The micro-processes during repatriate knowledge transfer: the repatriates' perspective

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Abstract

Purpose – *The purpose of this paper is to add a process perspective to the literature on repatriate knowledge transfer (RKT) and to understand how the knowledge transfer process unfolds in the repatriation context. Thus, this qualitative study uses existing knowledge transfer process models to assess their applicability to the context of repatriation and explain the micro-processes during RKT.*

Design/methodology/approach – *To provide a rich understanding of these processes from the repatriate perspective, critical incidents reported by 29 German and US American repatriates were content-analyzed.*

Findings – *The findings are summarized in a proposed RKT process model, which describes the roles and knowledge transfer-related activities of repatriates, recipients and supervisors as well as their interaction during four transfer phases: assessment, initiation, execution and evaluation.*

Research limitations/implications – *The experiences of repatriates from different geographic areas as well as the perspectives of knowledge recipients and supervisors were not studied but should be included in future research. In addition, future research could test the applicability of the identified micro-processes to different knowledge transfer contexts.*

Practical implications – *Managers can use the findings to facilitate the RKT process more effectively because the type of organizational support offered can be aligned with the changing needs of repatriates, recipients and supervisors during the four identified phases.*

Originality/value – *This is the first study that takes a process perspective to understand RKT. The integration of the current findings with the existing literature can enable a more nuanced view on RKT.*

Keywords *Critical incident technique, Content analysis, Repatriation, International assignment, Knowledge transfer process, Repatriate knowledge transfer*

Paper type *Research paper*

1. Introduction

Knowledge is increasingly recognized as a highly important economic resource (Barney, 1991; Drucker, 1992). The effective creation, distribution and utilization of knowledge in an organizational network is an important factor for the competitive strength of organizations (Argote, 2013). Due to the globally dispersed operations of many multinational organizations, the usefulness of intraorganizational knowledge transfer that spans national borders is widely acknowledged (Argote, 2013; Schleimer and Pedersen, 2014). One common mechanism to enable these knowledge flows is to send employees on international assignments (Crowne, 2009; Mäkelä, 2007).

The literature on international assignments suggests that assignees acquire highly relevant knowledge while being abroad (Berthoin Antal, 2000; Oddou *et al.*, 2013; Bender and Fish, 2000; Fink and Meierewert, 2005). Accordingly, the knowledge of assignees goes beyond the mere acquisition of facts about local markets and customers but also includes more tacit elements, such as perspectives shifts, increased network knowledge, a more global

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mindset and improved personal competencies (Oddou *et al.*, 2013; Stahl *et al.*, 2009). This valuable tacit knowledge can be harvested by organizations after the return of internal assignees to their domestic work unit to enlarge the organizational knowledge base and increase the return of investment from international assignments (Oddou *et al.*, 2009; Lazarova and Tarique, 2005).

Given the significant relative value of this knowledge, the authors would expect firms to manage the repatriate knowledge transfer (RKT) process upon the return of the expatriates much better than they apparently do (Lazarova and Caligiuri, 2001; Blakeney *et al.*, 2006; Oddou *et al.*, 2009). Despite the fact that RKT has some obvious challenges and does not occur automatically, the lack of strategic integration of repatriate knowledge into the broader organizational knowledge base is nevertheless surprising (Bender and Fish, 2000).

While several studies provided important insights to the key variables that either hinder or facilitate the success of RKT (Huang *et al.*, 2013; Oddou *et al.*, 2013), they are unable to explain how the RKT process unfolds. To date, no empirical study exists that advances a process perspective and analyzes RKT as a sequence of interdependent phases. However, a more detailed understanding of these RKT phases and the micro-processes during these phases could be of interest to researchers and practitioners alike. Shedding light on the interaction between groups of actors during RKT will contribute to understanding the knowledge transfer black box (Kwan and Cheung, 2006). In addition, insights about the inner dynamics of the process can be generated, which might help researchers to refine their theoretical RKT models. An investigation of the micro-processes during knowledge transfers and clear delineation among the phases corresponds to calls for further research on this topic by different scholars (Argote, 2013; Van Wijk *et al.*, 2008). Finally, to facilitate RKT, practitioners could use these results to improve the timing and type of organizational training and support they offer to the key groups of actors involved.

Consequently, this qualitative study investigates whether extant knowledge transfer process models inform the context of repatriation and attempts to generate a deeper understanding of the micro-processes during RKT. The authors define these micro-processes as the individual knowledge transfer-related activities of repatriates, recipients and supervisors and their various interactions during phases of the RKT. The contribution of this article is twofold. First, the roles and knowledge transfer-related activities of repatriates, recipients and supervisors are clarified from the perspective of repatriates, shedding light on the micro-processes during RKT. Second, an empirically informed RKT process model is introduced that acknowledges the dynamic and iterative nature of the RKT process.

2. Literature review

2.1 Status quo of the RKT literature

Scholarly interest in the topic of RKT has steadily increased since the first work of Berthoin Antal (2000). However, the number of studies that focus on RKT is still relatively limited and

nearly half of them are conceptual. In their literature review on repatriation and knowledge transfer, Nery-Kjerfve and McLean (2012) pointed out that the majority of articles between 1999 and 2009 that purported to focus on repatriation, knowledge transfer and learning actually addressed topics related to adjustment and retention of repatriates.

