Communication Encounters of Polish Expatriates in a Chinese Subsidiary of a Western MNC

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This exploratory study investigates Polish expatriate experts' accounts of encounters with local personnel when building a Chinese subsidiary of a Western MNC between 2011 and 2015. Semi-structured, narrative interviews were conducted with Polish experts, drawing on qualitative methodology and thematic analysis. Their stories reveal prerequisites for intercultural communication, language and culture-related communication problems with strategies to mitigate them, and factors that affect communication. The study offers important insights into the Polish-Chinese communication in a specific business context. It highlights research issues for further investigation and implications for practitioners with regard to preparation of top talents for expatriation.

Introduction

Although communication studies lack essays in communication practices of Polish professionals abroad, business expatriation has been attracting much attention against a backdrop of globalizing business activities. Because the exchange of knowledge and international experiences is crucial for organizational success (Adler and Gundersen 2008), companies seek abroad to access new markets for their products and services, and launch large-scale production in distant destinations, e.g. in Asian markets facing a great surge in foreign direct investment. China serves as the flagship example being one of the world's fastest growing economies placed at the top of the list of the most attractive investment economies to multinational companies (MNCs) (UN 2015).

Doing business internationally calls for a need of intercultural skills to be successful in expatriate assignments (Selmer 2002). The success depends on numerous factors, such as expatriates' previous international experience, their individual skills, the accurate selection of expatriates to specific assignments, their preparation through cross-cultural training, supporting them in the host country, as well as non-work factors such as how their spouse and family adapt to a foreign environment (Caliguiri 2012; Mendenhall et al. 2008). Of particular significance are cross-cultural training programs that help an expatriate to avoid a pre-mature cancelation of assignment, underperformance, or adjustment problems in the host country and in the parent company after coming back home (Harzing and Christensen 2004).

This paper is an exploratory, qualitative study that through narrative interviews investigates corporate-sponsored expatriation and intercultural communication by analyzing six Polish expatriates' accounts of their communication with Chinese employees during their stay in Shenyang, Liaoning Province, China, between 2011 and 2015. Their assignment was to train, coach, and advise local employees as part of the venture of building a Chinese subsidiary of a Western MNC. That production site was a highly multicultural environment involving 1,500 local employees and over 150 expatriates worldwide. Worth noting is that participants were the first Poles the MNC had ever expatriated to perform the role of experts.

The literature lacks empirical studies of intercultural collaborations of Polish professionals delegated to geographically and culturally distant locations. Despite an abundant literature on intercultural business communication in general, more context-sensitive research is needed to develop our understanding of intercultural contacts between business expatriates-local personnel in specific socio-cultural environments. Previous studies have mostly explored interactions involving expatriates from the US, China, Japan, West Europe, and Nordic countries (e.g., Abdulai, Ibrahim, and Mohammed 2017; Barker 2016; Björkman and Schaap 1994; Chai and Rogers 2004; Chudnovskaya and O'Hara 2016; Du-Babcock 2000; Froese, Peltokorpi, and Ko 2012; Gertsen and Søderberg 2010; Ishii 2012; Kingsley 2013; Peltokorpi 2007; Ravasi, Salamin, and Davoine 2015; Selmer 2006; Sergeant and Frenkel 1998; Søderberg and Worm 2011; Takeuchi, Yun, and Russell 2002; Van

Marrewijk 2010). Besides our attempt to fill this gap, this study contributes empirically to the area of intercultural communication in that it investigates Polish expatriates' retrospective interpretations of communication encounters between culturally distant professionals.

Polish interviewees were delegated to China as experts, which resulted from specific internal management culture in the Polish subsidiary of the MNC. Accordingly, the study will demonstrate the perspectives of a unique group of expatriates in China.

In practical terms, the study may shed light on actual problems and experiences of Central European expatriates in China. In view of the emerging opportunities of large-scale international initiatives, such as the '16+1' cooperation initiative (as part of the New Silk Road) between China and 16 Central European countries from the former Communist bloc, exploring the nature of such encounters may offer companies some hints for avoiding potential problems and, thereby, increase international potential and intercultural skills of top talents.

To fill the gap in the literature with regard to communication experiences of Polish MNC expatriates with the Chinese, we pose the following research question: What aspects of communication between Polish experts and Chinese personnel are meaningful to intercultural collaboration, as seen from the expatriates' perspective?

After a brief review of narrative studies of expatriates' intercultural experiences, we continue with the methodological underpinnings of the study, the findings of in-depth analyses of the empirical material, and discussion with concluding remarks, followed by limitations and implications.

Terminological remarks

We look at *communication* as a process of producing meanings, and at *intercultural communication* as a process of making sense of events and perhaps creating shared meanings among individuals with diverse cultural backgrounds (Chen 2017), that is individuals who perceive the world in different ways and behave in different ways, which affects their individual attribution of meanings (cf. Carbaugh 1990; Gudykunst 1997). Accordingly, studying intercultural communication means studying communication between culturally different others or 'communication practices in interaction' (cf. Piller 2007, 208) between members of culturally distinct individuals, groups, and collectives—when 'various linguistic and cultural conventions get into contact' (ten Thije and Maier 2012). In this piece, we will analyze retrospective Polish experts' accounts of their intercultural communication with Chinese employees. In turn, whenever the term *cross-cultural* is used, this implies an implicit or explicit comparison of communication practices across cultures (Chen 2017).

