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Cultural process considerations in a mixed methods investigation of social enterprise performance in Vietnam

Minh-Hieu Thi Nguyen^{a,b}, Darrin Hodgetts^a, and Kerry Chamberlain^a

^aSchool of Psychology, Massey University Albany Campus, Auckland, New Zealand; ^bVNU University of Economics and Business, Vietnam National University, Hanoi, Vietnam

ABSTRACT

This article reflects on the mixed methodological process developed for our research into social enterprise performance in Vietnam. Previous research has focused on social enterprises in developed economies, with calls for further research into emerging economies. This article documents how research in emerging contexts such as Vietnam requires researchers to consider cultural processes that enable research to be more feasible and practicable. We present an exemplar for combining international and local knowledge regarding social enterprise performance in designing the research, accessing participants, generating quality information, and interpreting and applying findings. This article exemplifies utility in scholars bringing theories, methods, and insights from international research into responsive dialogue with knowledge systems and cultural practices in emerging contexts such as Vietnam.

KEYWORDS

Culture; mixed methods; open systems; process; relationality; organisational studies; social enterprises

Research always takes place in a social and cultural context. This means that theories and methods developed in one context often need to be adapted for inquiries conducted in different contexts. This is perhaps most sharply applicable when research practices developed in the context of Western societies are subsequently applied within emerging economies in which cultural understandings and meanings related to organisations and relationships can be different. Below, we contribute to long-standing methodological conversations in psychology and organisational studies regarding the importance of centralising issues of culture, context, and process in research (Filatotchev, Ireland, and Stahl 2022). In this article, we reflect on the cultural processes of producing knowledge about how Vietnamese social enterprises achieved success. We employed a mixed methods design informed by a Vietnamese relational worldview, and where appropriate, international knowledge regarding social enterprise performance. This research focus is of interest to organisational psychologists who study links between enterprises and their broader

CONTACT Minh-Hieu Thi Nguyen  M.H.Nguyen@massey.ac.nz  School of Psychology, Massey University, Albany Campus, Private Bag 102-904, North Shore, Auckland 0745, New Zealand

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ecosystems, community orientated social psychologists interested in relationality, pro-social behaviour and organising solidarities of mutual aid, and Indigenous psychologists concerned with the interface of local and global knowledge (Hodgetts et al. 2020; House et al. 2002). We also intended for this article to inform praxis for emerging scholars engaged in research in Vietnam with international collaborators.

The practice of researchers importing theories, research foci and methodological strategies from Western nations into emerging economies has been problematised in various ways for some time. For instance, scholars have raised concerns about ‘academic imperialism’ (Chilisa 2017; Muzio 2022) that can disrupt and displace local knowledge systems and research practices (Chilisa and Tsheko 2014; Smith 2021). Indigenous communities have expressed concern about experiencing research fatigue and frustration over being researched from outsider perspectives (Muzio 2022). There have been calls from local populations for the use of research approaches through which they can recognize themselves and their own cultural perspectives, relationalities, and knowledge production practices (Banerjee 2022; Chilisa 2017; Chilisa and Tsheko 2014; Filatotchev, Ireland, and Stahl 2022; Smith 2021).

More specifically, previous research has also shown that theories, for example, regarding entrepreneurship and efficient organizational structuring, developed in Western contexts can have less relevance in emerging economies (Muzio 2022). Imported theories tend to reflect the predispositions, ways of being, and practices of their countries of origin, and are not necessarily as applicable in emerging economy contexts, such as Vietnam. This does not mean that imported theories and methods cannot be used in emerging contexts, but rather that researchers should not be surprised when their findings suggest that imported theories hold less explanatory power in these new contexts. Further, when utilizing imported theories and methods, care should be taken to avoid silencing local knowledge that is indigenous to, and functional within, the emerging economies of inquiry (Chilisa and Tsheko 2014). Local ways of knowing, researching, and organizing can extend beyond the limits and presuppositions of external perspectives (Filatotchev et al. 2020, 2022).

Indigenizing research requires scholars to rearticulate theories, research foci, and designs taken from developed contexts to reflect the cultural contexts in which they are to be applied (Hodgetts et al. 2020). Globally, efforts to indigenise knowledge production processes (e.g., Decolonial Psychology Editorial Collective 2021; Guimarães 2020) have opened spaces for inquiry where local knowledges are articulated and extended through dialogue with external knowledges and research strategies. More broadly, such processes of knowledge indigenisation are central to long-standing efforts to pluralise psychology so that different traditions or perspectives can be brought into conversation and shared for the inclusive benefit of all (Hodgetts et al. 2020). This also means not giving up on Western psychologies that have dominated the history of our discipline.

Rather, this involves bringing different cultural traditions for understanding people and the organisations they create into conversation within research applications (Guimarães 2020). Implicated in such efforts are aspects of praxis that have been associated with cross-cultural, intercultural, cultural, and Indigenous domains of psychology (Li et al. 2018).

Relatedly, scholars have also called for the use of open systems of inquiry that emphasize adapting theory, research foci, and methods to meet the cultural processes and existing knowledges of receiving societies (Filatotchev et al. 2020, 2022; Muzio 2022). This includes efforts to combine local and global perspectives within research projects. A long-standing open systems orientation towards organisational research (Emery 2004; Filatotchev, Ireland, and Stahl 2022) centralises the need for adapting, translating, and where necessary, substituting Western perspectives when engaging local knowledge systems. One core idea in open systems thinking is that organisations and their fit within ecosystems are shaped by both internal and external exchanges. Further, internal exchanges within the organisation can leak out into the local ecosystem, for example, when staff in a social enterprise earn enough to enable them to other support local businesses and economic development. External exchanges can also impact these organisations internally, for example, when an economic downturn impacts the demand for certain products and the organisation must be reshaped to produce newer products. Correspondingly, we approach social enterprises as embedded dynamic formations that are influenced by and also influence the Vietnamese ecosystem in which they emerge and trade with others. Filatotchev, Ireland, and Stahl (2022) also argue, as do we, that open systems thinking can inform investigations of an organisation's sustainable development in terms of its fit with the broader economic and cultural context within which it is operating. We can recognise that both social enterprises themselves, and our research into these organisations in Vietnam, are influenced by both the national eco-system and broader international factors, interactions, and trends.