Table I presents a chronology of RKT literature. Two directions are evident in this research; scholars either aimed to understand the effect of RKT on organizational learning and the types of knowledge acquired while being abroad or to identify the variety of variables that affect the success of RKT. While a comprehensive review of the current literature on RKT is beyond the scope of this paper, the main findings of the two research directions will be discussed to provide the context for this study on the RKT process. Thereby, most of the research on RKT to date has focused on the variables that either hinder or facilitate RKT success. These variables are aligned with and largely derived from the general knowledge transfer literature. Consequently, the review of the RKT literature that focuses on the main variables will also acknowledge the insights from the general knowledge transfer literature to demonstrate the embeddedness of the research on RKT.

Table I Existing conceptual and empirical research on RKT

Year	*Authors*	*Design*	*Term for RKT*	*Focus*
2000	Berthoin Antal	Qualitative (n = 21)	Knowledge of returned expatriates	Organizational learning and types of knowledge gained
2001	Berthoin Antal	Qualitative (n = 21)	Knowledge sharing of returned expatriates	Variables that hinder or facilitate RKT success
2005	Fink and Meierewert	Qualitative (n = 19)	Repatriate knowledge potential	Organizational learning and types of knowledge gained
2005	Lazarova and Tarique	Conceptual	"Reverse" knowledge transfer	Variables that hinder or facilitate RKT success
2006	Blakeney *et al.*	Conceptual	Repatriate knowledge transfer	Variables that hinder or facilitate RKT success
2007	Mäkela	Qualitative	Knowledge sharing in expatriate relationships	Variables that hinder or facilitate RKT success
2008	Bonache and Zárraga-Oberty	Conceptual	International assignees as knowledge transferors	Variables that hinder or facilitate RKT success
2009	Crowne	Conceptual	Knowledge transfer during and after foreign assignments	Variables that hinder or facilitate RKT success
2009	Furuya *et al.*	Quantitative (n = 305)	Transfer of global management competence	Variables that hinder or facilitate RKT success
2009	Mäkela and Brewster	Mixed methods (n = 413)	Expatriate/repatriate knowledge sharing	Variables that hinder or facilitate RKT success
2009	Oddou *et al.*	Conceptual	Repatriate knowledge transfer	Variables that hinder or facilitate RKT success
2011	Berthoin Antal and Walker	Qualitative (n = 24)	Organizational learning from returners	Variables that hinder or facilitate RKT success
2012	Nery-Kjerfve and McLean	Literature review	Knowledge sharing and learning resulting from repatriation	Variables that hinder or facilitate RKT success
2012	Reiche	Quantitative (n = 85)	Repatriate knowledge benefits	Variables that hinder or facilitate RKT success
2012	Santosh and Muthiah	Quantitative (n = 155)	Repatriate knowledge transfer	Variables that hinder or facilitate RKT success
2013	Huang *et al.*	Quantitative (n = 140)	Repatriate knowledge sharing	Variables that hinder or facilitate RKT success
2013	Oddou *et al.*	Qualitative (n = 45)	Repatriate knowledge transfer	Variables that hinder or facilitate RKT success
2013	Welch and Steen	Conceptual	Learning potential of global staff transfers	Organizational learning and types of knowledge gained
2014	Gonzalez and Chakraborty	Conceptual	Outward knowledge transfer	Variables that hinder or facilitate RKT success

First, there are two different typologies of repatriate knowledge. The typology by Berthoin Antal (2000) draws on earlier work from Anderson (1983), Paris *et al.* (1983) as well as Sackmann (1992) and distinguishes between five types of knowledge. These are know-what (declarative), know-how (procedural), know-when (conditional), know-why (axiomatic) and know-who (relational). Fink and Meierewert's (2005) typology of repatriate knowledge has five different categories, namely, market-specific knowledge, personal skills, job-related management skills, network skills and general management capacity. Both typologies emphasize the tacit character of the repatriate knowledge because only know-what (Berthoin Antal, 2000) and market-specific knowledge (Fink and Meierewert, 2005) are clearly explicit in nature.

Second, the research about the variety of relevant variables that affect RKT success covers the three levels of analysis in organizations: individual, dyadic and organizational (Marsick and Watkins, 2003). This three-level structure will be applied to present the existing literature. In addition, the characteristics of the knowledge to be transferred have also been identified as an important variable (Kogut and Zander, 1993). Therefore, knowledge characteristics will be discussed as an extra category.

On the individual level, knowledge researchers have agreed that knowledge sources and recipients need to be able and motivated to perform successful knowledge transfers (Argote and Ingram, 2000; Szulanski, 1996; Minbaeva *et al.*, 2003; Gupta and Govindarajan, 2000). The relevance of these variables can be traced back to the motivation-opportunity-ability (MOA) framework of work performance by Blumberg and Pringle (1982), which posits that any performance in the work context depends on these three factors. RKT researchers have begun to test the applicability of these findings in the repatriation context and found initial support for their impact on RKT success. For example, Oddou *et al.* (2013) highlighted that both the ability and the motivation of repatriates to transfer positively affected RKT success. This was supported by Reiche (2012), who showed that the ability of inpatriates was improved by their social capital, and their motivation was positively affected by tailored career and repatriation support, which in turn led to a higher probability of RKT success. Finally, regarding the characteristics of the recipients, empirical RKT research to date has highlighted the need for the willingness or readiness of recipients to learn from repatriates (Oddou *et al.*, 2013; Berthoin Antal and Walker, 2011). However, the impact of the ability of repatriates to receive has only been outlined in extant conceptual models and has not yet been tested in empirical studies (Lazarova and Tarique, 2005; Oddou *et al.*, 2009; Bonache and Zárraga-Oberty, 2008; Crowne, 2009; Gonzalez and Chakraborty, 2014).

