs
			Perceived role discrimination for HCNs
		Parity	Some safety measures
How do expatriates and HCNs compare		Upward and downward social	Attributed more power

53

themselves to each other and how do such comparisons influence their working relationships?	Outcome of perceptions	comparisons	The notion of superiority toward HCNs
			Consider selves better-off
	Impact on working relationships	Negative and positive outcomes	Self-enhancing behaviours
			Stereotypical behaviours
			Lack of trust

Note: *TAFW (Time away from work); IE (International experience)*

Table vii: *Coding of HCNs interviews*

Research questions	Interview questions	Main Themes	Initial codes
How do expatriates and HCNs perceive the differences in the implementation of HRM practices in IDOs?	Nature of HR practices implemented	Role allocation practices	Contract types
			Job title
			Job ranking/grade
			Pay practices
		Safety-oriented practices	Vulnerability in a risky context
			Logistical support
			Health insurance cover
			Security training
			Evacuation Insurance
			Travel Advice

			Institutionalised vehicles
		Privileges	None
	Perceived differences in Implementation of practices in both groups	Relative deprivation	Perceived inequity in pay
			Perceived role discrimination
			Less influential roles and lower placements
			Less protected
			Fewer opportunities
		Parity	Some safety measures
How do expatriates and HCNs compare themselves to each other and how do such comparisons influence their working relationships?	Outcome of perceptions	Upward and downward social comparisons	Attributed less power
			The notion of subservience towards expatriates
			Consider selves worse-off
	Impact on working relationships	Negative and positive outcomes	Self-deflating behaviours
			Stereotypical behaviours
			Lack of trust
			Incivilities
			Hesitance toward teamwork contributions