Influenced by international developments, social enterprises in Vietnam manifest dual missions by employing commercial principles to generate profits, whilst prioritising efforts to address societal and community needs (Estrin, Mickiewicz, and Stephan 2016; Nguyen, Pham, and Do 2024; Shaw and Carter 2007). These enterprises are recreated and shaped in response to the broader societal context in which they are designed to operate and are influenced by various factors within the local ecosystems related to politics, available human and material resources, and cultural considerations (Nguyen, Hodgetts, and Carr 2021). Social enterprises also contribute to the ecosystems within which they operate dialectically by providing jobs and social support systems for some of the most marginalised groups in society. Correspondingly, in Vietnam, social enterprises are articulated¹

¹Articulation refers to processes of expression and cultural adaptation via which organisational forms, such as social enterprises, become translated and embedded to fit within new contexts. The concept emerged from Antonio

in particular forms that are reflective of the Vietnamese eco-system and can differ somewhat from Western articulations. Recent research suggests that social enterprises that are reshaped to fit the local cultural and relational practices of the Viet village, for example, are more likely to succeed in this national context (Nguyen et al. 2021; Nguyen, Hodgetts, and Carr 2021).

We applied open systems thinking in our research at two interrelated levels: initially to consider previous international research into enterprise success factors, and then for how we might explore these issues methodologically in Vietnam. First, open systems thinking allowed us to further our understanding of how social enterprises as a global phenomenon are rearticulated to fit the Vietnamese context as opposed to European or North American eco-systems within which most research into these organisations has been conducted (Ahmad and Bajwa 2023; García-Jurado, Pérez-Barea, and Nova 2021). International research has documented how social enterprises reflect the values, experiences, knowledge and preferences of founding personalities, and the socio-economic and cultural conditions that shape their perspectives and opportunities to develop (Child 1972; Hambrick and Mason 1984). This general finding holds in Vietnam, where the culture and subjectivities differ. Our research also shows that Vietnamese social entrepreneurs are nurtured as more relational beings within the country's collectivist culture and values that continue to be influenced by a blend of Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, socialism, and capitalism (Chuang et al. 2015; Insun 2000; Nguyen 2016).

Second, open systems thinking aided us in considering how mixed methods (e.g., quantitative surveys with follow-up qualitative interviews) developed in Western countries can be rearticulated in ways that reflect cultural knowledge production processes, ways of being, interacting, and understanding phenomenon in Vietnam. We consider how from designing the research, accessing participants, generating and interpreting information, and sharing findings, our locally led research can draw selectively on insights from international methodologies in combination with local relational practices.

To recap, in this article, we reflect on our efforts to conduct research into social enterprises in Vietnam that is informed by both research foci and developments from other contexts and Vietnamese ways of knowing, being, sharing knowledge, and organising enterprises to meet local needs (Chowdhury 2021; Filatotchev, Ireland, and Stahl 2022; Mair and Marti 2006). Below we discuss our research context and process. Readers interested in more detailed accounts of our research findings and applications should consult the following empirical articles and policy brief (Nguyen et al. 2021; Nguyen, Hodgetts, and Carr 2021; Nguyen et al. 2024).

National and research context

Prior to the Doi Moi economic reforms of 1986, Vietnam had a centralized economic system whereby the state planned and controlled all economic activities and took responsibility of socio-economic infrastructure. Cooperatives were designed to offer work opportunities for mutual benefit, particularly for marginalized groups, including people living with disabilities, and in many respects enacted the social missions of contemporary social enterprises (British Council 2018). The number of such cooperatives had risen to almost 75 000 by 1986 (Pham et al. 2016). After Doi Moi, many cooperatives converted into social enterprises as part of the Government's effort to encourage private sector growth and the use of non-Government Organisations (NGOs) to support poverty reduction, job creation, healthcare, and education efforts (Pham et al. 2016). Coinciding with the recognition of Vietnam as a 'lower middle-income country' in 2010, these NGOs were encouraged to transform into more commercially driven entities that generated revenue to help address social and environmental concerns sustainably (Nguyen 2016). In terms of open systems, these efforts were supported by a number of organizations, including the United Nations Development program, Sustainable Development Goal Challenge and Youth Cooperative, British Council, Irish Aid, Lotus Impact, the Centre for Social Initiative Promotion, the Spark Center for Social Entrepreneurship Development, Centre for Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship (Pham et al. 2016; Truong Nam 2018).

Vietnam's economy is currently undergoing rapid expansion that is generating positive social effects, in terms of increased employment and incomes, as well as negative consequences, such as pollution and growing insecurities (Barton et al. 2022; Estrin, Mickiewicz, and Stephan 2016). Social enterprises have emerged as a vital element of the country's social safety net and efforts to build a more inclusive and sustainable economy. Participation in social enterprises has lifted the incomes of many low-income households comparatively faster than those of households engaged in more purely commercial enterprises (Gupta, Beninger, and Ganesh 2015).