With regards to the dyadic level, knowledge researchers have agreed that the type of interaction between knowledge sources and recipients as well as the type of their relationship affects knowledge transfer outcomes (Argote *et al.*, 2003; Ipe, 2003; Szulanski, 1996; Joshi *et al.*, 2006; Gupta and Govindarajan, 2000). First, the opportunity and intensity of interaction has been shown to facilitate knowledge transfer behavior (Gupta and Govindarajan, 2000). Second, trusting relationships that are based on the trustworthiness of the actors facilitate knowledge transfer success (Joshi *et al.*, 2006). Concerning the repatriation context, findings indicate that the opportunity to interact also facilitates the development of interpersonal connections and trusting relationships between repatriates

"Publicizing the specific and valuable areas of expertise of repatriates through internal communication mechanisms could help to establish the credibility and trustworthiness of repatriates."

> **"Specific training sessions for repatriates could be offered in order to improve repatriates' ability to communicate and present their knowledge effectively."**

and recipients (Oddou *et al.*, 2013; Mäkelä and Brewster, 2009). Therefore, the more frequent, convenient and rich the opportunities for interaction between repatriates and recipients, the higher the degree of RKT (Huang *et al.*, 2013).

Regarding the organizational level, Kostova (1999) emphasized that knowledge transfer processes are contextually embedded and do not happen in a vacuum. Researchers have agreed that an open environment for learning as well as concrete organizational practices that facilitate interaction and cooperation can positively impact knowledge flows in organizations (Nonaka, 1994; Kostova, 1999; Szulanski, 1996; Cabrera and Cabrera, 2005). Tentative empirical evidence exists that emphasizes the importance of these two organizational aspects in the context of RKT (Huang *et al.*, 2013; Reiche, 2012; Santosh and Muthiah, 2012; Oddou *et al.*, 2013). First, an organizational climate that values and facilitates cooperation and knowledge exchange can have a positive effect on RKT success (Oddou *et al.*, 2013; Santosh and Muthiah, 2012). Second, knowledge governance mechanisms (Huang *et al.*, 2013) or targeted career and repatriation support (Reiche, 2012) that are meant to improve the ability and motivation of repatriates and recipients as well as their opportunities for interaction can facilitate repatriate knowledge flows.

Knowledge characteristics have been identified as a relevant variable for knowledge transfer outcomes as well (Kogut and Zander, 1993; Ipe, 2003; Szulanski, 1996; Gupta and Govindarajan, 2000; Pacharapha and Vathanophas Ractham, 2012). Knowledge researchers have distinguished between the impact of the value or criticality of the knowledge for the recipients (Gupta and Govindarajan, 2000; Pacharapha and Vathanophas Ractham, 2012) and the degree of tacitness of the knowledge (Kogut and Zander, 1993). Concerning the repatriation context, Oddou *et al.* (2013) have argued that repatriates need the "right knowledge" to be able to transfer their knowledge. Thus, the usefulness of the knowledge for the domestic work unit members needs to be demonstrated to facilitate RKT. Additionally, the findings of Berthoin Antal and Walker (2011) indicated that repatriates transfer a wide range of explicit as well as implicit knowledge.

While these results on types of knowledge gained and especially the variables that affect RKT success indicate that the field has developed since the early work of Berthoin Antal (2000) and yielded important insights, a process perspective on RKT is currently missing. Consequently, the researchers have to draw on the general knowledge transfer literature to identify the most relevant knowledge transfer process models to study how knowledge transfer processes unfold in the context of repatriation.

2.2 Review of existing knowledge transfer process models

Knowledge transfer has been defined as a complex process with several stages that are interlinked (Szulanski, 1996, 2000; Hansen, 1999; Kwan and Cheung, 2006; Hansen *et al.*, 2005). The concept has been disentangled from other knowledge flow processes in organizations, such as knowledge sharing, by highlighting the importance of receiving and especially utilizing the transferred knowledge (Minbaeva *et al.*, 2003). Thus, the extent to which the transferred knowledge is applied in the new context is a central element of knowledge transfer (Chang *et al.*, 2012; Szulanski, 1996).

Table II summarizes the existing knowledge transfer process or phase models. Szulanski (1996, 2000) introduced one of the most widely cited knowledge transfer process models

Table II Existing knowledge transfer process models

Authors	*Design*	*Stages*	*Description*
Szulanski (1996, pp. 28-29)	Quantitative (n = 271)	1. Initiation	Comprises all events that lead to the decision to transfer
		2. Implementation	Resources flow between the recipient and the source
		3. Ramp-up	Recipient starts using the transferred knowledge, i.e. after the first day of use
		4. Integration	Recipient achieves satisfactory results with the transferred knowledge
Hansen (1999, p. 779-780)	Quantitative (n = 120)	1. Search	An activity that involves looking for, identifying and evaluating knowledge residents in other subsidiaries
		2. Transfer	A process that involves modifying, editing and incorporating the knowledge into the team's product
Hansen *et al.* (2005, p. 776-780)	Quantitative (n = 120)	1. Deciding to seek knowledge	Teams may decide to seek knowledge in other subsidiaries
		2. Searching for knowledge	An activity that involves looking for, identifying and evaluating knowledge resident in other subsidiaries
		3. Transferring knowledge	A process that involves modifying, editing and incorporating the knowledge into the team's product
Kwan and Cheung (2006, p. 18)	Literature review	1. Motivation	Comprises all events that lead to the attempt to initiate knowledge transfer
		2. Matching	The attempt to search for a suitable transfer partner(s)
		3. Implementation	Resources flow between the recipient and the source
		4. Retention	After the recipient has achieved satisfactory results with the transferred knowledge

and distinguished among four phases: initiation, implementation, ramp-up and integration. First, initiation includes all decisions that lead to the actual transfer, such as finding an opportunity, delineating the scope of the transfer and assessing involved costs. The value and robustness of the knowledge, as well as the reputation and the trustworthiness of the actors influence the ease of the knowledge transfer initiation. Second, during implementation, the actual flows of resources between knowledge sources and recipients occur. The transferred knowledge has to be adapted to suit the needs of the recipients and to make the knowledge more relevant for their context. Third, the ramp-up phase commences when recipients start to use the received knowledge and gradually improve their performance to a satisfactory level. Finally, integration refers to the routinized application of the knowledge, and "in this way, new practices become institutionalized" (Szulanski, 1996, p. 29).