Narrating intercultural communication encounters

In storytelling, narrative serves as a filter through which meaning is coproduced by the socio-historical context of events, i.e. the context, the agents with their experiences, psychological qualities, mood, emotions, etc. Ontologically, narratives are 'discrete units with clear beginnings and endings, as detachable from the surrounding discourse' (Riessman 1993, 17) and typical of thematic, consequential, and chronological sequencing (Steuer and Wood 2008, 575). These units are semantic structures that organise an individual's actions and the surrounding phenomena; thereby, narratives ascribe significance to these actions and phenomena from the perspective of that individual (Polkinghorne 1988, 18).

Czarniawska and Gagliardi (2003), Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld (2005), and Søderberg (2006) underscore the organizing function of narratives, which is particularly important in intercultural contexts, especially in multinational organizations. Narratives constitute and create organizations, they add up to the sense-giving and sense-making

processes within them. Because narratives deal with how interactants make sense of the 'realities they live in through their stories' (Musacchio Adorisio 2015, 80), they embrace the cognitive, semantic and explanatory functions.

Analyzing narratives is a powerful tool for exploring cross-cultural phenomena in organizational contexts. For instance, studying narrated cultural encounters of Danish expatriate managers, Gertsen and Søderberg (2010, 2011) have explored their cultural learning processes and gained insight into their abilities to effectively function in culturally diverse situations, displaying intercultural competence or cultural intelligence (Ang and Van Dyne 2008; Thomas et al. 2008). Another study of narrative interviews with Chinese and Western expatriate managers from Chinese subsidiaries of five MNCs headquartered in Denmark (Søderberg, and Worm 2011) has shown the need for revising the existing and dominating perspectives on intercultural collaborations of managers being affected mainly by their values systems (often boiled down to the oppositions of high- vs. low-context cultures or Eastern collectivist vs. Western individualist cultures).

Participation in narrative interviews may enhance narrators' reflections on their intercultural experiences by activating a second-order thinking and stimulating their cultural meta-cognition (Søderberg, and Worm 2011), which is indicated as a 'pivotal factor' in cultural learning (Søderberg, 2017). As a result, narrating triggers reflection on their intercultural experiences, their self-perception, and the perception of others.

Methodology

This study aims at exploring Polish expatriates' communication encounters with Chinese employees during the building of a Shenyang subsidiary of a major European manufacturing MNC. For this purpose, it is qualitatively oriented to allow interpretation and exploration of expatriates' experiences (Spencer 2011). The personal, in-depth accounts of collaboration encounters were recorded between September and December 2016 through semi-structured, narrative interviews. We chose narrative method as it may enhance a reflexive understanding of intercultural experiences and, thereby, allow metacognition (Gertsen and Søderberg 2010). Narrative interviewing gives access to private worlds inaccessible by experimental methodologies (Méndez García 2016; Pavlenko 2007).

In order to highlight the communication aspects of Polish-Chinese collaborations, the interviews were first analyzed thematically. By identifying and analyzing patterns of meanings salient to the description of a given phenomenon (Clarke and Braun 2013), the analysis allowed semantic grouping of the material and establishing these themes that were meaningful to intercultural communication in general and to the research questions in particular. Then, the relevant stories under each theme were analyzed in such a manner that would allow us to show Polish experts' perspective on their communication with the local personnel.

The MNC

The MNC is the world leader in its industry with a market share of about 20%. It operates in over 150 countries and has several dozens of plants in over 15 countries on four continents. The Chinese subsidiary (the scene for Polish-Chinese communication encounters) was not the first plant in China, but the first in the north-eastern region.

The Polish subsidiary, wherein the interviewees had worked before their expatriation to China, was established in the mid-1990s. It currently employs over 4,000 people and ranks third in the specific MNC's production capacity, so it occupies a strong position amongst other subsidiaries. In terms of internal management culture, we learnt during our informal talks with interviewees that it remains somehow hierarchical, although the company's

headquarters has sought to introduce more autonomy by dividing the organizational structure into numerous managerial levels at which individuals have a certain amount of autonomy and leeway to make decisions. However, Polish employees are quite dependent on a higher level as regards budget decisions. The leadership style characteristic of the Polish subsidiary combines paternalistic and participative leadership, and was termed by interviewees as 'expert' style—individuals are expected to become experts in a specific field and then given more autonomy (although they are still clearly hierarchised). There is a strong dependency between the headquarters and the Polish subsidiary and thus when guidelines are given, these are required to be implemented rather than discussed. This entails a quite high level of control over the subsidiary, which is mainly connected with ensuring quality, and a subordinate receives closer supervision from the superior in Poland than in the headquarters. Interviewees also stressed that employees in the Polish subsidiary tend to favour hierarchy and diffusion of responsibility, e.g. by pushing decision-making up the organizational hierarchy.

In light of the above, Polish expatriates demonstrate a unique (expert) style characteristic of their home subsidiary. We assume this style will be manifested in communication between Polish expatriates and Chinese employees.

Interviewees

One female and five males, aged from 36 to 44, were recruited for the study using a snowball sampling. One informant (a friend to the authors) used personal contacts to gain access to colleagues delegated to China. Further sampling was carried out according to these criteria: (1) they had to be either managers or experts, entailing everyday communication contacts with the Chinese, and (2) they had to be embedded in that new intercultural environment for at least one year. Six out of eight Polish expatriates fulfilled the criteria. All expatriates had previous experience interacting with foreigners, gained through previous expatriations up to nine months and by working with foreigners in the Polish subsidiary. None of them reported having previous work experience from China.