Since 2015, the number of social enterprises in Vietnam has increased fivefold with many organisations demonstrating considerable resilience and sustainability in supporting over one million beneficiaries (British Council 2021; British Council, UN-ESCAP 2018). During the COVID 19 pandemic, for example, almost 80% of Vietnamese social enterprises remained profitable, and were ranked the highest profit-making social enterprises in South-East Asia (British Council 2020). To date, Vietnam has more than 20 000 social enterprises that embrace the dual mission of generating sustainable commercial profits in order to also resource positive social and/or environmental impacts for local communities and society (Defourny and Nyssens 2008;

UNDP Vietnam 2023). Despite rapid development and noted successes, the underpinning reasons for the growth in social enterprises and the efficacy of these organisations in Vietnam remains relatively unexplored, providing the rationale for our research.

Recent decades have seen rapid growth globally in both social entrepreneurship and related scholarship (García-Jurado, Pérez-Barea, and Nova 2021; Granados et al. 2011; Gupta et al. 2020; Saebi, Foss, and Linder 2019; Short, Moss, and Lumpkin 2009; Teasdale et al. 2023). This growth has been documented predominantly in North America and European countries, with much less regional focus on emerging economies in African, South American or Asian countries (Ahmad and Bajwa 2023; García-Jurado, Pérez-Barea, and Nova 2021; Granados et al. 2011; Short, Moss, and Lumpkin 2009). Correspondingly, research into social entrepreneurship and social enterprises has also tended to be guided by Western theoretical understandings and research strategies (Filatotchev, Ireland, and Stahl 2022; Gupta et al. 2020). In responding to calls for more research into social enterprises in emerging economies (e.g., Gupta et al. 2020; Klarin and Suseno 2023; Short, Moss, and Lumpkin 2009), care needs to be taken regarding cultural processes in knowledge production.

Research in emerging economies has often involved the importation of existing theories and methods from Western contexts, focusing on the personality of social entrepreneurs themselves, as correlated with organizational strategies for success, and broader societal eco-system factors that influence the sustainability of these enterprises (Gupta et al. 2020; Klarin and Suseno 2023; Saebi, Foss, and Linder 2019). A prominent focus has been on identifying specific individual personality traits, skills, openness to innovation, motivations, and leadership philosophies found for Western social entrepreneurs in developed contexts (Collins, Hanges, and Locke 2004; García-Jurado, Pérez-Barea, and Nova 2021; Teasdale et al. 2023; Thompson 2002). Research has also explored how the personalities of social entrepreneurs relate to, and fit with, the societal contexts in which they operate (Welter 2011). This orientation is accompanied with an emergent focus on how economic and societal contexts can facilitate or undermine social enterprise development and performance (Gupta et al. 2020; Klarin and Suseno 2023; Saebi, Foss, and Linder 2019; Short, Moss, and Lumpkin 2009).

Other research has foregrounded the importance of interactive relationships between ecosystems, social entrepreneur characteristics, and enterprise performance (OECD-LEED 2016; Roundy 2016; Roy and Hazenberg 2019; Shaw and Carter 2007). Some scholars have characterised an enabling social entrepreneurship ecosystem as including an amenable local culture, supportive laws, and financial support structures that increase entrepreneurial motivations to respond to opportunities for developing social enterprises as a means of serving local needs (Biggeri, Testi, and Bellucci 2017).

It is also important to note that research shows that, just as social entrepreneurs and their strategies for success are shaped by ecosystems, over time, social enterprise activities can also influence elements of the ecosystem that support further enterprise development (Roundy 2019). A central issue currently perplexing researchers is how to bring cultural understandings and knowledge production practices germane to emerging contexts into conversation with global research on enterprises and research practices (Chilisa 2017; Filatotchev, Ireland, and Stahl 2022; Gupta et al. 2020; Zahra and Wright 2011). For our present research, this involved building upon previous research to consider the role of Vietnamese Indigenous selves (see below for comment on the Vietnamese interconnected self and studious spirit) and related cultural values as foundational to the psychology and organising of social enterprises in Vietnam.

Our research integrated theoretical ideas and empirical findings drawn from Western research with local knowledge, cultural practices, and ways of being. Using an open systems perspective, our findings showed that social entrepreneurs were more likely to succeed when their organisational processes benefited their communities and operated in accord with local customs and relational practices (Nguyen et al. 2021). This research also clarified how social entrepreneurs, social enterprises, and ecosystems often interact in accordance with the cultural nuances and customary practices of their localities (Nguyen, Hodgetts, and Carr 2021).

In this regard, the research we reflect on methodologically in this article also contributes to the broader cultural turn within psychology (Decolonial Psychology Editorial Collective 2021), management studies (Filatotchev et al. 2020, 2022), and the broader social sciences (Held 2019), and with contemporary discussions regarding culture and mixed methods research (Chamberlain et al. 2011; Dahler-Larsen 2023). As well as adapting global theories and methods and bringing local knowledges and problem focused research to centre stage (Chilisa 2017), the present research is useful to consider how researchers conduct inquiries with participants to meet the cultural values and practices of Vietnam. From a Vietnamese perspective, this involves bringing international knowledge regarding social enterprise success into harmony with Viet relational practices as a means of enhancing the sector in Vietnam. Of key relevance here is recent scholarship on an open systems approach to mixed methods research (Filatotchev, Ireland, and Stahl 2022). As Chilisa and Tsheko (2014, 233) also note, indigenizing mixed methods involve integrating ‘... multiple ways of knowing and seeing the world, multiple standpoints, and multiple values’ in ways that recentralize local knowledge and practices. This relationally ethical way of working involves collaborating with groups or networks, in ways that can benefit them (Chilisa 2017; Smith, 1999). As exemplified below, it requires us to centralise local ways of

being together that are germane to the research context as a basis of filtering what international research practices are useful in producing actionable insights to address issues such as how to enhance social enterprise performance (Filatotchev et al. 2020, 2022).