Hansen (1999) introduced a more simplistic two-phase model (i.e. search, transfer) while investigating the role played by weak ties in sharing knowledge among organization subunits. This was later extended into a three-phase model (i.e. deciding to seek knowledge, search costs, costs of transfers) by Hansen *et al.* (2005). However, the approach of only delineating between search and transfer behavior cannot explain the sequential nature of activities during the transfer phase itself, because the transfer phase is treated as one undifferentiated phase.

After reviewing intraorganizational knowledge transfer literature, Kwan and Cheung (2006) proposed another four-phase model, consisting of motivation, matching, implementation and retention. Departing from Szulanski's (1996; 2000) model, by splitting the initiation stage into motivation and matching in their model, Kwan and Cheung (2006) combined the

implementation and ramp-up stages into their implementation stage, but their retention phase broadly corresponds to Szulanski's integration stage (Kwan and Cheung, 2006). Their split of Szulanski's initiation phase into motivation and matching seems to be helpful, as motivation and matching were found to have "significantly different determinants and driving forces" (Kwan and Cheung, 2006, p. 17).

Based on this review of the relevant literature, this study investigated the following two research questions:

RQ1. Which micro-processes occur in the RKT process?

RQ2. How accurately do extant knowledge transfer process models explain RKT?

3. Methodology

3.1 Sample and data collection

Twenty-nine semi-structured interviews with repatriates from Germany (n = 15) and the USA (n = 14) were conducted. Germany and the USA were chosen because they are countries with a long history of expatriation. Given the qualitative nature of the study and the extensive nature of the interview protocol, a sample of about 15 in each country was deemed sufficient. To meet the selection criteria, the duration of repatriates' international assignment had to be at least six months, to enable a sufficient period of learning and knowledge acquisition while being abroad. In addition, repatriates' return to their domestic work unit must have been at least three months ago, to allow for opportunities of interaction with domestic work unit members and, therefore, potential knowledge transfer experiences.

Participating repatriates came from a broad range of industries, namely, the high-technology industry (n = 13), the automotive industry (n = 10), the retail industry (n = 4) and the energy industry (n = 2). The researchers chose industries that play a significant role in both countries and that employ large numbers of expatriates. The researchers contacted the human resource (HR) departments and requested their participation. Potential interviewees were identified and asked if they were willing to participate by HR personnel. However, their participation was completely voluntary. The majority of the repatriates were male (n = 20); the minority were female (n = 9). The average age of the repatriates was 42 years (SD = 5.4), the average length of the international assignments was 30 months (SD = 14.4) and the average time between reentry and the interview was 16 months (SD = 18.7).

Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were usually conducted at the repatriates' workplace. Repatriates were asked to reflect on successful as well as unsuccessful incidents of RKT attempts. To elicit concrete knowledge transfer experiences of repatriates, the following questions were asked, following the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954):

Q1. What happened? How did it unfold? Who was your target (with whom were you trying to share your knowledge)? What was transferred?

Q2. What led to the incident you just described?

Q3. What do you think were the critical factors in making it a successful/an unsuccessful transfer?

"Repatriates need to be able to tailor their knowledge to different audiences and detect suitable situations to initiate knowledge flows."

3.2 Data analysis

All interviews were recorded, transcribed and content-analyzed based on Krippendorff (2013) and Mayring (2010), with the assistance of the computer software MAXQDA 11. Initially a deductive approach was followed and the categories were operationalized based on previous knowledge, as the authors wished to test existing knowledge transfer process models in a new context (Patton, 2002). Subsequently, the initial coding scheme was modified as new sub-categories were allowed to emerge from the data (Miles and Huberman, 1994). This flexibility was necessary because extant knowledge transfer process models might not be detailed enough to cover the breadth of micro-processes during RKT.

In a first step, the three broad temporal process categories were imposed on the data: before, during and after the actual knowledge flows. The phases of existing knowledge transfer process models can be subsumed under these categories. For example, Szulanski's (1996) initiation phase relates to the "before" category, whereas the implementation phase corresponds to the "during" category, and the ramp-up and integration phases belong to the category "after" the actual knowledge flows. The analysis showed that the majority (60 per cent) of text passages were related to the phase before the actual knowledge flows, followed by the execution of the knowledge flows (28 per cent) and the post-execution phase (12 per cent). In addition, three actors emerged from the data as relevant sub-categories: repatriates as knowledge sources, co-workers and subordinates as potential recipients and supervisors as potential facilitators of the RKT process. Within these actor-oriented sub-categories, the majority of content was related to activities of repatriates (57 per cent), followed by recipients (26 per cent) and supervisors (17 per cent).