All interviewees declared they had either good or proficient knowledge of English. They had used both Polish and English at work on a daily basis in Poland. In Shenyang, they were given a basic Chinese-language training.

Table 1 provides a list of participants' characteristics. For the sake of anonymity, their names were changed.

Table 1. Participants' characteristics.

Name	Function in Shenyang	Assignment	Years spent in Shenyang	Previous International Experience
Anna	Expert/ Coordinator	• To implement lean manufacturing • To coach three Chinese	3.5	France
Jan	Expert	• To coach and support the head of quality department	2	Thailand
Karol	Expert	• To provide support for commissioning and start-up	2.5	Numerous European countries
Stefan	Expert	• To advise and coach technologists • To implement company methods and conduct internal audits • To coach seven Chinese engineers	3	USA, France
Władysław	Expert	• To design and develop training matrices for functional personnel	2.5	Scotland, France

		• To coach five product managers at the local level		
Artur	Expert	• To train three Chinese technologists • To coach a Chinese for the head of quality team	1.5	France

Local employees

Most of local employees were holders of higher education qualifications or higher technical qualifications (industrial engineering, chemical engineering, etc.). Their collaboration with expatriates was aimed at upgrading their professional skills. The majority of Chinese personnel declared at least basic knowledge of English. About one third of them had prior collaboration experiences with foreigners and had used English at work in other MNCs. These employees were not given any English-language training in the current MNC.

Site

Interviews were carried out in one researcher's place of residence, after working hours. The house was an ideal site for interview as it introduced a friendly, easy-going atmosphere, which helped to make interviewees feel comfortable. They could speak freely and willingly told stories, in some cases very personal ones, through which they expressed their emotions and perceptions of the time spent in Shenyang.

Procedure

Each interview lasted 60-90 minutes. The procedure was designed using recommendations given by Bauer and Gaskell (2000). In the initiation phase, the purpose of the study was disclosed and interviewees were assured full confidentiality and anonymity. Interviewer gathered background information such as an interviewee's educational and professional background, previous work and intercultural experience, as well as motivations for accepting the expatriate assignment in China. These data helped interpret the stories. Next, an initial topic was presented; it had been formulated in such a manner as to be (a) of personal interest—allowing narrators to develop stories about matters meaningful from their perspectives, (b) experiential, and (c) of social significance (Jovchelovitch and Bauer 2000). As appropriate for exploratory research, the initial stimulus was to invite rich stories: 'Please, tell me (a story) about your experiences with your co-workers in China'. In the narration phase, interviewees were encouraged to continue the storytelling both verbally and non-verbally. Having delivered a story, they were asked detailed questions in order to focus on critical events: 'Can you think of something particularly surprising/ frustrating/ difficult/ positive/ thought-provoking/ challenging?' (cf. Gertsen and Søderberg 2011). In the concluding phase, the interviewer asked why-questions and took paper and pencil notes. This informal small talk was a source of contextual information that helped interpret the material collected.

All interviews were conducted in Polish and audio-recorded to be subsequently transcribed verbatim (after obtaining participants' consent). All stories were further translated into English as literally as possible to faithfully retain the original meanings.

The role of interviewer in the construction of meanings

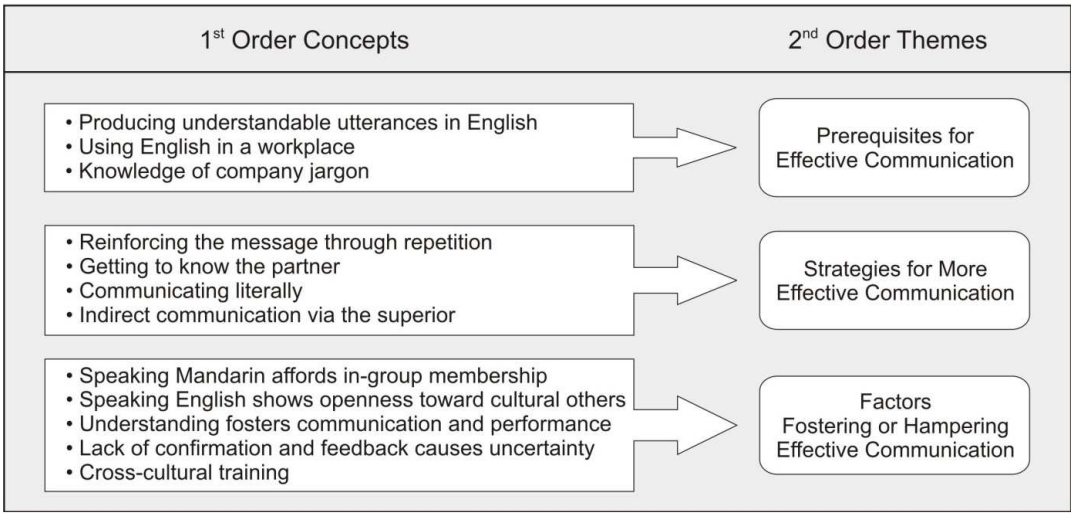
Interviews were conducted by the first author who himself is Polish. His role should be seen as constitutive in the construction of meanings due to several reasons: 1) interviews were

performed on his initiative, 2) he asked the follow-up questions about specific topics and hence may have influence the process of commenting, and 3) he conducted the 'small talk' which aimed at facilitating the interpretation of the material and hence influenced the process of analysis. Most of the time, interviewer tried to refrain himself from interrupting and instead encouraged interviewee to carry on the story by attentive listening and maintaining eye contact. Interviewer's academic background was useful in holding the informal talks with interviewees and commenting on some cultural aspects of their experiences; it may have contributed to an interviewee's confidence and a feeling that the listener was well-informed and truly curious about the story.