Reflecting on our research process

Below, we discuss the processes that were involved in undertaking our research project into social enterprise performance to draw out the lessons learned. We discuss in turn, designing the research, accessing participants, generating quality information, and interpreting this information from an open systems perspective.

Designing the research

The explanatory sequential mixed methods design we used afforded us the ability to examine diverse yet interconnected aspects of social entrepreneurship in Vietnam across three pivotal levels: individual social entrepreneurs (micro-level), social enterprises (meso-level), and the broader ecosystem (macro-level) (Chamberlian 2012; Creamer and Reeping 2020). We were also responding to recent calls for further development of research strategies and designs that enable the inclusion of relevant international literature and local cultural knowledge and practices (Filatotchev, Ireland, and Stahl 2022).

From an open system perspective, the need to take local culture and context seriously was a primary consideration in designing our research, to be aligned with the ways in which social enterprises operate in Vietnam. The mix of a quantitative survey and go-along interviews we employed have been used effectively for some time in Western social sciences to explore human understandings of phenomenon within different socio-economic environments (e.g., Pelto 2015). Looking specifically at comparable societal contexts, DuBois (1938) explored links between personality and culture in the Southeast Asian Island of Alor using psychological scales, direct observations, and open-ended interviews. Various mixes of quantitative and qualitative methods remain appropriate for establishing relationships between key factors shaping organisational performance and ensuring that the voices of the persons involved in this performance are considered when working to enhance such performance (Bartholomew and Brown 2012). Mixed designs can be invaluable for combining insights from Western theories, research, and best practices (etic) with local insights and emergent innovations that are central to social enterprise performance (emic) (Cassim, Hodgetts, and Stolte 2015). This pragmatic use of mixed methods has also increased in recent years in different contexts to facilitate in-depth, multifaceted, and explorative investigations of social issues, such as poverty, that are shaped by social, historical,

cultural and economic processes (Creamer 2017; Headley and Plano Clark 2020; Heyvaert et al. 2013).

In our project, the choice of a survey and follow-up go-along interviews offered one pragmatic methodological mix for testing the relevance of imported theories of entrepreneurs and social enterprises but also opened space for discussions regarding the value of these processes and emergent ideas with local entrepreneurs. After iterative consultation with local social enterprise leaders, the agreed quantitative element was a survey, made up of items drawn from prominent international theories, such as the Big Five personality factors operationalised into the International Personality Item Pool, and Bolton and Lane's Individual Entrepreneurial Orientation (Nguyen, 2021). The go-along interviews were designed with open-ended queries and through engagements with participants that were crafted to elaborate on the results of the survey (Nguyen, Hodgetts, and Carr 2021). These questions were designed to reveal underlying cultural values rooted in local knowledge that may elude explanation through the survey alone. This sequential design enabled us to explore social enterprise performance from various angles, and to access the voices and experiences of local social entrepreneurs within their own contexts (Greene, Caracelli, and Graham 1989). Following the survey of a diverse group of social entrepreneurs ($N = 352$) from the North, Center and South of Vietnam, we selected 20 to complete go-along interviews participants who were considered subject matter experts, which explored the survey findings, their experiences in establishing and leading social enterprises, and the impacts they had or had not achieved.

We worked to integrate Western and Vietnamese cultural perspectives through collaboration between a lead Vietnamese scholar activist (the lead author) and international scholars. The lead author is Vietnamese and actively involved in the country's social entrepreneurship activities, working with the three other scholars who specialise in sustainable livelihoods, cultural psychology, and methodologies. The Vietnamese researcher's local insights, conceptual constructs, and experience and understanding of local participants influenced the research design and the conduct and use of the project. In particular, the research questions were developed not only from Western literature but also from that researcher's understanding of the Vietnamese context and design conversations with sector leaders, valuable when there was no substantive literature on local social enterprise functioning. The other authors contributed their extensive applied research experience, skills in psychological and organisational measurement, and qualitative community-based participative inquiry with various cultural, and knowledge of centralising local knowledges and practices in research.

Reflecting the core Vietnamese values of relationality, service to others, and ways of being (including the cultural emphasis on the 'studiousness of spirit'), our design for conducting this research was compatible with the relational

ontology and ethical frameworks that feature reciprocity in participative research (Cornish et al. 2023; Wilson 2020). This design was also enhanced by the first author's cultural and local positioning, having been involved in the social entrepreneurship community for more than 15 years, with regular participation in sector support initiatives, liaising with international support agencies, and various Vietnamese institutions and authorities. This involvement delivered key insights into the sector in Vietnam and provided the necessary credibility and relational connections for accessing participants through the sector networks she had participated in establishing. These networks were not simply mined for participants and data but were actively engaged in the framing of the research and uptake of key findings (Cornish et al. 2023; Smith, 2012).

As is culturally appropriate, during the design stage we actively sort feedback from leading entrepreneurs in the social enterprise sector on both the survey questions and overall research plan. In addition to sending formal emails soliciting comments on the survey, the lead author engaged in informal discussions with these key informants in more relaxed settings. For instance, during social entrepreneurship-related events, such as conferences, seminars, or training sessions, the lead author attended post-event informal gatherings, and often hosted stakeholders in coffee or tea houses and restaurants. These informal gatherings comprise encounter spaces where Vietnamese people cultivate relations and do business. Such settings encourage open and candid conversations over refreshments within a food-oriented culture.

These foundational interactions encompassed simple gestures, such as exchanging emoticons on social media, extending greetings on special occasions to social entrepreneurs and their families, like the Vietnamese traditional New Year (Tết), or gifting local specialties. These occasions signalled the lead researcher's commitment to cultivating positive working relationships and served as valuable networking opportunities for building trust, mutual knowledge exchange, negotiating the research focus, refining the questionnaires, and planning the practicalities of the fieldwork. From these interactions with sector leaders, the first author gained further insights about the diversity of social enterprises in terms of size, scale, and focus. These insights led us to include more focus on the performance of social enterprises as this relates to the size and scope of these organisations.