In the next iteration of analysis, the 3×3 category matrix of the process categories and actor sub-categories was imposed on the data, to increase precision of process category labels. Detailed sub-categories of knowledge transfer-related activities were identified for each actor. This step of analysis showed that the "before" process category needed to be split into two categories, as the knowledge transfer-related activities of actors were qualitatively different and showed a sequential nature. These phases were labeled assessment and initiation. The phase in which the actual knowledge flows were executed was named execution, whereas the post-execution activities were included in the evaluation phase. Table III includes descriptions of each of the four phases and reports the frequencies of typical quotes for each category.

Each step of the analysis was discussed among the authors to ensure logical consistency and clear definition of categories. Disagreements were discussed and the categories were revised until mutually exclusive, but collectively exhaustive categories were defined. To assess the intersubjectivity of the final category system, three independent coders fluent in English and German coded the interview transcripts. The intercoder reliability was calculated using the macro KALPHA, provided by Hayes and Krippendorff (2007). Krippendorff's α was satisfactory with $\alpha = 0.77$.

4. Findings

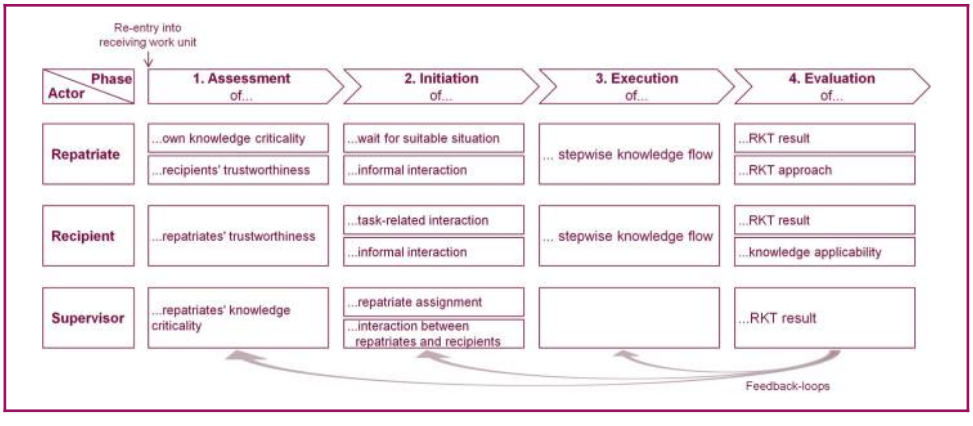
4.1 The RKT process model

As can be seen from Figure 1, the findings are summarized in a proposed RKT process model with four phases: assessment, initiation, execution and evaluation. The model clarifies the roles and knowledge transfer-related activities of the three groups of actors: repatriates, recipients and supervisors. The feedback loops account for the iterative and dynamic nature of RKT and indicate that the evaluation of a specific transfer experience can impact subsequent knowledge transfer-related behavior, particularly recipients' openness to receive repatriate knowledge in the future.

Table III Phase descriptions and corresponding category system

Phase	*Description*	*Actor*	*Category*	*Frequencies (%)*
Assessment				40
	This phase describes the considerations that influence the decision to transfer or receive knowledge	Repatriates, supervisors	Assessing knowledge criticality	18
		Repatriates, recipients	Assessing trustworthiness	22
Initiation				35
	This phase describes the triggers or impetus that immediately precedes the actual transfer of knowledge	Repatriates, recipients	Waiting for emergent work situation	18
		Repatriates, recipients	Seeking informal interaction	2
		Recipients	Approaching repatriate with concrete issue	7
		Supervisors	Giving repatriate concrete assignment	7
		Supervisors	Directing repatriate to recipients	2
Execution				10
	This phase is characterized by the actual flow of knowledge between repatriates and recipients	Repatriates, recipients	Stepwise knowledge flows	10
Evaluation				14
	This phase starts after the actual flow of knowledge and is focused on its result	Repatriates, recipients, supervisors	Evaluating transfer result	8
		Repatriates	Evaluating own transfer approach	6

Figure 1 Repatriate knowledge transfer process model



4.2 Assessment phase: assessing knowledge criticality and trustworthiness

The first phase of the RKT process model, the assessment phase carried out by repatriates, recipients and supervisors, emerged from the critical incidents data. Sample responses are shown in Table IV. This phase describes the considerations that influence the decision to transfer or receive knowledge.

4.2.1 Repatriates. The critical incidents indicated that, the onus for knowledge transfer lay upon the repatriates who drove the process and felt responsible for the outcome of their knowledge transfer attempts. The key task of repatriates was the assessment of the knowledge criticality of their knowledge for the domestic work unit as a whole, as well as for individual recipients (4.1). For example, knowledge that was assessed as critical was either novel and/or relevant for solving concrete business issues of the domestic work unit and individual recipients. In some cases, repatriates reported that their familiarity with the domestic work unit enabled them to focus on the acquisition of knowledge while being abroad that they knew would be useful when coming back. Thus, for some repatriates, the assessment of knowledge criticality began before repatriation (4.2).

