

Empowering Knowledge Dynamics: A Process Ontology Perspective on Collaborative Leadership in International Assignments

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Abstract

Purpose:

This paper conceptualizes a framework for the role of collaborative leadership in the generation and distribution of knowledge by globally mobile personnel. This framework addresses limitations in existing models that often ignore the iterative and relational processes in knowledge dynamics by emphasizing collaborative leadership's crucial role in continuously shaping these dynamic processes.

Design/methodology/approach

Adopting a theoretical approach, this study applies a process ontology to demonstrate how these knowledge dynamics interact at different levels of analysis through a continuous process of becoming. It critically reviews existing literature on knowledge transfer in IAs, highlighting limitations of traditional paradigms. The paper also draws on the concept of Leadership-as-Practice to emphasize the importance of collaborative leadership to explore these complex interactions and their implications for knowledge movement.

Findings

By applying this lens, we identify novel phenomena, including the occurrence of knowledge dynamics not only during IAs but also in anticipation of them. We uncover asymmetries of knowledge that emerge at various stages of IAs and reveal that knowledge movement in IAs is

multi-directional and processual, challenging the traditional view of linear knowledge dynamics.

Originality

This paper introduces a novel framework combining process ontology and collaborative leadership to examine knowledge dynamics in IAs. It offers a novel perspective by moving beyond the traditional, linear understanding of knowledge transfer, emphasizing the multi-directional and dynamic nature of knowledge creation and movement. By introducing process ontology and collaborative leadership, the study challenges existing paradigms and develops theoretical propositions opening new avenues for research and theory-building in the knowledge management and global mobility literature.

KEYWORDS: Knowledge sharing, knowledge transfer, collaborative knowledge creation, collaborative leadership, Leadership-as-Practice, International assignments, expatriation

'The semantics of knowledge representation in an organization are intrinsically unstable.' (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002)

The importance of knowledge transfer of globally mobile personnel has been identified for over 40 years (e.g. Chang et al., 2012; Edstrom & Galbraith, 1977; Gonzalez & Chakraborty, 2014). Historically, knowledge transfer via international assignments (IAs) has been understood mostly as a home-to-host phenomenon (sending organization to receiving organization), as the HQ sent individuals both to control and coordinate the activities of subsidiaries (Riusala & Suutari, 2004). A more recent counter narrative has been the recognition and investigation of knowledge transfer in the opposite direction, namely from host to home, sometimes known as reverse knowledge transfer (Gonzalez & Chakraborty, 2014; Oddou et al., 2009; Vlačić et al., 2019). While reverse knowledge transfer has received some attention in recent years (Almond et al., 2024; Liu & Meyer, 2020), most of the existing literature investigated it primarily upon repatriation and hence refer to it as repatriate knowledge transfer (Froese et al., 2021).

However, despite an increasing recognition that a high percentage of IAs are designed for the purpose of knowledge exchange and leadership development (Caligiuri & Bonache, 2016), there is very limited understanding of the interplay between leadership in the subsidiary and knowledge dynamics in the context of globally mobile personnel. Specifically, questions on the implications for leadership (within HQ and subsidiary) when IAs create new knowledge and how these new considerations revise our current understanding of knowledge-movement remain unanswered. In recognition of the idea that international assignees work in fluid and complex environments (Bader et al., 2019; Caligiuri & Bonache, 2016) we contend that previous research is missing important considerations. The evidence suggests that most research regarding knowledge transfer in global mobility, has taken a fundamentally positivist

approach which has inhibited our understanding of the issue (Bucher et al., 2024; Chang et al., 2012; Luring & Selmer, 2012; Monks et al., 2016; Reiche, 2011). Heizmann et al. (2018, p. 17) describe the context as one that “has been dominated by functionalist and essentialist research paradigms”.

Whilst we acknowledge that this is often implicit rather than explicit in academic papers (e.g. Froese et al., 2021; Hsu et al., 2021; Vlajcic et al., 2019; Vlajčić et al., 2019) these philosophical assumptions impact upon the research process and, by default, the nature of the research findings (Langley, 1999). Fundamentally, process theorizing in organization studies aims to understand organizations as a continuous process of becoming (Langley & Tsoukas, 2017; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002), as opposed to seeing them as stable entities that work in predictable ways (Hernes et al., 2013). Consistent with the highly dynamic environments within which international assignees find themselves operating (Almond et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2022), a process ontology sees knowledge creation, sharing, and transfer activities as multiple and entwined continuous processes. We suggest that a process ontology is an important representation of reality in the organizational context and that taking a process ontological perspective will help to further our understanding of the development, creation, and movement of knowledge in IAs. Building upon ideas of the ‘practice turn’ recently applied to dyadic knowledge sharing through IAs (Heizmann et al., 2018), we believe the omission of processual understandings has overly narrowed the focus on knowledge movements as a uni-directional event, from A to B (Wang & Chen, 2024). Which is at the expense of the ever-changing ‘becoming’ of knowledge as it is both created and moved (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002).

We draw on collaborative leadership, which is defined as leadership that emerges from the dynamics of a collective “emerging from interactions across members of a group that change the trajectory of activity, decisions, or strategy (Robinson & Riddell, 2022, p2), to look to collaboration and leadership as activities of international assignees enabling an exploration

of the overlapping spaces around these agents and the implications for changes in knowledge (Sharma & Bansal, 2020). This understanding of collaborative leadership is rooted in the idea of Leadership-as-Practice (LAP). LAP proposes that leadership can be considered a collaborative process that takes place in practice as people interact with, and are affected by, others and their contextual arrangements (Raelin, 2023). LAP is a relatively recent discourse which disputes the traditional conceptualisation of leadership as the activity of an individual (Raelin, 2016a). Raelin describes LAP as practices that are “embodied and situated and thus are shaped by the participants and their collective activities, discourses, surroundings, and artifacts that can enhance or detract from what they are attempting to accomplish” (Raelin, 2023, p. 20). In keeping with the ideas of leadership being processual and pluralised, LAP offers the view that no leader leads alone, with the possibility of leadership taking place throughout an organization in a more collaborative process (Raelin, 2023). As such, collaborative leadership emphasises the co-creation of relationships, the contextual nature of knowledge and authority, and the collective facilitation of varied viewpoints to attain common objectives. It underscores the importance of collaborative efforts in achieving mutual goals through the integration of diverse perspectives (Raelin, 2023; Robinson & Riddell, 2022).