Also in accord with open systems thinking, the go-along interviews were designed to unpack the results of the quantitative survey and to bring these into conversation with local knowledge. The survey presented no significant relationship between Western conceptualisations of personality and social enterprise performance in Vietnam but underscored the pivotal role of ecosystem supports that are shaped by local cultural ways of being and engaging in collective work (Nguyen et al. 2021). Accordingly, we developed prompts for the interviews to explore these survey results in more depth. As is also

standard practice for designing interviews in Western and Indigenous community research, we developed an initial general interview guide with topics for discussion. However, it was deemed culturally necessary during subsequent consultations with key stakeholders and within our research team to follow a less rigidly structured format that better reflected the dialogical style of Viet discourse (*cf.*, Cassim, Hodgetts, and Stolte 2015; Galletta 2013; Mason and Brown 2014). These interviews started with a culturally appropriate casual conversational style focused on sharing family and work-related self-positioning so as to establish trust and common ground, often with reference to light-hearted situations. As is common conversational practice, we designed these initial engagements to feature open mutual questioning, conducted while the researcher transited social enterprise spaces with the entrepreneurs who created these organisations (Kusenbach 2003).

In designing the interviews, we paid attention to local cultural considerations because social entrepreneurs in Vietnam tend to come from the very communities they seek to help. Their approaches to setting up and running social enterprises also reflect the culturally informed relational practices associated with the Viet village as an institution that has enabled Vietnamese people to pool resources and survive adversity collectively for millennia (Nguyen et al. 2021). This shift in focus from the global to local was important in terms of our need to embrace the local perspectives, histories, and social-political conditions to better understand social enterprise growth, performance and sustainability within specific ecosystems, such as Vietnam (Hazenberget al. 2016).

Accessing participants

In this section, we explain the fieldwork process and participant recruitment. We discuss how the lead author engaged with participants in the conduct of the survey and go-along interview in culturally nuanced and respectful ways. The fieldwork and participant recruitment leveraged Vietnamese relational practices that value the importance of face time as a basis for establishing working relations. It would be impossible to gain participation in this cultural context by simply mailing out surveys or just turning up as a stranger to gain informed consent. Rather, this required aligning practices with the cultural nuances within Vietnamese society, where working with known people, taking time to be known, politeness, reciprocity, and the concept of ‘saving face’ hold great significance (Mai, Bilbard, and Som 2009; Smith and Pham 1996).

It is important to realise that Vietnamese people tend to avoid expressing contrary opinions directly. They typically respond with a ‘yes’ to show they have acknowledged your comments but have not necessarily agreed with you. In essence, a ‘yes’ conveys attentiveness rather than an endorsement or agreement to participate in research (*cf.*, Borton 2000). This required the first

author to take sufficient time to go over what participation would involve before implicitly confirming through cultural cues that the person was indeed consenting to taking part in the study. To access valuable local knowledge, we adopted a culturally nuanced gradual approach (Meyer, Tran, and Nguyen 2005), grounded in community psychology principles of building trust through reciprocity, fostering partnerships, and demonstrating respect and relevance (*cf.*, Borton 2000; Smith and Pham 1996). This aligns with local relational practices, contemporary thinking on relational ethics in psychology (Hodgetts et al. 2022), and an open system research process that harmoniously weaves Western and Vietnamese research practices into participant recruitment (Filatotchev et al. 2020).

Vietnamese people also tend to be direct and open to sharing knowledge when speaking to someone they know and trust, and often when they see benefits from sharing for themselves and others (Smith and Pham 1996). Many prioritize getting to know a person's background, expertise, character, and relationship to their own work or sector before starting any business or formal activity (Mai, Bilbard, and Som 2009). One important way in which Vietnamese people assess potential for establishing relationships is by observing how the person treats others and whether they act with kindness and benevolence. Likewise, our iterative recruitment processes were facilitated by the lead author having an established national reputation and name recognition as a key figure in the sector. In conducting this research, the lead researcher approached social entrepreneurs with humility and demonstrated respect towards their efforts, particularly for those who were elders. In Vietnamese culture, the reverence for the elderly is considered a fundamental virtue, as age is valued in terms of experience and wisdom (Borton 2000). This deep respect was evident in various aspects of the fieldwork, for example, in language use (employing a more deferential 'You' and a humble 'I') and gestures, including the practice of using both hands when giving or receiving items from others or offering small gifts to elders (Nguyen 2016).

Another way Vietnamese people develop relationships with others is through offering food and eating and drinking communally. Even when a researcher is known to the sector, engaging in small talk, informal conversations over cups of coffee, tea, or street food play a vital role in initiating and nurturing relationships (Mai, Bilbard, and Som 2009; Smith and Pham 1996). Dinking and eating together offer a window into a person's character and provides a means for people to form connections and arrive at collective decisions (Nguyễn 2004).

These cultural practices comprise opportunities for the establishment of mutual interests and shared and divergent experiences, and the cultivation of disclosure on the part of both interviewer and interviewees. Sharing refreshments for Vietnamese people is a valued form for gathering and communing

that enables the expression of shared dignity and belonging as citizens looking to engage in shared ventures, including research (Nguyen 2016; Nguyễn 2004). Eating together comprise moments for shared humanity, learning, and knowledge exchange. In this context, food and drink comprise metonymic expressions of who Vietnamese people are and might become together. Such interactions strengthened the lead author's relationships with leading figures in the sector and provided valuable insights into community practices. This facilitated leading social entrepreneurs to become key confederates for the project, aiding in the snowball recruitment of further participants. Forming such relationships also comes with obligations. For example, the lead author maintained regular communication throughout the project, and this continues to this day.

