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# Repatriate knowledge transfer: Antecedents and boundary conditions of a dyadic process

Anne Burmeister<sup>a,\*</sup>, Mila B. Lazarova<sup>b</sup>, Jürgen Deller<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Work and Organizational Psychology, University of Bern, Switzerland

<sup>b</sup> Simon Fraser University, Department of Business Administration, Canada

<sup>c</sup> Department of Business and Economics, Leuphana University of Lueneburg, Germany

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## ABSTRACT

In this study, we build on the ability-motivation-opportunity framework to test whether both repatriates' disseminative capacity and domestic employees' absorptive capacity as well as their opportunities for interaction affect repatriate knowledge transfer. Further, we examine the moderating effects of two distinctive factors associated with repatriate knowledge transfer: repatriate knowledge characteristics and characteristics of international assignments. Using multi-source time-lagged data from 101 dyads, we find support for most of our hypotheses. Our study contributes to theory and practice by providing an integrated analysis of antecedents and boundary conditions of repatriate knowledge transfer and by highlighting its dyadic nature.

## 1. Introduction

One of the core competitive advantages of multinational companies (MNCs) arises from their ability to acquire and utilize globally dispersed knowledge (Zeng, Grøgaard, & Steel, 2018). MNCs possess unique capabilities to transfer this knowledge efficiently across their network of subsidiaries, which, in turn, contributes to their superior performance in comparison to their locally based competitors (Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000; Foss & Pedersen, 2004). While corporate headquarters (HQ) and globally dispersed subsidiaries can learn from each other in several ways, reverse knowledge transfer from foreign subsidiaries to HQ has recently gained in importance (Peltokorpi & Yamao, 2017; Yang, Mudambi, & Meyer, 2008). Access to results of local research and development activities and insights into customer preferences in foreign countries can facilitate the targeted development of products and services for specific groups of customers (Kogut & Mello, 2017). In addition, receiving valuable knowledge from foreign subsidiaries enables HQ to orchestrate intra-organizational knowledge flows among different foreign subsidiaries, thereby ensuring more efficient implementation of global strategies (Ambos, Ambos, & Schlegelmilch, 2006).

However, our understanding of the factors that shape reverse knowledge transfer is still limited (Kogut & Mello, 2017), in particular when it comes to individuals as knowledge transferors. This represents an important gap in the literature because knowledge is ultimately created and transferred by individuals (Minbaeva, 2013; Nonaka &

Takeuchi, 1995). One crucial group of individuals that can contribute to reverse knowledge transfer are international assignees *returning* from assignment, or repatriates (Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012). Through their work experience at the foreign subsidiary, international assignees can acquire highly valuable knowledge about local markets and its customers and more general knowledge about doing business across borders (Berthoin Antal, 2000; Fink & Meierewert, 2005; Oddou, Osland, & Blakeney, 2009). Given their familiarity with multiple organizational units, international assignees are ideally positioned to transfer knowledge across the MNC (Caligiuri & Bonache, 2016; Harzing, Pudelko, & Reiche, 2016). Their role is particularly valuable when it comes to transferring tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1967), knowledge that is intuitive and difficult to articulate independently of knowing subjects (Lam, 2000). However, research has documented that upon repatriation the knowledge that assignees gain at the foreign subsidiary is consistently underestimated as an assignment outcome and it is not viewed as a strategic resource that can leverage the global competitiveness of MNCs (Burmeister et al., 2015; Sanchez-Vidal, Sanz-Valle, & Barba-Aragon, in press). Thus, while repatriation creates a knowledge dissemination opportunity, evidence strongly suggests that this opportunity is rarely seized (Berthoin Antal, 2001; Oddou et al., 2013).

Given the potential strategic benefits of repatriate knowledge transfer (RKT), a reverse knowledge transfer process in which repatriates transfer contextually embedded knowledge from the host location to the home location upon return from the international

\* Corresponding author at: Department of Work and Organizational Psychology, University of Bern, Fabrikstrasse 8, 3012, Bern, Switzerland.  
E-mail address: [anne.burmeister@psy.unibe.ch](mailto:anne.burmeister@psy.unibe.ch) (A. Burmeister).

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assignment, scholars have begun to examine factors that may contribute to its success. Recent results from quantitative studies have indicated that repatriates' motivation and ability to transfer their knowledge to domestic employees upon return (Sanchez-Vidal et al., in press), and knowledge sharing opportunities with domestic employees (Huang, Chiu, & Lu, 2013) are important antecedents of RKT. However, the existing studies have not addressed the dyadic nature of RKT that has been depicted in conceptual models, in which the ability and motivation of both domestic employees and repatriates have been introduced as equally relevant antecedents of RKT (Oddou et al., 2009). Importantly, research on dyadic phenomena, such as RKT, is conceptually and statistically deficient unless the perspectives of both actors (in this case repatriates and domestic employees) are recognized on equal footing (Krasikova & LeBreton, 2012; Tse & Ashkanasy, 2015). Although this has been discussed theoretically, we were unable to identify a single study on RKT that reflected the perspectives of both repatriates and domestic employees. Furthermore, existing studies have not represented the complex and distinct nature of RKT as they have not discussed the boundary conditions of this reverse knowledge transfer process. Treating RKT as a conventional knowledge transfer process in MNCs ignores the specific challenges and added complexities of reverse knowledge transfer processes (Kogut & Mello, 2017; Oddou et al., 2009; Yang et al., 2008). For example, RKT is particularly challenging because repatriates need to reintegrate into their domestic work units and convince domestic employees, who may have limited international experience and interest in their international knowledge, to receive their knowledge (Burmeister et al., 2015; Oddou et al., 2009).