Based on this process perspective on collaborative leadership, the objective of this paper is to draw on a process ontology to extend current theory on leadership by proposing that international assignees’ leadership provides the context for the movement of knowledge and the development of new knowledge both for the individual assignee, their colleagues, and the organizations within which they operate. In doing so, we argue that existing frameworks of knowledge dynamics (Nonaka et al., 2000, 2006) and organizational learning (Crossan et al., 1999), are constrained by their focus on knowledge flows as structured processes that are rooted in more static or sequential models of learning and knowledge dynamics. While Nonaka’s unified model of dynamic knowledge creation (Nonaka et al., 2000) and Crossan’s work on the

four processes of learning (intuiting, interpreting, integrating, and institutionalizing) (Crossan et al., 1999) are foundational to our understanding of knowledge dynamics and organizational learning, we argue that our study offers a distinct contribution. The processual lens differentiates our work by shifting the emphasis from uni- or bi-directional knowledge flows to multi-directional and emergent knowledge dynamics. We postulate that knowledge is co-constructed through the interactions of various actors, including IAs, local stakeholders, and organisational systems and integrate collaborative leadership into the process of knowledge creation itself rather than viewing leadership and organizational processes as primary enablers of knowledge dynamics (Nonaka et al., 2000; Vera & Crossan, 2004; von Krogh et al., 2012).

We contribute to theory by conceptualizing a new knowledge framework to differentiate between the different types of knowledge-dynamics triggered through IAs. This framework is based on two ideas: that of process and leadership. Process allows us to see that knowledge movement does not follow linear uni-directional patterns but is multi-directional and dynamic. By adding leadership as a construct that is aligned with a process ontology, we demonstrate that IAs have a fundamental role in developing knowledge collaboratively, so that the system of making and moving knowledge is both multi-directional and multi-level. We draw attention to the need to take a different perspective in future research to effectively investigate the underlying knowledge dynamics. Fundamental to this is the desire to improve the understanding of the social processes and practices involved in the movement of knowledge as advocated by Heizmann, Fee and Gray (2018). It also provides insights into the importance of being, time and context and their interactions in the creation of knowledge (Gunz & Mayrhofer, 2018). In doing so, the paper extends Nonaka's model (Nonaka et al., 2000) by proposing a more dynamic, multidirectional process of knowledge dynamics, which sees leadership itself as being jointly created within these processes, continually influencing and being influenced by relational and contextual factors. This perspective shift enables a more nuanced

understanding of how knowledge dynamics evolve in complex settings such as IAs and challenges the linear and hierarchical framework of organizational learning (Crossan et al., 1999; Vera & Crossan, 2004). It shows how learning and leadership in IAs are inherently iterative, multi-directional, and emergent and highlights that the multi-dimensional is not necessarily about ‘more than one relationship’, but rather, it is about each relationship not being uni-directional as this would not be possible from a process ontological lens.

This paper also offers implications for reviewing HRM and organizational policies. First, to facilitate the generation of high levels of *collaborative knowledge creation, transfer, and sharing* in IA programs, organizations would benefit from explicitly considering, encouraging, and measuring these different knowledge dynamics. Second, these knowledge outcomes help to reinforce the importance of leadership and leadership development for both the assignees and their colleagues. Therefore, organizations should develop policy guidelines within IAs that emphasise the importance of leadership development and integrate this more formally in the preparation for an IA to stress the role of collaboration and offering support to enable these processes.

This paper now proceeds by explaining the construct of a process ontology before establishing critically reflecting on existing models and terminology of knowledge dynamics. Next, we explore collaborative leadership and its ontological alignment with our paradigmatic lens, which leads to an overview of current leadership research in the global mobility literature. From there we conceptualise the role of collaboration and collaborative leadership within IAs and the relationship with knowledge sharing, knowledge transfer and collaborative knowledge creation. Finally, we develop propositions and present our framework before concluding our arguments.

A Process Ontology

Process ontology, in organisational settings, conceptualises phenomena not as fixed structures or characteristics, but as interconnected "streams of activity" that unfold over time (Hernes, 2014; Langley & Tsoukas, 2017). It aims to understand organizations as continuously evolving, rather than as static, predictably operating entities (Langley & Tsoukas, 2017). Process ontology provides a radical reappraisal of how the world works and, when applied to knowledge creation and knowledge movement research, seriously calls into question theories where individuals, their actions, and their traits are viewed as fixed and the relating between individuals is seen as predictable (Sharma & Bansal, 2020). When all things are conceived of as emergent and fluid, then activities involving knowledge – whether transferring knowledge, sharing knowledge, or generating knowledge – must be considered in this way as well. Process brings attention to the means by which things can come about and offers alternative ways to understand the dynamics of knowledge. We adopt a process ontology for the remainder of this paper.

As knowledge moves around and within both organizations and individuals in practice, it is a constantly changing process. Rather like the jazz trio in which the musical improvisation continuously moves between the players, no single moment in time can be usefully unravelled. William James explains this as follows:

“What really exists is not things made but things in the making. Once made, they are dead, and an infinite number of alternative conceptual decompositions can be used in defining them ... Philosophy should seek this kind of living understanding of the movement of reality, not follow science in vainly patching together fragments of its dead results. (James, 1909, p. 263)”

The work of Sharma and Bansal (2020) provides a useful source to consider the value of applying a process ontology to understanding knowledge generation. The authors describe how their research into the challenges faced by academic researchers when trying to discover knowledge relevant to the practitioner community is enabled through this new lens. Traditionally, they argue, the issue of the ‘research-practice gap’ is investigated as a concern of knowledge transfer, namely the transfer of knowledge from academics to practitioners (Guerci et al., 2023; Timming & Macneil, 2023). This fails to resolve the problems (Monks et al., 2016; Reiche, 2011) because the construct of knowledge transfer does not recognize the value of bringing together the two underlying groups within the knowledge creation process. Knowledge is viewed as a package which is merely passed from place to place and its transfer can be guided by leadership and organizational practices. Instead, a process ontology, emphasizes that knowledge creation is best conceptualised as a dynamic of interrelating within which knowledge arises both during and in between the events at which the relevant practitioners work together. Whilst knowledge transfer in the IA literature has sometimes been identified as a process (Wang & Chen, 2024), the concept has been largely researched within traditional paradigms (e.g. Amir et al., 2020; Kiessling et al., 2023; Maley & Kiessling, 2021; Rossi et al., 2017; Vlajčić et al., 2019; Vlajcic et al., 2019). In contrast, a process ontology sees knowledge creation and knowledge transfer as boundaryless constructs more appropriately thought of as continuous activities epitomising ‘a continual process of becoming’ (Sharma & Bansal, 2020, p. 387).