Table IV Assessment phase

Actor	*Category*	*Sample responses*
Repatriates		
	Assessing knowledge criticality	4.1. "I haven't tried to share it if I didn't think it was necessary. So I don't think I shared it unless I saw an application for the knowledge. And always when an application was right, I think people were generally very inquisitive."
		4.2. "I think it was my familiarity with my work unit's mission and practices that enabled me to know what's important for my work unit. And when I was over there in Europe, I was able to take in the information that I knew was important to my work unit and make the observations that I knew would be of interest to my work unit. And so it was my experience and familiarity with the work unit itself that I returned to, which made the knowledge transfer more relevant."
	Assessing trustworthiness	4.3. "I would say, if you trust in people then you are likely to reveal more around the actual knowledge, and your opinion. You are probably a little more honest, then with people where you only talk about the actual topic. Certainly you do transfer a different kind of knowledge then only this very neutral knowledge."
Recipients		
	Assessing trustworthiness	4.4. "Yes, trust is a very important topic. With everything that is new or foreign, you rather resent it. That's what the others do as well. They question: 'What is that guy's agenda, why is he here?'"
		4.5. "You have to have been viewed as being highly successful. If you were not successful, then I don't think that people would value what you have to say. You had to be highly respected within the organization that you were with before you left."
Supervisors		
	Assessing knowledge criticality	4.6. "Well, I think that if a person 'the supervisor' values the international experience and is willing to be an advocate for it, as part of ongoing discussions, that person can facilitate the knowledge transfer '...'"
		4.7. "But to respect that, or I think they also need to recognize, like any manager, 'I understand the skills that you bring to my organization'; the full skill set. And so, if something comes up, I need your help on relating to that, 'she knows all of it'"

The second assessment that repatriates performed focused on the trustworthiness of potential knowledge recipients. This assessment was particularly important in transfers that involved non-technical knowledge, such as repatriates' personal experiences and opinions. Repatriates felt more vulnerable when sharing these types of knowledge with others (4.3).

4.2.2 Recipients. The main recipients for the repatriates' acquired knowledge in these critical incidents were either co-workers or subordinates. Repatriates reported that successful knowledge transfer attempts were characterized by recipients' trust in the repatriates, while unsuccessful incidents included the recipients' assessment of the repatriates as lacking in perceived trustworthiness (4.4). The source of trust that was assessed during this phase and that subsequently triggered the recipients' motivation to receive knowledge was influenced primarily by repatriates' perceived ability, their track record and their general performance in the organization. Thus, recipients' assessment of repatriates' trustworthiness as evidenced by previous achievements and credibility pertained to both the repatriation period as well as the period before and during expatriation (4.5).

4.2.3 Supervisors. The role of supervisors as facilitators of the RKT process was apparently viewed as important but nevertheless limited with regards to visible behavioral actions during the assessment phase. The assessment of knowledge criticality on the part of the supervisors was demonstrated by their display of positive attitudes toward the international experience and the acquired international knowledge of repatriates (4.6). From the

perspective of the repatriates, this was seen as normal managerial behavior that should be in the interest of every superior (4.7).

4.3 Initiation phase: identifying the right timing and context to transfer

Table V portrays the roles and sample responses for each set of actors in the second phase – initiation. This phase describes the triggers or impetus that immediately precedes the actual transfer of knowledge.

4.3.1 Repatriates. To transfer their technical knowledge successfully, repatriates needed to be highly effective in recognizing the appropriate moment or timing of transfer. In many instances, this meant being patient and waiting for a suitable work situation to arise, rather than imposing their knowledge on potential recipients (see responses below – 5.1, 5.2). Repatriates also reported instances where they initiated the transfer of more personal experiences and opinions that they perceived as helpful to other individuals. In these cases, repatriates looked for opportunities to interact more informally with potential recipients (5.3).

4.3.2 Recipients. According to repatriates' accounts, recipients initiated knowledge transfers in two potential ways. First, they approached repatriates with a concrete question

Table V Initiation phase

Actor	*Category*	*Sample responses*
Repatriates		
	Waiting for emergent work situation	5.1. "Example situations usually develop form concrete work situations. For example, we sit together in our daily evening meeting, where all department heads sit together and discuss production figures and problems that have arisen during the day"
		5.2. "When that particular situation is there, aha, I've got the scenario to take them through to wow them and to astound them"
	Seeking informal interaction	5.3. "I tend to do that as more of a mentoring basis. So, for those executives that are doing highly international or global jobs now in my portfolio, and I can think of at least two of them, I work with them fairly closely to sort help leverage the knowledge of learning that I had in my experience to help them. And I think it's reasonably successful"
Recipients		
	Approaching repatriate with concrete issue	5.4. "'Company XYZ' tries to become more international and access new markets, for example in Japan. People approach me with questions about the market entry in Japan and what you have to do to be successful"
		5.5. "If there are questions about usability criteria, I now get asked to do this. My expertise is sought after"
	Seeking informal interaction	5.6. "I also do mentoring for younger colleagues. They often want to know how they can develop their careers and explore new things, 'how can I develop a personal career plan', etc. In these situations, I often realize that this step to go abroad and experience a different culture has had real impact and that's why I recommend going abroad to them"
Supervisors		
	Giving repatriate concrete assignment	5.7. "So, aside from the obvious, sort of the debrief after the assignment, the manager can take advantage or prompt a knowledge transfer in the way they assign projects. So, for example, if a manager who gets an employee like me back from a UK assignment, has the opportunity to assign me to do some additional deals in the UK, I think that's a way of repatriating some knowledge; taking advantage of that knowledge. So it's in the work assignments"
	Directing repatriate to recipients	5.8. "I mean, I think the way that they 'supervisors' would facilitate that is to ask me to go and help another partner in the sales process or in the delivery process of one of these programs. And they do that. They'll say, 'Can you go work with so and so because they don't understand how they deal with these situations?'"

or issue they needed to resolve, based on the knowledge that repatriates had undergone certain experiences. For example, colleagues approached repatriates with specific questions related to their current projects. In general, the explicit knowledge of repatriates was more frequently sought after by their colleagues (see responses below – 5.4, 5.5). Second, some recipients used more informal situations to ask repatriates about personal expatriate experiences, and how they viewed their international assignment and reentry (5.6).