Based on the shortcomings of the existing literature, we aim to advance research on RKT in two ways. First, we highlight the dyadic nature of the process by focusing on repatriates' disseminative capacity and domestic employees' absorptive capacity and their opportunities for interaction as main predictors of RKT, in line with the ability-motivation-opportunity (AMO) framework (Blumberg & Pringle, 1982). More specifically, disseminative and absorptive capacity reflect the ability and motivation component of the AMO framework, opportunities for interaction of repatriates and domestic employees represent the opportunity component of the AMO framework, and RKT is the performance-related behavior we aim to explain. Our inclusion of domestic employees is critically important in the context of RKT, as research has documented that there is distinct lack of receptivity to repatriate knowledge (Oddou et al., 2009), meaning that repatriate ability and motivation alone can only do so much, which makes it critical to examine the role of domestic employees as knowledge recipients. Second, by considering two characteristics of RKT as boundary conditions, we aim to contextualize the predictions of the AMO with regard to the importance of ability, motivation, and opportunity for RKT. We integrate the characteristic of the knowledge being transferred, positing that the role of disseminative and absorptive capacity will become more critically important when repatriate knowledge is difficult to teach. In addition, we introduce the extent of the international experience of both repatriates and domestic employees as the second boundary condition. We argue that both actors' previous international experience can, respectively, detract from or contribute to the *shared field* for RKT, thus affecting the relevance of opportunities for interaction for RKT.

Taken together, the central research questions of this study are: (1) how ability and motivation of *both* repatriates' and domestic employees and their opportunities for interaction affect RKT, and (2) how these relationships are shaped by distinct characteristics of RKT, namely, the teachability of repatriate knowledge and the international experience of both repatriates and domestic employees. Our conceptual model is presented in Fig. 1.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. The distinct nature of RKT as a reverse knowledge transfer process

Reverse knowledge transfer processes from foreign subsidiaries to HQ, such as RKT, can be much more complex than and distinctively different from conventional knowledge transfer processes from HQ to foreign subsidiaries (Harzing et al., 2016; Kogut & Mello, 2017; Oddou et al., 2009; Yang et al., 2008). Reverse knowledge transfer processes may be complicated by power imbalances between the HQ, as the all-knowing principal, and foreign subsidiaries, as the more specialized and locally constrained agents (Yang et al., 2008). Despite strategic level recognition that knowledge created as subsidiaries is important for MNC operations (Piscitello, 2004), individuals at HQ often have to be convinced of the value and relevance of this international knowledge (Burmeister et al., 2015). Further, although organizations may value repatriate knowledge in principle, repatriates' domestic colleagues may be resistant to it in practice (Oddou et al., 2013). Indeed, studies have confirmed that repatriates report facing active and passive resistance when they try to share their knowledge (Berthoin Antal, 2001; Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012). Such findings suggest that reverse knowledge transfer via repatriates may resemble a process of persuasion rather than straightforward knowledge dissemination (Yang et al., 2008). Thus, we study the influence of the individual characteristics of both repatriates as knowledge senders and domestic employees as knowledge recipients on RKT. More specifically, we examine how repatriates' disseminative capacity, domestic employees' absorptive capacity, and their opportunities for interaction influence RKT.

Second, repatriate knowledge is embedded in and shaped by the characteristics of the foreign host country (e.g., its norms and policies), which are different from those encountered in the home country (Oddou et al., 2009). The international, contextually embedded, and highly tacit nature of repatriate knowledge adds to the complexity of RKT (Fink & Meierewert, 2005). Such knowledge is more difficult to adapt to new contexts and teach to domestic colleagues who may not have not been exposed to international knowledge before (Chang, Gong, & Peng, 2012; Riusala & Smale, 2007). Accordingly, we examine one of the characteristics of repatriate knowledge, teachability, as a boundary condition of RKT. Specifically, we investigate whether teachability moderates the relationships between repatriates' disseminative capacity and RKT and domestic employees' absorptive capacity and RKT.

Third, the experience of being on international assignment can reduce the common cognitive ground (i.e., cognitive overlap and shared understanding; Nonaka, 1991; Oddou et al., 2009) between repatriates and domestic employees who lack such international experiences, thus complicating RKT further. Being on international assignment provides manifold learning opportunities during which international assignees can develop a more global mindset and learn to appreciate local perspectives on how to operate effectively in global business environments (Crowne, 2008; Oddou et al., 2013). However, when repatriates interact with domestic employees who might lack international exposure, repatriates may realize that they do not share a common "language" with domestic employees to communicate the usefulness of their international knowledge (Oddou et al., 2013; Reiche, Harzing, & Kraimer, 2009). This challenge be more exacerbated in cases of repatriates with extensive international experience, which may limit their understanding of and connection with their colleagues at the domestic work unit (Mäkelä & Suutari, 2009). To address these challenges, repatriates need to undergo a complicated socialization process upon return to the domestic work unit during which they re-learn about the home context and re-build trusting relationships with domestic employees (Oddou et al., 2009).<sup>1</sup> Consequently, to gain a first understanding into the

<sup>1</sup> We thank an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this aspect of RKT.

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