International Assignments

International assignments have received increasing attention in the context of HRM and organization studies over the past three decades due to “an increasingly interdependent global economy” and the need for multinational corporations to adapt to shifting environments and operational needs (e.g. skill gaps) across the world (Caligiuri et al., 2009; Renshaw et al.,

2020b). Previous research on IAs largely focussed on the experience of expatriates, their families, and the host and home organization, as well as the effects of the IA from a career perspective and the impact of HRM practices (Mello et al., 2023; Renshaw et al., 2020b). Another stream of research focussed on the importance of knowledge transfer as a crucial consideration underpinning IAs for both organization and expatriate (Chang et al., 2012; Choi & Johanson, 2012).

From a knowledge perspective, the nature of expatriate assignments can be viewed as multiple asymmetric knowledge transfers. When first arriving on assignment, the expatriate is likely to be absorbing knowledge so that their skills can be maximised within a new context (Chang et al., 2012). Considering the likely high level of contextual differences between the home environment that they came from and the host environment within which they now work (Stoermer et al., 2021; Vlajčić et al., 2019), international assignees constantly interact with their colleagues bringing different perspectives, ideas, and cultures to the work at hand (Heizmann et al., 2018; Hsu et al., 2024; Wang & Chen, 2024). Thereby engendering knowledge creation in the midst of the work within which they are engaged. This is further catalysed by the different viewpoints, behaviours, and working conditions of the host employees in comparison to the home employees and the international assignees they send (Javidan et al., 2005; Oltra et al., 2012) both in the context of expatriates and inpatriates (Harzing et al., 2016). While cultural differences might act as potential barriers to knowledge management (Stoermer et al., 2021; Wang & Chen, 2024), IAs are generally characterised by a consistent search for or creation of knowledge (Kießling et al., 2023). With knowledge flowing back to the people and systems situated within the country of origin, this is the point where true value of IA is created (Liu & Meyer, 2020).

Expatriates have a distinctive role in knowledge sharing because they act as both formal and informal conveners (Amir et al., 2020; Duivivier et al., 2019). Bringing people together to

explain, bringing people to discover together, or bringing people together to generate and think anew. However, despite this collaborative approach to learning and knowledge exchange in IAs (Li & Scullion, 2010), existing literature did not focus sufficiently on the changing and evolving nature of this process (Wang & Chen, 2024). Due to the ontological perspective of previous studies, observations of knowledge dynamics are largely restricted to individual directions from person to person or treat knowledge as a static commodity that is transferred in a linear and unidirectional manner. However, this perspective overlooks the fluid, emergent, and reciprocal nature of knowledge interactions.

We propose that a process lens offers unique insights into what really happens in the extensive knowledge flows that occur in the context of IAs. A process perspective allows us to see that knowledge is not merely transferred from person to person but continuously flows, evolves, and interacts across multiple directions and levels. This approach reveals the complex, multi-directional nature of knowledge creation and exchange, challenging traditional views that treat knowledge as a static, linear transfer between individuals.

Knowledge transfer and sharing

Extant literature uses a range of terms to describe the movement of knowledge in IA contexts. We share definitions for the key terms used in the rest of this paper italicising these constructs for clarity. Whilst *knowledge transfer* and *knowledge sharing* are often used interchangeably, consistent with Duvivier, Peeters and Harzin (2019) we distinguish the two concepts by level: *knowledge sharing* as a dyadic individual-individual activity which formally or informally (Moore & Birkinshaw, 1998) enables the organizational level activity of *knowledge transfer*, hereby defined as ‘the movement of knowledge between different units or organizations’ (Duvivier et al., 2019). Traditionally, however, research tends to assume that both knowledge transfer and knowledge sharing in the IA domain are uni-directional and hence the benefit is only derived by the recipient. We contrast this with the multi-level relationships that are

continuously evolving and becoming, rather than a fixed, static entity (we refer to this as non-entitative) identified from the process paradigm in Table 1. Whilst examples exist in extant research whereby the assignee is seen as the recipient of knowledge this is still interpreted more in keeping with a uni-directional flow rather than considering multi-directional flows that become apparent (Heizmann et al., 2018; Hsu et al., 2021; Maley & Kiessling, 2021; Stoermer et al., 2021). Nonaka's knowledge-creating company theory and Crossan and colleagues' (1999) dynamic processes of organizational learning (from intuiting to institutionalizing) are two theories on knowledge management and organizational learning that have discussed multiple levels of analysis and multi-directional flow of knowledge and learning.

The knowledge-creating company theory demonstrates how knowledge flows between tacit and explicit forms (Nonaka et al., 2000, 2006). These flows occur as individuals and teams interact, creating new knowledge that moves fluidly across organizational boundaries (e.g. between the assignee and the home organization) and across organizational levels. Knowledge flows are conceptualized as spiralling outward, starting at the individual level and expanding to teams and the organization. This spiral illustrates how knowledge is not static but is generated and shared more dynamically between tacit and explicit knowledge through different stages (Nonaka et al., 2006). Similarly, Crossan et al.'s (1999) work on the four processes of learning (intuiting, interpreting, integrating, and institutionalizing) proposes a sequential progression of learning from individual-level intuiting to institutionalizing on the organizational-level, where each stage builds upon the previous one. In contrast to these two models, a process perspective shifts the focus from structured stages or mechanistic progression of knowledge flows to iterative, relational, and processual dynamics that cannot be categorized. Specifically in the situated and dynamic context of IAs, knowledge creation and flows do not follow clear and predictable processes but are less distinct, often overlap and evolve due to constant readjustment and re-contextualization.