Analysis of the material

Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns of similarity in expatriates' stories of intercultural collaboration. Because no interview guide implying any theoretical categories previously established in the literature was used in this study, the analysis was inductive—carried out in the 'bottom-up' manner (emic coding). Due to the research question, we only focused on the stories that contained reflections on communication issues. First, all six interview transcripts were coded by the first author applying detailed 'initial coding' by breaking down subsequent parts of data, labelling them, and examining by comparing the data clusters for any similarities and differences (Charmaz 2014; Strauss and Corbin 1998). Initial coding was followed by 'focused coding', i.e. by searching for the most significant patterns of meaning that could serve to develop categories (Charmaz 2014; Saldaña 2016) salient to the research aim. Next, the adequacy of the initial codes was checked by the other two authors. From this point on, the analysis was performed collaboratively to ensure an inter-subjective reliability in the categorization process. Second, the 'axial coding' (Strauss and Corbin 1998) was conducted by crossing out synonymous and redundant codes, and leaving the most representative ones (Boeije 2010, 109). The number of codes was reduced by merging these that exhibited conceptual similarity with reference to the research question. This allowed establishing initial first-order conceptual categories by considering how the initial concepts were related to one another, as well as specifying their properties with respect to such components of processes as context, condition, interaction, and consequence (Charmaz 2014, 148; Saldaña 2016, 244). Third, the final first-order concepts were thematically clustered. This allowed establishing three communication themes in expatriates' stories. The full set of first-order concepts and second-order themes serves as a basis for a data structure (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2013), as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Structure of the empirical material.



Findings

Prerequisites for effective communication

All interviewees highlighted that face-to-face communication with local employees was problematic due to difficulties of using English at a workplace. Besides difficulties in understanding a Chinese accent, they tentatively ascribed problems with creating shared meanings to different ways of teaching English in Poland and China. Also insufficient knowledge of the company jargon was viewed as a serious communication obstacle and source of misunderstandings.

Another problem articulated by expatriates was local employees' unwillingness to communicate in English which was the company language. Some Poles ascribed that to insufficient English proficiency, whereas others believed speaking a mother tongue was something natural and convenient. Stefan describes how omnipresent Chinese hindered collaboration with his team of Chinese technicians and how it aroused a feeling of uncertainty and seriously restricted his ability to react to potential problems:

> I was seated in one office with them, all the time over three years. And during these three years, I was able to understand virtually nothing from their conversations, so I did not know what was going on around me. For example, they were discussing something, and I even heard my name a few times, but I did not know what that was about. I did not know whether to react or not, or if they needed some help from me. I would often turn back and ask: 'What is it about?'. And they would explain the thing to me, and then it would turn out that I could help them. They would only approach me and tell me about some specific problem. But, normally, they tried to solve many problems among themselves.

Another expert reflected on speaking a mother tongue at a workplace as a strategy to undermine an expatriate's position. Władysław told us a story about his difficult collaboration with a Chinese expert who belonged to his team of constructors (Władysław was the only non-Chinese member thereof). She also served as an intermediary between a French manager and the team, who communicated the manager's instructions.

> She [A Chinese colleague] was supposed to participate in meetings, communicate with the boss, and inform us about his decisions, instructions, and so on. And she did inform us—oftentimes in Chinese. When she communicated something and I was out of office, she 'forgot' to pass it to me. And then the boss demands something, but I do not know what. He did not get anything from me as I did not know. And here comes her mentality, typical of a Chinese,
> —'I did say that!'.
> But I say:
> —'Maybe you did, but not to me'.
> —'But I cannot do everything'.
> —'But you can at least say it in English, as everybody knows English here'.
> I had such a situation a few times more after that. On the one hand, I cannot blame her, because if I am out of office, then she is more likely to forget about speaking English. But it happened on several occasions, I experienced that… that she wanted to somehow undermine me. She knew why I had come there, and so on, and she was kind of afraid that I could replace her, take her position, right?

The narrator constructs himself as being in opposition to his Chinese co-worker. He recounts collaboration with her as a power struggle between an expatriate and the local employee who feels threatened by the expatriate. He assumes his colleague speaks Chinese to the team deliberately to prevent him from understanding his superior's instructions and, consequently, from doing his job. Although it is impossible to ascertain real intentions of the Chinese co-worker based on this story alone, it is evident that the narrator ascribes his inability to do perform well to the lack of information from his manager. He blames his Chinese colleague for that, whom he regards as a person responsible for communication flow.

Strategies for more effective communication

Expatriates devised ad hoc strategies (see Table 2) to overcome communication difficulties caused by misunderstandings, ambiguity, and uncertainty. An interesting response to ambiguity was developed by Władysław who replicated Chinese employees' behaviours to maintain enjoyable interactions.