4.3.3 Supervisors. Supervisors who took an active role in the RKT process were reported to have two potential facilitation approaches. First, some supervisors gave repatriates specific assignments in which their acquired knowledge was applicable (5.7). Second, supervisors initiated knowledge transfers by directing repatriates to colleagues who needed support for solving a problem or dealing with an issue (5.8). In general, repatriates observed that supervisors had to be cognizant of the fit between upcoming tasks and the repatriates' knowledge set to facilitate its effective transfer.

4.4 Execution phase: executing stepwise knowledge flows

The roles and sample responses for repatriates, recipients and supervisors that comprise the third phase – execution – are shown in Table VI. The execution phase was characterized by the actual flow of knowledge between repatriates and recipients.

4.4.1 Repatriates. Critical incidents indicated that some repatriates were attuned to how much knowledge recipients could absorb and were careful not to overwhelm them. Meeting their own need to transfer what they learned on an international assignment emerged in critical incidents on unsuccessful knowledge transfer. In success stories, repatriates seemed to be very cautious not only about when to transfer their knowledge, as described in the initiation phase, but also about how it should be done; they based this on their evaluation of the capacity and receptivity of recipients. They also acknowledged that acceptance of their knowledge was a gradual process that depended on the perceived usefulness of their earlier attempts (see responses below – 6.1, 6.2). The authors termed this a stepwise approach, which involves calculating the right amount of knowledge to transfer, assessing its impact and basing subsequent transfer attempts on that assessment.

4.4.2 Recipients. In response to the stepwise approach of repatriates for the execution of the transfer, recipients also seemed to be willing to receive knowledge bit-by-bit during each transfer attempt. Recipients' responsiveness seemed to increase over time as a result of the growing evidence that repatriates' knowledge was useful and could be successfully

Table VI Execution phase

Actor	*Category*	*Sample responses*
Repatriates	Stepwise knowledge flow	6.1. "I will stay with my bit by bit approach for know-how transfer. Otherwise I will overwhelm people" 6.2. "You cannot approach them with all the knowledge you have acquired during years abroad and just dump all the knowledge on them at once"
Recipients	Stepwise knowledge flow	6.3. "I started it and one after another they realized that something worked, it worked well, it worked really well. That's when people accepted it"
Supervisors	N.A.	N.A.

applied in their work context. The proven usefulness of repatriates' knowledge in the work unit context seemed to trigger recipients' motivation to receive knowledge (6.3).

4.4.3 Supervisors. None of the repatriates mentioned the involvement of the supervisors during the execution phase described in their critical incidents.

4.5 Evaluation phase: evaluating transfer result and approach

Table VII illustrates the roles and sample responses of the three actors in the fourth and final phase – evaluation. This phase began after the actual flow of knowledge and is focused on its result.

4.5.1 Repatriates. Repatriates evaluated the knowledge transfer result and determined its consequences for their subsequent transfers. They seemed to be highly satisfied if the knowledge transfer was successful and their knowledge was applied in the new context, regardless of any compensation or rewards (7.1). However, if the knowledge transfer was unsuccessful because recipients resisted the new knowledge, repatriates responded in one of three ways: complete withdrawal from future transfer attempts (7.2); applying a more selective approach, for example only approaching recipients with whom knowledge transfer had previously been successful (7.3); or continuing to attempt to transfer their knowledge (7.4). Persistence was a key factor in this phase. Another important part of this evaluation phase for repatriates was reflecting on their own knowledge transfer approach and its effects on the transfer, particularly in unsuccessful attempts. In many instances, repatriates searched for the reasons underlying a failed transfer attempt to increase the likelihood of success in future transfers. Repatriates reflected on their influence skills and whether or not their attempts to transfer knowledge were too overwhelming (see responses below – 7.5, 7.6).

Table VII Evaluation phase

Actor	*Category*	*Sample responses*
Repatriates		
	Evaluating transfer result	7.1. "If I just force someone to do something the way I want him to, then I cannot be sure that he has really internalized it. If I convince him, then he might actually believe that this is a good approach. Or the ultimate goal is to get him to say: 'That was my idea'. Mission accomplished. I don't care if someone says that he has learned this from me. But if he says, 'that this was my idea and I actually think it's awesome'. If I reach my objective this way–fine for me, great! "
		7.2. "I guess I gave up because nobody understands it, nobody cares. I don't really care myself at the end; I don't even want to talk about it anymore"
		7.3. "My motivation was high nonetheless but limited to certain areas. I wasn't only active in the areas where I work and where I can see value. In the other areas, I completely withdrew. Just didn't approach them anymore"
		7.4. "So, if I got easily discouraged because I tried to transfer the knowledge and I didn't penetrate in my first couple of conversations, and then if I just said, 'Well forget it. If they don't want to know, I don't. . .' then that's a problem; you won't be successful"
	Evaluating transfer approach	7.5. "It won't work if I don't persist and find a way myself to successfully convince people that what I've learned is of value"
		7.6. "Maybe I approached that person too directly and the person was overwhelmed. That might have been"
Recipients		
	Evaluating transfer result	7.7. "If it works and they can verify it, because I found that if you come forward and you explain stuff, nobody listens. But if an issue comes up and you actually propose a solution and it works, then you get a lot of attention the next time around"
Supervisors		
	Evaluating transfer result	N.A.