Insert Table 1 about here

Reverse knowledge transfer refers specifically to the transfer of knowledge from the host to the home, at the organizational level of analysis (Lazarova & Tarique, 2005). Although most global mobility research seems to focus on this arising solely upon repatriation and hence offers the definitional subset of *repatriate knowledge transfer* (Froese et al., 2021). However, this risks making the assumption that *knowledge transfer* may never happen or may happen only in small amounts if repatriation is unsuccessful (Lazarova & Tarique, 2005) or in the context of inpatriates (Kiessling et al., 2023; Maley & Kiessling, 2021). We contest this view because in a processual ontology it would be impossible not to derive knowledge even when repatriation was deemed unsuccessful: something, somewhere has been learnt. In addition, knowledge transfer cannot be imposed by one party onto another or directed through the implementation of HRM practices as assumed elsewhere (Liu & Meyer, 2020; Vljajčić et al., 2019). In contrast, knowledge is always passing back and forth and does not rely on repatriation. This means that with too great a focus on the singular timepoint *repatriate knowledge transfer* may be leading to the exclusion of understanding *knowledge transfer* throughout the assignment process.

Whilst there are challenges to successful *reverse knowledge transfer* during an assignment including the out-of-sight-out-of-mind concept, the risk that the home organization is focusing on the outward transfer of knowledge (Gonzalez & Chakraborty, 2014) and unsupportive HRM practices (Liu & Meyer, 2020), we believe that the importance of *reverse knowledge transfer* during an IA has been too narrowly defined and researched. While Reiche

(2011) hinted that there would be a benefit if expatriates would transfer knowledge during their assignment, the paper did not propose a conclusive conceptualisation of this process. For example, consider the benefit derived in terms of *knowledge transfer* or *knowledge sharing* when an assignee who has been able to assimilate with their local host, successfully explains to their colleagues why the home organization is requesting changes to the supply chain. As a result, the assignee will no longer have to keep managing the frustration of host colleagues and has the potential to help with communication back to the home organization to facilitate any necessary changes but in a way that is achievable by the host organization. Hence the movement of knowledge is to the benefit of host, home, assignee, and colleagues.

Turning to the generation of new knowledge, several terms exist in the literature which we contest under a process ontology given the potential for confusion. For example, Rossi, Rosli and Yip (2017) offer *knowledge co-production* which they define by reference to its use in the academic-practitioner researcher field. It is our view that the word ‘production’ invites one to think of a step-by-step activity which does not align with assumptions of a process ontology. Similarly, *knowledge co-production* is used by authors within a positivistic approach which continues to see knowledge as a discrete bundle of information or comprehension, see for example Tranfield et al. (2004).

More helpfully, Sharma and Bansal (2020) propose *knowledge co-creation* whilst working in a process ontology, however we consider this to be insufficiently distinctive for our purposes because the prefix ‘co’ is too easily interpreted as implying a dyadic approach and fails to identify the important role of collaborative practice within the leadership activities of international assignees and their colleagues (see below). Zhang et al. (2019) use the same term, *knowledge co-creation*, to recognize the collaborative processes that go beyond the provision or receipt of information and including the generation of new knowledge, however this is

applied by the authors in a positivistic paradigm and ignores the importance of collaborative leadership as is the centre of our theorisation in this paper.

Adding to the potential for confusion, *knowledge sharing* is invoked by Heizmann et al. (2018) to explore the construct of participants generating new and shared understandings of existing knowledge. Through such *knowledge sharing* the researchers - using a practice-based approach - identify elements of new knowledge through this emergent new understanding. We seek to build upon this to explore the potential for generating entirely new knowledge and offer and define a new term to prevent confusion, *collaborative knowledge creation*. To allow us to define this we now turn to explore the role of collaborative leadership in IAs.

Leadership and Collaboration

Thus far we have argued that adding a process ontology to the issues of knowledge making and moving allows us to see new issues and new possibilities. In this section we are going to argue that both leadership and ideas of collaborative leadership have been missing from IAs as knowledge creators.

The “practice-turn” (Chia & MacKay, 2007; Feldman & Worline, 2016) posits that human behaviour can only be fully understood by examining human actions as people relate to each other through practice. In reviewing different approaches to practice, Feldman and Orlikowski propose: “Although various practice theorists emphasize different aspects of these relationships and elaborate distinct logics, all generally subscribe to a key set of theorizing moves: (1) that situated actions are consequential in the production of social life, (2) that dualisms are rejected as a way of theorizing, and (3) that relations are mutually constitutive. These principles cannot be taken singly, but implicate one another” (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011, p. 1241). Therefore, practice is here defined to mean the improvised, in situ coping and evolving patterns of behaviour and activity through which new meanings emerge and unfold (Raelin,

2016a). Agency is said to give rise to and arise from activity: agency springs from engaged social interaction (Raelin, 2016a, 2016b) and therefore activity and agency are mutually constituted (Feldman, 2016). This is a core assumption underpinning the concept of Leadership-as-Practice (LAP).

LAP is a relatively recent discourse which disputes the traditional conceptualisation of leadership as the activity of an individual (Raelin, 2016a). Raelin describes LAP as practices that are “embodied and situated and thus are shaped by the participants and their collective activities, discourses, surroundings, and artifacts that can enhance or detract from what they are attempting to accomplish” (Raelin, 2023, p. 20). When used as a verb, ‘practice’ (US spelling) includes all social features of relevance to the process of interest and the continuously flowing agencies and activities (Buchan & Simpson, 2020) that are recursively produced and emergent (Kempster & Gregory, 2017). Practice therefore encodes: beliefs; history; roles; power relationships; mental heuristics; personal values; agency in a continual flow of activity (Chia, 2004; Feldman & Worline, 2016; Kempster & Gregory, 2017; Nicolini & Monteiro, 2016). It is important to note too that through a practice lens, it is not just the mind, but the body also that is implicated. Thus, collaborative leadership is made-and-unmade-and-remade perpetually when people transform their flow of practice towards new meanings and directions (Graupe & Nonaka, 2010; von Krogh et al., 2012). Leadership in this form, as a sequence of patterns, in flow, is never static but is always emergent and across multiple participants. In keeping with the ideas of leadership being processual and pluralised, LAP offers the view that no leader leads alone, with the possibility of leadership taking place throughout an organization in a more collaborative process.