> I often nodded back. I kind of entered into their mentality and did what they did: nodded, smiled, etc. Even when I needed something very much, and urgently, I knew it would be difficult to get it due to all the steps you need to go through with them. But this nodding, smiling… not flattering them, but observing how they do it.

The narrator positions himself as an observer who tries to adapt to a group of local employees by, first, trying to understand their way of thinking, and, second, by mirroring their behaviours. By doing so, he learns that local employees' ways of collaboration work well for them, so he restrains himself from imposing on changing their behaviours and thus shows respect of their working and communication styles.

In another story, Stefan describes his rule of thumb according to which communicating via the superior increased the efficacy of expatriate-local employee contact. Otherwise, the communication was often one-directional and led to poor or no performance.

> I learnt at the beginning that you talk to the Chinese via the superior. First you go to the boss of the person you will collaborate with and you explain what needs to be done. The boss delegates certain duties to his subordinate and then you can approach that subordinate and explain what he needs to do, because any attempt to work directly with them, without the participation of their boss, it usually failed—it only came down to a talk, and they said: 'Yes, yes', and they continued doing their own thing. So there was a rule that you needed to get to people via the boss.

The narrator clearly describes a communication step-by-step sequence that allowed him to initiate collaboration with Chinese co-workers. This indirect communication consisted of the three phases: expatriate to superior (in English), superior to employee (in Mandarin/ English, depending on the superior), and expatriate to employee (in English). Stefan states that deviation from this system ended in fobbing him off with nodding. The story shows that devising the strategy was as a result of some cultural learning that took place among expatriates. Referring to the strategy in terms of 'rule', the narrator implies that it is something expatriates worked out collaborating with the Chinese. It is likely they learnt about the strong hierarchy in the Chinese subsidiary and have swiftly adapted to it, which should not have been challenging to Polish experts who themselves came to Shenyang from a relatively highly hierarchical working environment.

Table 2. Strategies devised by Polish expatriates to facilitate communication and collaboration with Chinese employees.

Problem	Strategy
Ambiguous nodding/ understatements 'There were lots of understatements there. They, e.g., nod their heads to show they understand everything: "Yes, yes". The next day, (…) it turned out that they had understood nothing'. (Artur) 'I finally started making breaks and I started asking them questions to see if they understand everything, right? And they did not respond to my questions. They just nodded—everything was clear to them. Later on, of course, that 'everything' turned out to be not so clear and when we were implementing the methods, then… that was not clear to them at all'. (Anna)	*Repetition* 'I asked them to exactly repeat what they were supposed to do' (Artur) *Getting to know the interactant better* 'The more you work with a given person, the more you talk to them, spend time with them, then you get to know that person better and you start understanding that person intuitively...'. (Artur) *Replication of interactants' behaviors* 'I often nodded back. Sometimes, I had to "walk in their shoes" and behave like them. That let me get many things faster'. (Władysław)

Difficulty in understanding figurative language 'Sometimes, I told them to do something or I tried to joke and give them some funny comparison to something, and they read it entirely seriously'. (Anna)	*Asking clarifying questions* 'I finally started making breaks and asking them questions to see if they understand everything'. (Anna) *Communicating literally* 'You needed to speak really clearly and simply… and very literally, using no metaphors, no jokes, no similes, no comparisons to something abstract, because that simply does not work with them'. (Anna)
Lack of feedback 'But when you spoke, and that was quick, they often did not ask you further questions if they did not understand, and that was a source of problems'. (Stefan)	*Summarizing e-mail* 'So what we often did was that (…) we had a meeting and afterwards I sent them an e-mail with a summarized task the receiver was supposed to do. And that worked fine'. (Stefan) *Network-based communication* 'One of my employees told me…, because I sent him a message via that chat, (…) "You know what? Chatting with you is much better than talking, because I understand you better (this way)". So they gave me such signals from time to time'. (Stefan)
Uncertainty about the right interpretation of the message 'Using the same words, talking to a white, I always knew, more or less, what to expect. Talking to or asking a Chinese the same question, I *never* knew what answer I could get'. (Karol)	*Asking for confirmation* 'I had to confirm every single thing for three, four, five times with the Chinese'. (Karol)
Lack of direct communication approachability '… and it was difficult that if you did not get to people via their manager… then there was no progress, you could not push anything through. That was *difficult*'. (Stefan)	*Communicating via the superior* 'I learnt then how to communicate with the Chinese, because you have to talk to them via their manager'. (Stefan)

Factors fostering or hampering effective communication

Interviewees emphasised that Mandarin was spoken during social events. However, they expressed their understanding for the Chinese using their mother tongue if it was understood by the majority of the group. This view can be interpreted in the context of expatriates' previous experiences in Poland which is a highly monolingual and monocultural country where it is common that people converse in Polish even when eating out in the presence of foreigners. But although interviewees did relate speaking English to showing an open attitude toward foreigners, they could at the same time perceive it as unnecessary, incomprehensible, or—when asked to speak English—as an obligation to be open. This is shown in a story told by Stefan who reflects on his Polish colleague's suggestion about speaking English and views it as something unnatural, 'rare'. The narrator presents full understanding for using a local language even in the presence of foreigners. This finding appears puzzling as the expatriate seems to favour the reason of convenience of using a local language by the majority of the group over enhancing mutual understanding and expatriates' integration:

> When you went out for dinner and there was one foreigner and all the others were Chinese, then they did not speak English just because of me. Imagine a Frenchman coming to Poland and going out for dinner with a bunch of Poles. They will not speak French just to let that Frenchman understand. That is obvious. We had a situation with our Polish colleague who always said: 'Do not speak Polish. Speak only English as he does not know Polish'. He kind of forced us to get opened to that. But, it is rare… really, because it is much easier to speak your own language if most people speak that language, rather than adjust yourself to one person. It worked this way in China. They are not going to speak English only for me.