As a result of these practices, a comprehensive contact list of 619 social entrepreneurs across Vietnam was developed. This list was augmented by scraping an industry website and related social media pages containing contact and contextual information for each social enterprise. For those with digital access, we personalized the standard research participation invitation letter, incorporating details about how the research group knew about the addressee and the social enterprise. For those without digital contact, the lead researcher proactively reached out through phone calls and in-person meetings. By maintaining regular contact with the confederate social entrepreneurs, she also gained opportunities to engage in community gathering of recruited social entrepreneurs. These events provided a platform to strengthen relationships within the community, share the research, as well as extend more formal invitations to participate.

Generating quality information

The fieldwork reflects broader cultural processes of reciprocity whereby the efforts of the first author and key stakeholders to support and grow the sector facilitated research participation and the generation of quality information. More specifically, the first author placed strong emphasis on actively listening to potential participants as they shared their experiences, embracing the cultural imperative to be present with participants not solely for the purpose of mining them for information. This meant that during site visits the first author continued to find ways to support these social enterprises, such as assisting with translating brochures into English or aligning their social impacts with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. These actions are important for social enterprises engaged in growth and gaining sustainable development funding from international agencies. The first author also extended gestures of goodwill by covering the cost of drinks or bringing food to share with participants. The culturally informed, relational ethical principled practice engaged in for working *with*, rather than doing research *on*

community members reflects indigenised ways of working collectively to produce and apply knowledge (Hodgetts et al. 2022). Briefly, Vietnamese cultural practices of reciprocity encouraged the active involvement of participants, ultimately resulting in high-quality information.

Our culturally patterned rearticulation of go-along interviewing was intentionally familiar and comfortable for participants, encouraged open dialogue and facilitated more in-depth mutual explorations of social enterprise performance (*cf.*, Kusenbach 2003). Prior to the go-along interviews, the lead author took the time to share a cup of tea, coffee, or a light snack, creating opportunities for informal discussions about work and life. As noted above, these culturally informal activities played a crucial role in renewing a shared sense of connection between the interviewer and interviewee as Vietnamese, ultimately facilitating open sharing in what often became eat-along interviews. Participants then took the first author on narrated tours of their organisations that produced contextually sensitive and rich accounts of their social enterprise practices and place within the sector. These go-along interviews involved the first author observing and engaging directly with participants in their everyday work activities and cultural practices of visiting and dialogue that are central to how Vietnamese people do business. These dynamic, site-responsive interviews reflected the cultural principles of working *within* communities whilst enacting genuine care and cooperation towards the common good (Cornish et al. 2023). These encounters also involved reciprocal gifting and were catalysts for enacting the mutual trust necessary for participants to disclose their experiences and explore topics with the researcher. Participants took considerable time to show and tell the researcher about key success factors shaping performance within their specific organisations and the sector more generally. They confirmed the importance of eco-system supports, and local cultural values of harmony, mutual care, open mindedness, adaptation, leadership, and relational practices of inclusion and mutual accountability (Nguyen et al. 2021).

Interpreting and acting to support the sector

An overall interpretation of key issues shaping social enterprise performance emerged from an iterative and abductive process of inquiry (Peirce 1878). The open system approach was employed in our integrated use of survey and interview methods in a manner reflective of Vietnamese practices of ethical interaction and also extended to our interpretation of the information collected. We worked iteratively with these empirical materials, local stories relating to the Vietnamese context and theoretical abstractions that also spoke to broader international concerns regarding social entrepreneurship, success, and values of mutual aid. Collaboration among team members created spaces for the integration of insights from Vietnamese cultural knowledge

with international theory to promote the cultural relevancy and usefulness of research findings to community as well as ensuring that the researchers remained accountable to the locales and international scholarly community Chilisa and Tsheko (2014); Levac et al. (2018).

In keeping with the open systems approach to this inquiry, our interpretation was crafted from an integrative co-construction of knowledge from both inside (emic) and outside (etic) Vietnam (Chilisa 2017; Motala 2015). This process was aided by the first author's status as a cultural insider and long-standing leader in the social enterprise sector in Vietnam, and who had also been educated in Global approaches to management and psychology. Insights from the first author's cultural knowledge and experience in the sector were brought into dialogue with the international literature on social enterprises and insights from the remaining authors in terms of Indigenous, community and organisational research practices in psychology.

In terms of process, the recorded interviews were transcribed in Vietnamese. Preliminary coding and analysis were conducted in Vietnamese with input from the international researchers through constant dialogue. Our process here was designed to preserve the cultural nuances associated with the Vietnamese language and to ensure that the cultural concepts and relationships participants were drawing upon were foregrounded within their native language. Once the patterns and exemplars from the transcripts were identified, quotes and associated preliminary points of interpretation were then translated into English for further interpretation, primarily by the first author with input from the second author. Literature about Vietnamese culture was also used as a source of analytic heuristics and an interpretive tool during this interpretative process to provide context for unpacking patterns of response and to develop the interpretation in a manner grounded within Vietnamese cultural knowledge systems. Extracts were also interpreted in relation to global literature on social enterprises, organisational performance, the importance of eco-systems supports, and the relationality of human being and organising.

The interpretative heuristics employed in this research comprised Western theoretical concepts previously applied to social enterprise performance that were customised for the Vietnamese context, and local knowledge and practical insights associated with core Vietnamese village values regarding mutual aid, solidarity, care, and collective endeavour. For example, concepts included ecosystem system supports and personality constructs that had been associated internationally with social enterprise success. These heuristics were combined with local insights into the rearticulation of traditional Vietnamese village relational structures and collective ways of being in the success of social enterprises. Literature regarding Vietnamese culture was also used iteratively to provide context for unpacking patterns of participant responses and to develop the interpretation in a manner informed by Vietnamese culture. This culturally informed process is increasingly

recognised as important within community-informed and participative research that is designed to make tangible contributions to addressing complex social and psychological issues (Cornish et al. 2023).