When leadership is understood as a perpetually unfolding process that arises from interaction, this understanding has been reflected in the knowledge management literature of Nonaka (Nonaka, 1991; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). In their unified model of SECI, Ba, and

leadership, Nonaka et al. (2000) conceptualize leadership as a critical enabler of the SECI processes (socialization, externalization, combination, internalization), wherein leaders foster the context (Ba) that is necessary for knowledge conversion—from tacit to explicit knowledge. Nonaka et al. (2006) position leaders as instrumental in guiding shared visions, nurturing interactions, and creating environments conducive to knowledge creation. However, while simultaneously Nonaka argues that the ‘hope that the creation of knowledge in organizations lies with exceptional leaders is unrealistic’ (von Krogh et al., 2012, p. 252) they did not propose an alternative perspective on knowledge dynamics and leadership that aligns more closely to the processual realities of knowledge generation, sharing and transfer in the context of complex international organizations. When exploring the mundane and everyday activity from which leadership emerges, we see that ideas of collaboration become fundamental. Collaboration fits with images of the successful jazz band (Hefferon & Ollis, 2007; Humphreys et al., 2012) or the conductor-less orchestra (Page-Shipp et al., 2018; Vredenburg & Yunxia He, 2003). Or more prosaically one might ‘think of a time when a team was humming along almost like a single unit. Working together was a joy... Everyone is participating in the leadership.... both collectively and concurrently’ (Raelin, 2011, p. 203). When things are ‘Kinda magical’ and the different group members are ‘pinging off each other’ (Robinson & Renshaw, 2022).

Collaboration is mobilised through engaged social interaction (Raelin, 2016b, 2016a), In other words, inter-actional agency plays out across participants (Crevani, 2018) and the resulting action is emergent and co-constructed towards a specific aim (Vuojärvi and Korva, 2020). The literature suggests that this type of collaboration relies on the “intersubjective practice of agency, in which conversants transcend their own immediate embeddedness” (Raelin, 2016b). Spontaneous improvisation is another possible form of collaboration (Kempster & Gregory, 2017) when stakeholders are “transformed by the relation between them - which is not just the sum of their qualities” (Raelin, 2016b, p. 135/136). We see this

collaborative leadership as offering the ontologically consistent context in which international assignees play a role in the generation of new knowledge. The very enactment of collaborative leadership enables the creation and distribution of knowledge.

Leadership in the IA literature in contrast to Collaborative Leadership

Whilst there is literature investigating the role of leadership in the field of global mobility both conceptually and empirically, many simply refer to individual leaders, not collaborative leadership as we have defined above. Consistent with Table 1, leadership is often interpreted as a uni-directional construct performed by one party influencing another. Once again, this view of leadership is inhibiting the ability to recognise the broad role of *all* international assignees with respect to knowledge creation and distribution irrespective of seniority.

Whilst the term leadership is regularly invoked in the IA literature this is normally done without consideration for the potential difference between leadership as an emergent social practice and the leader as an individual (e.g. Caligiuri & Tarique, 2009). This is further evidenced through the interchangeable use of the words managers and leaders (e.g. Dragoni et al., 2014). Similarly, in the majority of cases it seems that extant research correlates the leader construct with seniority, (see, for example Kossek et al., 2017; Rao-Nicholson et al., 2020). This may be a consequence of early expatriate research in which the predominant model was the HQ sending senior leaders to run and control the operations of overseas subsidiaries (Harzing, 2001). It may also be linked with the focus of knowledge creation literature on central, upper-echelon leadership (von Krogh et al., 2012). Nevertheless, these are inconsistent with more modern views of leadership as a more collaborative process (Crevani, 2018; Raelin, 2016a).

Reinforcing the older ideas of the 'hero leader', the assignee/line-manager dyad has been investigated in which either the assignee or the assignee's line-manager is considered the leader

(Bucher et al., 2020; Rao-Nicholson et al., 2020). This includes when the assignees themselves may be described as having seniority. But this labelling ignores the potential for collaborative leadership by all assignees irrespective of their seniority as is brought to the fore by an LAP approach. The recent work of Bucher et al. (2020) on *repatriate knowledge transfer* offers an example in considering lone hero leaders when investigating the behaviours of senior assignees, in contrast to considering their broader leadership impacts in the fluid context of organizational life consistent with a process ontology. The dominating positivistic methodological approach is also consistent with the broader leadership-knowledge literature (Pellegrini et al., 2020).

We suggest that moving to an ontologically consistent view of leadership in studying knowledge distribution and creation, helps us to see the agentic importance of international assignees at all levels of the organization, not just senior leaders. It helps to provide fresh theoretical insight on the potential for the generation of new knowledge and the distribution of knowledge through the collaborative leadership of international assignees. We now explore this collaboration to introduce our framework of IA knowledge dynamics.

Collaboration and Collaborative Knowledge Creation

Amir, Okimoto, & Moeller (2020) argue that the knowledge transfer literature in global mobility has been too focused at the organizational level dynamics and hence needs to incorporate micro and meso level issues. In contrast to existing models (Crossan et al., 1999; Nonaka et al., 2006), our framework builds upon this in seeking to bring together different levels and directions in combination, including *collaborative knowledge creation* at the group level, all within the context of a process ontology.

The importance of collaboration within leadership in the international business literature is well recognized, for example in arguing that it represents a dynamic capability which delivers

long-term competitive advantage (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018) or within transformational leadership practices (Bradshaw et al., 2015). Indeed, the construct of collaboration is used widely in several literature domains although with many different definitions - and yet, it is fundamentally an emergent process between social entities (Bedwell et al., 2012; Waller et al., 2016). This is entirely consistent with both the ontological perspective and LAP conceptualisation. The role and activities of successful IAs are, we suggest, dominated by the need to operate collaboratively with their work colleagues. And, in line with the collaborative leadership doctrine, this applies to all IAs not simply the most senior individuals. Hence the enactment of this collaborative leadership enables *collaborative knowledge creation*, defined as the iterative fluid process through which international assignees engage with others within groups in collaborative leadership, the outcome of which includes the generation of new knowledge, whether tacit or otherwise.