Expatriates' inability to speak Mandarin limited integration at social events, because they could not engage in dinner-table conversations. This made them feel awkward, excluded,

and gave them a feeling of not belonging to the group. Low Mandarin proficiency prevented integration and resulted in their feeling of being ignored, and in the long run in a preference for social isolation:

> **Jan:** One day I thought: 'Ok, I am going to eat lunch with the Chinese'. I gave up after a week. I said: 'No, thank you, I do not want to as it does not add any real value'. I sat there on my own and I heard them speak Chinese… And I said: 'Enough!'. When two or three Chinese people met at the table, nobody got interested in you, never… So I said: 'If I am to sit on my own here?, then I prefer to sit on my own there?'.

Speaking Mandarin was also necessary to participate in the decision-making process. Using Mandarin at the meetings inhibited expatriate-local employee communication and collaboration, and created a feeling among the expatriates of not belonging to the work group.

> **Władysław:** Although the boss held the meetings in English, they discussed everything in Chinese. And we are sitting there, with my boss, as they are talking Chinese, and we do not know what is going on. Somebody tries to translate that, but they have been talking for twenty minutes, and somebody translates that for two minutes. And then we had another meeting with other things discussed in Chinese, not in English. They easily switched into Chinese and discussed everything among themselves, even if we belonged to the group, too. And the decision was taken—without us.

Some expatriates ascribed collaboration difficulties to an insufficient understanding of the subject matter of communication, e.g. the methods to be implemented. Although Polish experts indicated that providing a clear and unambiguous message fostered communication, Stefan's story shows that comprehensible instructions do not have to ensure effective manager or employee performance. In such cases, additional explanations are required.

> They often started to apply a method, but they did not understand completely *why* they should apply it, which became apparent after a few months. I think they did not apply those methods deeply enough, because they were not clear enough. So then additional explanations were needed. And when they knew 'why?' and 'what for?', then it was much easier. Communication with managers looked different as well. I had a particularly resistant manager, who resisted for a very long time, but later it turned out that he did not understand what we wanted to implement and why. At some point, the things were moving in such a bad direction that I said: 'That is enough. I have to arrange a meeting with that manager and his four masters, and I need to talk to them, as something is apparently not working here'. And just after the meeting, he comes up to me and says: 'Listen, I understand everything now, I know everything, and it is going to be good now'. And then something switched in his head, maybe my boss talked to him as well? In any event, the things moved much, much better with him since then…

Interestingly, the narrator implies that besides clear instructions and understanding the essence of implementing a method, also being convinced by somebody higher in hierarchy, or at the same managerial level, may have been a decisive factor in enhancing performance. Apparently, the cultural category of hierarchy seems to have served as a tool for making sense of their collaborations with the Chinese. Being uncertain about or unable to account for a change of local employee's behaviours, the narrator applies a cultural lens to understand that change.

Another factor hampering communication was lack of feedback, which often led to understatements, misunderstandings, delays in task performance, and financial losses. It also caused uncertainty and a feeling of being ignored, which hampered effective collaboration as well. Interviewees described it as something difficult, surprising, sometimes frustrating, and something different from their previous collaboration experiences. In China, no questions were asked during seminars and training sessions, or when the Chinese received oral or written recommendations. To stimulate asking questions or getting feedback, expatriates devised strategies that helped them determine the extent to which the message was understood (Table 2). However, these strategies were reported to fail sometimes if, for example, being

asked about understanding an instruction, Chinese colleagues only nodded or just said 'Yes, everything is OK', or if they skipped e-mails with meeting minutes.

What enhanced expatriate-local employees communication and collaboration was an on-site cross-cultural training, which lasted between two-five days. An expatriate's task was to bring one Chinese person to such a training, and then they participated in interactive games aimed at 'fostering, strengthening, and improving communication' (Jan).

> **Władysław:** It [training] gave me a deeper understanding of typical Chinese behaviours. We could compare them with the behaviours of Europeans, Americans, or others. We could see how others coped with them as other expatriates also told about their experiences in a Chinese environment. The Chinese also told us about their experiences with us (…). That allowed us to draw some conclusions about how to behave to attain your goals, because you came here to work, right? So it [that work] needs to be done.

All expatriates appreciated the training as it helped them strengthen collaboration and understand some culture-determined behaviours of Chinese employees. For example, one informant stressed he had learnt about building trust with Chinese counterparts. Importantly, cross-cultural training increased expatriates' cultural self-awareness:

> **Jan:** You could get to know yourself better, not only to improve communication skills of the very Chinese, but your own, too. We could get to know each other, what one person thinks of the other, who prefers a particular working style. That was really cool.

Nevertheless, all interviewees highlighted the training had been delivered too late—between one and one and a half years after they arrived in China.