To integrate information from the fieldwork into the interpretation, the go-along interviews were designed to generate information regarding why the survey failed to replicate some of the significant relationships found in contexts such as the United States between the personality types of entrepreneurs and the successful performance of their social enterprises. The accounts of interviewees shed new light on the importance of considering the fit between the core Vietnamese traditional village values, ways of being and leadership, which shaped the structure and functioning of successful social enterprises, as organisations with a prosocial ethos. Drawing on local literature, we discovered how the core values of the village, rooted in a tradition dating back some 4000 years, have been seamlessly and instinctively integrated into contemporary social enterprises. In particular, the craft villages that thrived for thousands of years also specialised in a particular product, such as bronze casting, pottery, painting, or toy-making, closely resemble the functions of many contemporary social enterprises in Vietnam (Mus 1952; Insun 2000). Residents in these villages valued collaboration, reciprocity, shared obligations, and the sharing of technologies and skills to sustain supportive social relations that are underpinned by the relational character of the studious spirit (Vu'q'Ng 1992). The valuing of the studious, relational, resilient, and adaptive way of being exemplified by social entrepreneurs has been cultivated in response to the upheavals of Vietnamese national history. This history features repeat waves of colonisation that restricted Vietnamese peoples' control of many situations and encouraged people to work studiously in solidarity and develop organisational structures of mutual aid to survive within conditions of restrained agency.

As well as drawing on Vietnamese notions of the studious spirit, our open systems orientation drew us towards literature in global psychology on the interconnected self (Gergen 2009; Rua, Hodgetts, and Stolte 2017). For example, recent Indigenous writing from New Zealand had also explored how culturally informed relationality of being emerges '... through ongoing interactions with other people, the environment, cultural practices, physical and spiritual domains, history and the present ...' (Rua, Hodgetts, and Stolte 2017, 55). In the present case, these processes of relational becoming were transplanted into the articulation of social enterprises that embraced the leader's sense of collective purpose, obligation, and mission to support others. Reflecting the open systems assertion that organisations contribute to the ecosystems within which these emerge dialectically, interviewees described how their social enterprises function as institutions for cultural reproduction, transmission, and the enacted sharing of village values that are appreciated by local people.

Correspondingly, our interpretation featured how legacy village values were being used to create culturally familiar spaces for success and practices that resonate strongly with Vietnamese people; allowing them to recognize and comprehend their roles, selves, and contributions within the collective effort (Nguyen, Hodgetts, and Carr 2021). This interpretation made sense to not only the first author but also to the confederate entrepreneurs who had advised the project from the design phase. The findings reflected how successful Vietnamese social entrepreneurs reported having been socialised within collectivist village values that wove persons within collectivist villages and a cultural system emphasising mutuality and sustainability (Chuang et al. 2015; Nguyen 2016). This local insight also confirms findings from previous international literature regarding the importance of eco-system supports for social enterprise success (Gupta et al. 2020; Klarin and Suseno 2023; Saebi, Foss, and Linder 2019). We could recognise how the cultural ecosystem had functioned to socialise social entrepreneurs to enact collectivist and harmonisation values (Te 1987; Vu' o' Ng 1992) and to construct their prosocial efforts as a key element of their fate/destinies in life to contribute to their communities (Nguyen, Hodgetts, and Carr 2021).

In accordance with the open system perspective, our findings, informed by both local knowledge and international theory and research, were shared with the social enterprise network through peer lunches and conversations, networking events, and a policy brief that was suggested by network members as necessary for promoting the further development of ecosystem supports for youth social entrepreneurship development (Nguyen, Hodgetts, and Carr 2024). In short, the research findings became a focal point via which key stakeholders continued to work together to support the sector. In this way, the collaboration of the authors and sector leaders created a methodological space for the integration of local (emic) and outside (etic) knowledges (Chilisa 2017; Motala 2015) to document and produce outcomes to help support the further development of the social enterprise sector in Vietnam.

Conclusion

Methods writing in qualitative psychology tends toward epistemic issues and sampling and coding strategies. This article offers a less pervasive focus on cultural process considerations as anchored in a research exemplar from Vietnam, a country that is opening up to the discipline of psychology and international collaborations. Our specific focus is on how researchers might work in culturally appropriate ways when conducting research in non-familiar contexts. We sought to contribute to ongoing discussions regarding how theory and research developed in Westernised contexts can be rearticulated for use in this emergent economy to better reflect local ways of knowing, being, relating, and organising to meet local needs. A key focus was on how we

effectively mix methods from an open systems perspective that involved co-designing a practically orientated, exploratory, methodological strategy for exploring cultural nuances that influence social enterprise performance in Vietnam. The survey not only validated key hypotheses but also stimulated further inquiry through go-along interviews into cultural and ecosystem considerations that help us understand performance in this context.

Our research design also allowed us to integrate insights from Western and Vietnamese knowledge systems to better understand social enterprises in Vietnam and to assist the efficacy of the sector (Banerjee 2022; Nguyen, Hodgetts, and Carr 2024). The use of these methods was particularly valuable for developing our understanding of the importance of ecosystem factors and how these manifest through cultural practices associated with traditional Vietnamese village structures. The open systems perspective adopted orientated us towards how social enterprises take on such relational characteristics from the broader ecosystem and how these were central to the rearticulation of such organisational structures in new settings. Cultivated through Vietnamese people developing collective responses to adversity for millennia, these Viet village structures emphasising solidarity and mutual obligations to care are ingrained culturally as a core dimension of many successful social enterprises in Vietnam today.