The ability to share or transfer tacit knowledge is a widely acknowledged challenge included in global mobility literature (Caligiuri & Bonache, 2016; Duvivier et al., 2019). Tacit knowledge being know-how that is embedded in individuals' conscious or sub-conscious (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Tacit knowledge resides in the human brain and cannot be easily captured or collected. To create an environment where tacit knowledge can be shared, interaction and collaboration between different stakeholders is essential (Arnett et al., 2021; Park et al., 2015). The nature of collaborative leadership, in which the group has a sense of coming-together and being-in-the-groove, offers circumstances in which tacit knowledge may be offered up. As such, collaborative leadership not only enables this step in the dynamics of knowledge distribution and generation thereby enabling *collaborative knowledge creation*.

Proposition 1: *By fostering an environment of collective engagement and shared purpose, collaborative leadership facilitates the unstructured but ongoing creation and dynamic sharing of tacit knowledge.*

Collaborative leadership also plays a fundamental role in the broader process of knowledge management within which *knowledge sharing* and *knowledge transfer* have interactive effects (Pellegrini et al., 2020). To the extent that host colleagues see shared goals and hence shared value in working with assignees, they will be motivated to work collaboratively. As identified by Salem, Van Quaquebeke, and Besiou (2018) such collaborative activity whether driven by assignees or by locals can improve the results of working together (Hsu et al., 2024). Building upon ideas of boundary spanning leadership, they noted how assignees bring together different groups through their role in sharing and transferring knowledge as well as enabling parties to work more effectively together.

Oddou et al. (2009) also report on the role of leadership in *knowledge transfer* and the importance of assignees' line-managers collaborative style in influencing successful *repatriate knowledge transfer*. The importance of such a collaborative approach by the assignees themselves is also reported by Heizmann et al. (2018) in the attainment of newly shared understandings. This is also consistent with the importance of collaboration identified within the academic-practitioner knowledge management research-gap literature (Rossi et al., 2017). Whilst these research examples mostly fit within a dyadic approach to leadership, this signals how collaborative behaviour is consistent with leadership that has the potential to generate new knowledge through the process of *collaborative knowledge creation* when leadership is placed within the context of all assignees and their colleagues as a collaborative endeavour.

Additionally, international assignees have been identified as undertaking the roles of coach or connector which 'build trust and foster collaboration' (Petison & Johri, 2008, p. 130).

Because our definition of collaborative leadership sits within the wider social system, we are emphasising that this is not a uni-directional endeavour. Rather, we anticipate that local employees will have valuable skills and capabilities to offer that support valued outcomes to the international assignees, thereby increasing the potential for collaborative leadership as multiple individuals work together. Extending Nonaka's representations that middle managers have a fundamental role to play in knowledge creation (Teece, 2013), all the parties interacting together have this potential in all directions (Kilduff et al., 2011).

The value for an international business in creating a wide base of employees with a global mindset has been recognized for a long time as has the potential of creating this through IAs (Gregersen et al., 1998; Renshaw et al., 2020a). Furthermore, the potential that such global mindsets may improve the *knowledge transfer* process through IAs has also been acknowledged (Oddou et al., 2013). This supports our contention that the processes are iterative as IAs develop global mindsets by working closely with their hosts to achieve common goals and this results in a greater ability to collaborate effectively. Going beyond the ideas of Oddou et al. (2013) we suggest this not only increases the potential for *repatriate knowledge transfer*, it also positively impacts upon *collaborative knowledge creation* and relatedly *knowledge sharing* and *reverse knowledge transfer*.

Whilst it is clear that some types of knowledge movement lend themselves to a uni-directional study, say when an international assignee is newly appointed as a divisional CEO and shares their vision with the organization's employees, ignoring the dynamic environment risks overlooking important issues (Sharma & Bansal, 2020). Considering, for example, how that vision may have first been shaped collaboratively as the CEO works alongside their new colleagues, whether explicitly or otherwise, and the potential for knowledge to continually evolve in ways reminiscent of Mintzberg's idea of how strategies form and emerge over time (Mintzberg, 1978; Mintzberg & Waters, 1985). The vision that takes effect 'in practice' cannot

be the same as any the CEO assignee would have formulated by themselves in isolation absent collaboration with others.

In its regular major annual global mobility survey Santa Fe (Santa Fe Relocation Services, 2020) reported that more than 90% of responses considered IA experience to be an important part of their leadership talent management and a third reported that leadership development is a key driver for sending people on IAs. Indeed, the research report by Santa Fe in 2023 (Santa Fe Relocation Services, 2020) found that leadership development was restricted by operating virtually during the pandemic. Accordingly, it is likely that the engagement of international assignees with home and host colleagues will be influenced by their leadership development and the expectations set for their IA performance. Thus, leadership and collaborative outcomes can be anticipated.

Proposition 2: *The effectiveness of dynamic knowledge creation and continuous knowledge sharing during IAs relies on an iterative, co-constructed process of evolving dialogue and shared experiences between international assignees and host colleagues.*

On the basis of the above it is reasonable to reconsider *knowledge sharing* and *transfer* practices. For example, assignees may prompt *knowledge sharing* by other individuals as they describe their ways of working or provide artefacts such as local client information or local internal process documentation (Feldman & Pentland, 2003). Similarly, as people start to work together with new colleagues, and as trust builds, there is the potential to generate new shared understandings of existing informational constructs (Abrams et al., 2003; Heizmann et al., 2018). Assignees absorbing this knowledge may also interact with colleagues back at the home organization transferring this information.

Consider, for example, where an assignee has discovered through working alongside host colleagues, an understanding of why there are regular breakdowns in production line output. Whereas the home organization has long thought these breakdowns unacceptable and blamed them on local ineptitudes, the compassionate assignee begins to understand that there are deep-rooted maintenance issues that are not remedied by edicts from on-high. The assignee is able to explain, through *reverse knowledge transfer*, why these breakdowns happen and also how local teams are building capability to solve long term systemic issues. Such a transfer of knowledge to the home organization is likely to affect future dialogues about production output and *knowledge transfer* processes from home to host.