Discussion and conclusion

This study explored Polish expatriate experts' narrative accounts of their encounters with Chinese personnel when building a Chinese subsidiary of a Western MNC. We elucidated how expatriates recalled their experiences and identified in their stories such themes as prerequisites for effective communication, communication difficulties followed by strategies to mitigate them, and the factors that hamper or foster communication.

We found that collaboration between expatriates and local employees was based on direct, person-to-person communication in English. However, in many cases expatriates had to resort to the indirect communication by relaying messages to Chinese employees through their superiors, which helped them initiate collaboration with the Chinese who otherwise ignored their messages. This strategy is consistent with Polish expatriates' 'expert' style that combines paternalistic and participative leadership. The cultural effect of this style may, to some degree, alleviate potential culture-based miscommunication. This finding suggests that further research may provide insight into the relationship between leadership style and expatriate-local employee communication.

On the one hand, problems with understanding oral messages suggest a determining effect of English proficiency on effective intercultural communication. While expatriates had difficulty in understanding Chinese accent and the company jargon, figurative messages in English as communicated by Poles were ambiguous for Chinese personnel. This study confirms the phenomenon of 'language paradox' (Van Marrewijk 2010) in intercultural contacts as—although both Poles and the Chinese declared either good or proficient command of English—local employees' strong accent and expatriates' production of figurative messages hindered fluent communication. Moreover, whereas expatriates were given a basic Mandarin course, local employees were not trained in English (company language). Shared language, be it mother tongue or competence in the common company language, has long been recognised as critical for the transfer of explicit and tacit knowledge (Mäkelä, Kalla, and Piekkari 2007; D. Welch, L. Welch, and Piekkari 2005), and so has been the role of expatriate

managers in this transfer (Gamble 2003). Thus, more equal distribution of language skills could have enhanced transfer of knowledge and information.

Omnipresent Mandarin prevented expatriates from acquiring information from superiors, learning about problems within a team, and participating in the decision-making processes (interpreting services did not help much due to a substantial reduction of the message). As a result, using Mandarin deprived expatriates of equal access to content-related material. Besides this obstacle to attaining transactional goals, also relational goals could not be obtained (Holmes 2005), because using Mandarin prevented expatriates' inclusion and equal access to colleagues and workplace activities (Kingsley 2013).

On the other hand, English does not automatically ensure efficient intercultural communication (Angouri 2013; Björkman, Tienari, and Vaara 2005; Peltokorpi 2007) nor does it ensure that things will get done by the local workforce (Nair-Venugopal 2015). Expatriates' stories showed that low proficiency in the host language severely hampered expatriate-local employee communication, which is in line with the most recent findings (Zhang and Peltokorpi 2016) suggesting that low local language proficiency affects work and non-work-related expatriate adjustment and hinders intercultural communication and information flows in subsidiaries. More specifically, this finding contributes to research on the role of host language in expatriate work-related adjustment (Peltokorpi 2008; Selmer 2006; Takeuchi, Yun, and Russell 2002; Zhang and Peltokorpi 2016) by indicating that low host country language proficiency is a serious obstacle to expatriate-local personnel socialization and the source of expatriates' exclusion, social isolation, and the feeling of being ignored or not belonging to the group. Furthermore, given previous studies showing expatriates' negative perceptions of natives using their mother tongue at a workplace (Wright, Kumagai, and Bonney 2001), expatriates' stories revealed that speaking Mandarin in the presence of expatriates led to suspicion that the Chinese may have evil intentions; one interviewee implied that Mandarin might have been used deliberately to prevent expatriates from understanding instructions, which may suggest applying code switching by the local employees to regain decreasing power (Hinds, Neeley, and Cramton 2014; Vaara, Tienari, Piekkari, and Säntti 2005).

Chinese 'ambiguous nodding' may have been used to avoid further communication with expatriates. Although the Chinese were expected to ask for clarifications, it is possible that they did not, because that could have been interpreted by the Poles as a sign of weakness, which can be regarded as a means to save face (Bond 1991; Ting-Toomey 2005). The 'ambiguous nodding' was interpreted by Polish expatriates in cultural terms (Artur: 'The Chinese have something in their culture like… that they cannot acknowledge that [there is something] they do not know').

Poles applied various tactics to increase reciprocal understanding of messages and to increase intercultural contact, such as repetition, adjustment to interactants' behaviours, asking clarifying questions, asking for confirmation, or summarizing the message through e-mail, etc. Although such tactics may work in Polish business contexts, some of them may inadvertently have posed a threat to the Chinese interlocutor's face, especially if applied in public. By demanding feedback at scheduled meetings, expatriates may have shown little intercultural sensitivity, i.e. the affective aspect of intercultural competence being the desire to understand, accept, and appreciate cultural differences (Chen and Starosta 1997), which is necessary for successful intercultural interactions (Chen and Starosta 1997; Graf 2004; R. T. Moran, Harris, and S. V. Moran 2007). Even if they sought to work out strategies for enhancing communication, which exemplifies intercultural adroitness, i.e. the ability to attain communication goals in intercultural interactions (Chen and Starosta 1996), the strategies often did not alleviate ambiguity or uncertainty, and may have turned out to be counterproductive for collaboration. By contrast, demonstrating respect by replicating

communication behaviours of local personnel showed that although collaboration was more time-consuming for expatriates, it was effective in the long run.