Engaging with local cultural histories aids us in developing a contextually informed understanding of local enterprise performance that is informed by both globalist and localist perspectives. Accordingly, our research contributes to what Banerjee (2022) refers to as the ‘pluriverse’ or multivocal strategy for ensuring Indigenous voices are centralized in research conducted *with* rather than *on* local people and organisations. Relatedly, Chilisa (2017) foregrounds complexities that can remain with the integration of Indigenous and Western knowledge systems. It remains crucial for psychologists to continue to develop methodological strategies that draw gainfully from these different perspectives without subsuming the local to the global. Filatotchev, Ireland, and Stahl (2022) also identified open systems theory as offering a useful conceptual orientation for integrating globalist and local perspectives to fit harmoniously within local cultural contexts. This is important culturally from a Vietnamese relational perspective within which the harmonizing of knowledge systems does not require sameness or one perspective supplanting another. Effective integration requires continued dialogue and finding and holding points of synergy that make sense in efforts to enhance the success of social enterprises in Vietnam.

Taking local culture seriously was confirmed as beneficial for the utility of this research, revealing the centrality of ecosystem supports and the reproduction of Viet village values and practices relating to harmonization, solidarities, mutual sustainability, and care in social enterprise success. This research deepens our understanding of how to bring Western theories and methods

into conversation with Indigenous Vietnamese cultural and psychological (ways of being and relating to others) systems into conversation (cf. Filatotchev et al. 2020, 2022; Guimarães 2020). In the process, we practised the use of local cultural insights as interpretive tools or analytic heuristics that provided contextual insights for unpacking patterns of participant responses and for developing and actionable interpretation of social enterprise performance and future support needs that made sense to Vietnamese people (Nguyen, Hodgetts, and Carr 2024). Taking such a culturally informed interpretative process is increasingly recognised as important within community-based research and action in psychology (Cornish et al. 2023; Hodgetts et al. 2020). This article also provides an exemplar for emerging scholars in countries such as Vietnam regarding how to rearticulate relevant Western theories and methods for use in emergent economies, in ways that reflect local practices of knowing, being, relating, and organising enterprises to meet local needs.

In designing and conducting this research, we did not start from scratch. Readers with backgrounds in qualitative, Indigenous, and community research will find synergies between our account of a research process and their own efforts to work participatively for the benefit of local communities. As noted by Cornish et al. (2023) even though there are synergies between various participative community-based research strategies, it is important to not simply subsume these into a single procedure due to the varying cosmologies and cultural nuances that feature across research contexts and methodological rearticulations. In contributing to these methodological conversations, we have emphasised the crucial cultural pragmatism through which the lead author immersed herself as both a researcher generating new knowledge and as a key source of advice and support *within* the social enterprise sector in Vietnam. This self-positioning reflects the importance of relational ethics when working reciprocally *within* such networks to ensure the research walks *with* local people and meets the needs of local communities (Chilisa 2017; Smith, 1999). Finally, in exploring the centrality of cultural processes in conducting a mixed knowledge and methods investigation, we have foregrounded the utility of open systems thinking in rendering psychological research practicable in emerging contexts, such as Vietnam today.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Dr. Minh-Hieu Thi Nguyen is a scholar and practitioner at the intersection of social entrepreneurship, psychology, and sustainable development. Her research explores how entrepreneurial initiatives drive sustainable social change, with a focus on community empowerment and inclusive growth. As a Representative-at-Large of the Asian Association of Social Psychology for Vietnam, she bridges local and regional perspectives in psychological research. Her publications appear in high-impact international journals as well as Vietnamese outlets, including the practical Vietnamese book “Let’s Start Up a Social Enterprise”—a resource for local changemakers. She is also the co-founder of Project SENSE (Social Enterprises for Social Economy) and an active contributor to several social impact initiatives, including The Enhancing Participation and Inclusive Change (EPIC) Collective, Design Thinking Sustainable Citizen, and CatalystNOW.

Darrin Hodgetts is Professor of Societal Psychology at Massey University in Auckland. Darrin’s research interests reside with the societal determinants of health, precarity and homelessness, human [in]securities, and everyday cultures. Darrin publishes regularly in psychology and social science journals including, *Nature*, *Review of General Psychology*, *Political Psychology*, *British Journal of Social Psychology*, *Theory and Psychology*, *Asian Journal of Social Psychology*, *Journal of Community Psychology*, *Military Psychology*, *Sustainability*, *Applied Science*, *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society Lond B*, *Sustainability Science*, *Social Science & Medicine*, and *Urban Studies*. His book length titles include, *Tackling precarious work: Toward sustainable livelihoods* (APA), *Social psychology and everyday life* (2nd ed. Palgrave), *Asia-Perspectives on intercultural psychology* (Routledge), *SAGE handbook of applied social psychology*, *Urban poverty & health inequalities: A relational approach* (Routledge).

Kerry Chamberlain is Emeritus Professor of Social and Health Psychology at Massey University in Auckland, New Zealand. He is a critical health psychologist with research interests in health and the everyday, with a specific focus on medications, media, materiality, mundane ailments, food, and disadvantage, and in innovative qualitative research methodology. He is a past Associate Editor for *Psychology & Health*, the *British Journal of Health Psychology*, and *Kotuitui*. He serves on the Editorial Boards of *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, the *Journal of Health Psychology*, *Health: An Interdisciplinary Journal for the Social Study of Health, Illness and Medicine*, and *Psicologia della Salute*. He is a past Chair of the International Society for Critical Health Psychology, and a Fellow of the European Health Psychology Society. He has supervised numerous graduate students, including over 120 master’s students and 40 PhD students.

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