Proposition 3: *The process of knowledge sharing is enhanced by collaborative interactions between IAs and local employees. As they collaborate, they continuously create knowledge and facilitate the flow of knowledge transfer.*

These different examples and propositions of *knowledge sharing* and *transfer* illustrate the interrelated nature of these different constructs. And not only do they impact upon each other, but they generate consequences in a fluid and continuously adjusting manner underpinned by collaborative leadership. Given the argument for *knowledge transfer* and *knowledge sharing* during and after the IA, we suggest there must also be potential for such knowledge-distributions before the IA, i.e. prompted by anticipating its implementation. At its simplest, one can anticipate that home employees will share information about the assignee before they travel. More importantly, consider the value to an assignee of starting to work with new host colleagues on projects prior to departure. Beginning to share and transfer knowledge before relocating might simplify subsequent activities when the assignee still has the benefit of face-to-face interactions with home colleagues. Hence *knowledge sharing*, *knowledge transfer*

and even *collaborative knowledge creation* may be triggered by the IA but arise in advance of its commencement.

Proposition 4: *By engaging in information exchange and adaptive collaborative projects with host colleagues prior to the IA's departure, dynamic knowledge sharing and transfer might be initiated before the commencement of the IA.*

Finally, circumstances now favour global projects where an employee may be sent on an IA and yet is still involved with multiple colleagues and stakeholders (internally and externally) in multiple countries. This means that *knowledge sharing, knowledge transfer and collaborative knowledge creation* may also happen with colleagues from the home and other organizational and non-organizational stakeholders. Whilst the conditions for generating new knowledge may require different or more complex conditions, especially with external stakeholders, theoretically the possibilities exist – see for example, the extensive literature on successful co-opetition for instances that support these outcomes (Wilhelm & Kohlbacher, 2011).

The Collaborative Knowledge Creation Framework

Bringing together all these factors and relationships we offer Figure 1 to illustrate our *Collaborative Knowledge Creation Framework*.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Figure 1 illustrates that in a fluid and ever-changing world, where personal agency intertwines with that of others, the movement and generation of knowledge as a result of IAs is best understood as a highly integrated set of relationships. Given the growing importance of leadership development in IAs (Kossek et al., 2017) combined with the recognition that leadership does not sit within single individuals (Pearce et al., 2014; Raelin, 2016b, 2016a, 2023), we see collaborative leadership as central to these knowledge relationships. In doing so, our framework extends Nonaka et al.'s (2000) unified model of knowledge creation by emphasizing on multi-directionality not just as more paths of interaction but as emergent, non-linear relationships where knowledge and leadership are co-created, contested, and redefined dynamically. As collaborative leadership develops and sustains *collaborative knowledge creation*, this similarly enables the potential for *knowledge sharing* and *knowledge transfer*. And each of these is best interpreted as continuous momentary processes which then reflect back upon each of the other knowledge-distribution and knowledge-generation possibilities. Therefore, following guidance from Feldman (2016) we show each construct within a dashed circle, the relationships with dashed, curving, double-headed lines and the model 'off-centre' to further indicate the fluidity of these processes.

These knowledge constructs can happen before, during and after an assignment which, to support the ever-changing dynamic, we illustrate with a curved rather than the traditional straight line. The different knowledge processes operate at different ontological levels and yet interact, are continuous and self-reinforcing in nature. Researching or operating within one of these processes and assuming one ontological level is likely to severely limit our understanding

and potential practical implications. We argue that it is crucial to reflect on the non-entitative, non-compositional and non-substantive nature of these phenomena of interest. The constantly changing nature of knowledge dynamics as a result of an ongoing process of change through relationships, interactions and collaboration.

The framework helps to highlight the potential importance of *reverse knowledge transfer* during an IA (rather than simply post repatriation) which has been under-investigated in the IA literature. It also emphasises the potential for these knowledge processes before an IA is put into place – an issue that we have not seen developed in prior IA literature. Finally, we identify how other stakeholders beyond the classic home-host dyad within and outside the organization may also play a role in these knowledge dynamics. Our framework highlights the importance of *reverse knowledge transfer* during the assignment in bringing attention back to this component in comparison to *repatriate knowledge transfer*. This, we contend, is especially important given recent suggestions that whilst successful repatriation may be important to generate value to the home organization it may not be a requirement to achieve a successful return on investment (Renshaw et al., 2020b, 2020a). *Reverse knowledge transfer* during the IA may underpin success when repatriation does not occur.

Theoretical contributions

We have argued that traditional lenses applied to the research of knowledge flows and leadership have limited our understanding of these phenomena generally and specifically in the field of globally mobile personnel. Theoretically, our contributions to research in global mobility and leadership are threefold. First, we extend Nonaka et al.'s (2000) unified model of dynamic knowledge creation by integrating a process ontology, emphasizing that leadership and knowledge creation are not predefined or sequential but dynamically co-created through relational interactions. We suggest that leadership is not only about facilitating Ba but emerges within and through the dynamic and multi-directional interactions of knowledge dynamics. We

provide a framework to understand the role of collaborative leadership and the relationships between *collaborative knowledge creation*, *knowledge transfer*, and *knowledge sharing*. In doing so, we provide conceptual clarity between different knowledge terms being used in the extend global mobility literature. While Nonaka's leadership perspective focuses on enabling structured processes (Nonaka et al., 2006), our framework posits that leadership itself is co-created within these processes, continuously shaping and being shaped by relational and contextual factors. Our framework illustrates the fundamental role of collaboration and collaborative leadership within the dynamics of knowledge, bringing the construct of LAP into global mobility. This provides support for the proposition that individual assignees may bring leadership into their work irrespective of their seniority in contrast to traditional assumptions (see, for example Kossek et al., 2017; Rao-Nicholson et al., 2020).