The abovementioned strategies differ from those previously reported in the literature. For instance, Peltokorpi (2007) has shown that Nordic expatriates in Japan used culture-congruent strategies to maintain intercultural interactions with local personnel, such as informal meetings with local managers and meetings with local employees without their local managers whose presence could affect smooth expatriate-local employee work relations. Our findings hence contribute to studies of expatriates' tactics to increase intercultural communication and information flow in foreign subsidiaries.

Furthermore, we also exposed negative components of intercultural adjustments (Beaven 2007). Unsuccessful communication with local Chinese, mainly caused by the expatriates' inability to speak Chinese, followed by difficulties to socialise and integrate with the team, often led to stress, frustration, and even to negative attitudes toward collaboration in general. Consistent with the literature, suggesting that cultural fatigue or culture shock may turn into critical or even hostile attitudes toward host nationals (Selmer 1999) and lower expatriate performance (Eschbach, Parker, and Stoeberl 2001), this finding points out a crucial role of relevant foreign language proficiency. Our contribution is that we do not merely enumerate the difficulties met. Our narrative approach allowed the interviewees to reflect on the strategies they developed to better cope with the challenges and pave the way for better communication and collaboration.

Our study also revealed weaknesses in the MNC's international HR policy. Little attention was paid to adequate preparation of expatriates for their assignment, e.g. by delivering a pre-departure training and supporting them to successfully function in Chinese culture both in work and non-work contexts. A pre-departure training that continues during the stay in the host culture is a prerequisite for a successful cross-cultural training as it lets expatriates and their families 'develop interactional, relational and perceptual skills' and learn about the host culture, people, and all the changes to be made in the families' lives (Eschbach, Parker, and Stoeberl 2001, 273). Such practice, if applied, could have lowered expatriates' uncertainty toward living in a new environment and mitigate the results of a culture shock. Polish experts appreciated on-site cross-cultural training, since they could learn about Chinese work values and behaviours, and raise their cultural self-awareness, but they all deplored that it was delivered long time after they arrived. Furthermore, some interviewees' opinions showing full understanding for local employees using Mandarin in intercultural contexts (e.g., when dining with expatriates) may suggest content-related weaknesses in the training given to the Polish experts.

Last but not least, the narrative design of the study provided access to expatriates' retrospective interpretations of their intercultural encounters. Participation in narrative interviews let them look at their intercultural experiences from a different perspective after their return from China. They had a chance give sense to them and make sense of the realities told in their stories, which may trigger cultural learning (Søderberg 2017). For example, when telling their stories, interviewees made sense of their communication strategies and accounted for their use applying cultural concepts (e.g. hierarchy). They also articulated that even if they had faced working, management, or decision-making styles different from the styles they were familiar with, they did not strive to change them or impose their own ones as they saw those styles worked well for local employees. A unique interview context allowed a reflection on intercultural experiences and may have turned out to be a valuable lesson for the Polish experts.

Implications

This paper contributes to intercultural communication in MNCs and adds further implications to the area. In theoretical terms, because cultural sensitivity and cultural agility are aspects of intercultural communication competence, future research can continue to explore their impact on intercultural collaborations in MNCs. Our findings indicate that the ability to attain communication goals does not automatically lead to effective collaboration. In the Chinese context, that desire should be outweighed by respecting cultural differences and culture-based behaviours, even at the cost of communication goals.

As to research implications, future work should involve gathering accounts of similar business ventures and intercultural collaborations as perceived by both expatriates and local nationals. This approach would introduce more plurivocality. Moreover, in light of the emerging opportunities for the development of bilateral economic and trade relations between China and Central European countries, studies of intercultural interactions between employees from these countries may provide companies with hints for increasing international potential and intercultural skills of their top talents.

Narrative interviewing could be used by researchers and expatriates' mentors as a method to gain more insight into their intercultural communication and collaboration, and to show where communication can be improved, intercultural trust built, and intercultural communication competence developed (Søderberg 2017; Søderberg and Worm 2011).

In practical terms, companies should focus more on cultural preparation by offering a rigorous training aimed at reducing cross-cultural uncertainty (Stock and Genisyürek 2012). Also, ensuring a mentor experienced in the host culture would let expatriates voice their problems and help them handle in-company operations, and adjust to a new living environment. Recent studies have shown that having a local host within the company—who interprets culture, intermediates and facilitates communication—contributes to knowledge flows (Carraher, Sullivan, and Crocitto 2008; Vance, Andersen Vaiman, and Gale 2014), socialization (Feldman and Bolino 1999), work engagement (Nigah, Davis, and Hurrell 2010), and develops the social capital of expatriates, which may lead to higher individual and organizational performance (Van Bakel et al. 2016).

Limitations

This study was a first attempt to examine intercultural communication practices of Polish experts in China. However, it has several limitations. First, the material includes only retrospective stories based on selective memories of Polish interviewees. Although anchoring certain events in specific, subjective plot constructions is an advantage of narrative interviewing, since it unfolds experiences meaningful from the narrator's perspective, it also prevents a sharper focus on communication aspects of intercultural collaborations. Second, the authors had no access to observe any collaboration practices in China and could not compare them with interviewees' accounts. Third, only expatriates' voices are presented in this study. Listening to Chinese employees' perceptions of their collaboration with the Polish experts might introduce new perspectives.

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