Second, we have conceptualized the importance of *collaborative knowledge creation* by IAs which has been overlooked in previous research. Theorising beyond Nonaka et al.'s (2000), unified model of dynamic knowledge creation that focussed on a more generalised organizational context, we draw on a process ontology to highlight the importance for better understanding knowledge processes catalysed by IAs. We show that collaborative knowledge creation is not restricted by time as it is constantly changing and everything through these processes of change adds to knowledge. As a result, we argue that there is a need to look more holistically at the process of knowledge dynamics, especially in the context of IAs. Considering the widely acknowledged complex and fluid environment in which IAs sit (Bader et al., 2019), this holistic and processual approach would seem to fit the phenomena of interest, since individuals often create new knowledge through dynamic interplay rather than predefined pathways. As such, our study contradicts Crossan's framework of organizational learning (Crossan et al., 1999), which primarily assumes a linear progression through the four stages of intuiting, interpreting, integrating, and institutionalizing. Drawing together being, space and

time as well as the interactions between these elements, as outlined in our framework, provides a basis to better understand knowledge dynamics, especially in the context of IAs.

Third, a key contribution of this paper is the recognition of the potential for knowledge movement and creation in anticipation of an IA. Thereby, we contradict and extend the contribution of previous studies which consider *reverse knowledge transfer* during an assignment as almost exclusively relevant post repatriation (Gonzalez & Chakraborty, 2014) or during cross-border acquisitions (Liu & Meyer, 2020). In contrast, we argue that *reverse knowledge transfer* may start before the assignment and thus requires more careful consideration of HRM when contemplating IAs. This is especially important if they are to take place with the purpose of knowledge transfer. The practical consequences of this are that case studies of cross-country collaboration for the purposes of problem solving or work delivery may be viable replacement evidence of knowledge transfer in contrast to more quantitative data they rely on. Additionally, for those organizations interested specifically in collaborative knowledge creation, using multi-country project assignments, the considerations of this paper might provide valuable insights that they do not currently use.

Practical and policy implications

Our discussion focuses on the insufficient consideration of the fluidity and process of knowledge creation and sharing. In the wake of an increasing focus on knowledge work and knowledge development, this paper offers two policy implications for organizations and managers. First, we anticipate that a successful IA program will generate high levels of *collaborative knowledge creation, knowledge transfer, and knowledge sharing* as a result of leadership practices. Knowledge will flow between the assignees, their host colleagues, and their home colleagues in all directions. *Collaborative knowledge creation* happens primarily within and between host colleagues during the assignment but also has the potential to happen with home colleagues and all of these dynamics could happen prior to an IA commencing.

Organizational policies would benefit from explicitly considering, encouraging, and measuring these different knowledge dynamics to promote success. For example, introducing explicit steps to promote pre-IA activities. Moreover, organizations could foster collaborative leadership by creating pre-assignment forums where assignees and local employees interact, share expectations, align goals, or even work on collaborative projects and thus, lay the groundwork for multi-directional knowledge exchange before the commencement of the assignment.

Second, these knowledge outcomes help to reinforce the importance of leadership and leadership development for both the assignees and their colleagues. Organizations should continue to increase their efforts towards developing policy guidelines within IAs that emphasise the importance of leadership development and integrate this more formally in the preparation for an IA to stress the role of collaboration and offering support to enable these processes. Irrespective of the underlying goals for an IA, the role of collaborative leadership would benefit from more explicit consideration by organizations and potential assignees. This includes recognition and explicit attention on the multi-directional flow of knowledge to enhance the leadership-knowledge relationship. Assignees often play multiple roles— conveners, communicators, and catalyzers — depending on the underlying goals of the assignment, the evolving context and ongoing interactions. Organizations should provide ongoing support (e.g., coaching or reflective sessions) to help assignees navigate these dynamic roles and adapt their approaches and practices. Organizations could also establish systems to capture and amplify the knowledge emerging and flowing from the interactions between assignees and local stakeholders by encouraging the co-creation of new insights and sharing of knowledge through collaborative leadership practices.

IA management practices might benefit from adopting a more process-oriented approach that recognizes that collaborative leadership and knowledge creation are ongoing, iterative, and

embedded in the interactions of assignees and other stakeholders. However, due to the nature of the knowledge dynamics based on a process ontology perspective, the planning and directing of knowledge flows can be more difficult as it can emerge and be shared and transferred more fluidly based on situated dynamics. As such, knowledge management requires flexibility in the design of IAs, moving away from rigid, predefined frameworks and potentially rethinking success metrics.

Future research

In conclusion, and to advance our understanding of knowledge dynamics in IAs, we hope that our arguments will trigger new methodological research approaches consistent with a process ontology. This might help overcome the limitations of the historic paradigm of singularity, as illustrated in [Column 1] Table 1, which designates knowledge as being moved by one party in the direction of another and to the benefit of the recipient. The traditional epistemology we use limits us from noticing what is happening. Traditional approaches are insufficient if research is to surface what may be happening from the perspective of emergence and process. Therefore, adopting a process ontology and the realities of the continuous becoming of knowledge as advocated through a process ontology and throughout this paper might bring forth new understandings of all the phenomena we have explored in the context of IAs and beyond.

There is a need for different research approaches, including the use of elicitation techniques or video ethnography, in which events are played back to participants, enabling them to go deeper in their descriptions and see beyond and between simplistic explanations (J. Robinson & Renshaw, 2023). With respect to *collaborative knowledge creation* these methods would also include research at the group level rather than at the individual level of analysis. We would particularly encourage researchers to explore the role of non-work stakeholders (e.g. family) in the process of knowledge dynamics in IAs. As theorised by Wang and Chen (2024),

expatriate social capital might be an important driver of knowledge creation in IAs, and thus, underpinning organizational value outcomes. This would illustrate how knowledge gained outside of work—through cultural adjustment, family, and community interactions—contributes to knowledge dynamics, the expatriate’s effectiveness and, consequently, to the organization’s success.

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TABLE 1 Comparing the traditional paradigmatic research approach towards knowledge phenomena in IA literature to that of collaborative leadership

	Traditional Paradigm (main focus)	Process Paradigm (embedded within Collaborative Leadership)
Provider	Assignee	All parties
	<i>Entitative</i>	<i>Non-entitative</i>
Direction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From assignee to host/colleagues • From assignee to home/colleagues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The movement of knowledge is in constant flux changing as it moves and touches all parties and contexts, across and between levels of analysis
Timeframe	Critical timepoints in assignments	Continuous and ongoing
	<i>Uni-level</i>	<i>Multi-level</i>
Benefit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To host • To home 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All parties, in different ways

Figure 1 Proposed Collaborative Knowledge Creation Framework



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