4.5.2 Recipients. In the eyes of the repatriates who narrated these critical incidents, the recipients focused solely on the result of the transfer during this phase. Thus, evidence that the transferred knowledge proved useful when applied in the new context positively influenced the recipients' evaluation of the transfer. It also influenced their openness and motivation to engage in subsequent knowledge transfer attempts (7.7). This, along with the lessons learned by the repatriates in their evaluation of their transfer skills, forms the basis for the feedback loops at the bottom of the model.

4.5.3 Supervisors. In these critical incidents, there were no examples of how supervisors evaluated the RKT results.

5. Discussion

Based on critical incidents of knowledge transfer successes and failures reported by German and US American repatriates, this study provided a process perspective to the literature on RKT. In addition, extant knowledge transfer process models were extended and a RKT process model was introduced, to more accurately reflect the repatriate context. The study has two main contributions. First, the roles and knowledge transfer-related activities of repatriates, recipients and supervisors have been clarified. Thus, this paper shed light on the micro-processes during RKT. Second, an empirically informed RKT process model was developed that acknowledges the dynamic and iterative nature of the RKT process. The two main findings will now be discussed in greater detail to relate them to the existing research on RKT.

5.1 The link between the prevailing key variables perspective and the process perspective

The findings indicate that the micro-processes during RKT were contingent upon the ability and motivation of actors as well as their opportunity to interact. This result is in accordance with the previous studies on RKT that focused on the identification of key variables for RKT success (Oddou *et al.*, 2013; Reiche, 2012; Huang *et al.*, 2013) and the original MOA framework of work performance by Blumberg and Pringle (1982). The key finding of this study with respect to the MOA framework is that the relative weight of each component of the framework varies among actors and across the four phases of RKT, as illustrated in the following paragraphs.

The accounts of repatriates placed greater emphasis on their ability than on their motivation during all four phases. Repatriates emphasized the importance of their ability to market the value of their knowledge and their credibility to potential recipients during the assessment phase as well as the ability to interpret social interactions and detect the appropriate timing to initiate knowledge flows during the initiation phase. Additionally, they needed to be able to understand how to adjust their knowledge transfer behavior as not to overwhelm recipients during the execution phase as well as refine their RKT approach after evaluating previous RKT attempts during the evaluation phase. This insight substantiates previous research that identified repatriates as the key actors during the RKT process, who invested time and effort into making the transfer successful for relatively altruistic reasons, such as engaging in RKT because it is "the right thing to do" (Oddou *et al.*, 2013, p. 264). The motivation of repatriates to transfer their knowledge seemed to be taken for granted and therefore was not worth mentioning. Repatriate motivation might have been mentioned less frequently because repatriates return with a wealth of knowledge (Fink and Meierewert, 2005; Berthoin Antal, 2000) that they wish to share with domestic work unit members. Furthermore, repatriate ability to transfer may have been more relevant to them, as they were struggling to learn how to transfer their knowledge and how to avoid failure.

The motivation of recipients was of utmost importance during the assessment phase, as perceived by the repatriates. Without recipients' motivation, the RKT process would not proceed. While repatriates had already reflected on the usefulness of their newly acquired knowledge, potential recipients were less familiar with their international experience and

the potential value of their knowledge. Therefore, repatriates needed to demonstrate the criticality of their knowledge to increase the motivation of potential recipients to engage in knowledge transfer-related behavior. In addition, the trustworthiness of repatriates, particularly their credibility, track record and expert status, was equally important, as the trustworthiness of the senders seemed to impact the perceived value of the knowledge (Andrews and Delahaye, 2000; Pacharapha and Vathanophas Ractham, 2012). Even though the accounts of the repatriates focused less on the ability of recipients to acquire knowledge, their incremental approach to the execution of knowledge flows indicated that they were mindful of the limited absorptive capacity of recipients (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990). Thus, the ability of recipients was also relevant for the success of RKT; however, less noteworthy than the motivation of repatriates.

Finally, RKT was dependent on opportunities to interact for repatriates and knowledge recipients, and this was a result that confirmed previous research results (Oddou *et al.*, 2013; Huang *et al.*, 2013). None of the repatriates reported incidents where repatriate knowledge was successfully transferred without repeated personal interactions with recipients. As repatriate knowledge has primarily been described as tacit (Berthoin Antal, 2000; Stahl *et al.*, 2009), personal interaction, as one of the richest communication channels, might be necessary to transfer this kind of knowledge (Gupta and Govindarajan, 2000).

5.2 The RKT process model

While existing knowledge transfer process models (Kwan and Cheung, 2006; Szulanski, 1996; Hansen, 1999) focus on the organizational level and clarify which stages are relevant for organizational learning to occur, the current study analyzes knowledge transfer in the context of repatriation from an individual perspective. Thus, the RKT process model not only aims to delineate among the subsequent knowledge transfer phases but intends to explain the individual knowledge transfer behavior of three groups of actors and their interaction during those phases. Thus, the results respond to the call for an analysis of the micro-processes during knowledge transfer processes (Van Wijk *et al.*, 2008; Argote, 2013).

The initiation phase from Szulanski's (1996) phase model was split into two phases, namely, assessment and initiation. This refinement supports the results from Kwan and Cheung (2006), who divided the initiation phase into motivation and matching. However, the term assessment is considered to be more accurate to describe the individual knowledge transfer behavior during this stage, because repatriates, recipients and supervisors assess the criticality of the knowledge of repatriates and each other's trustworthiness (Andrews and Delahaye, 2000; Oddou *et al.*, 2013; Cohen and Levinthal, 1990; McAllister, 1995).

Based on the available qualitative data, an asymmetry seemed to emerge between repatriates and recipients, regarding the different importance attributed to the underlying facets of trustworthiness. Accordingly, repatriates seemed to focus on the affect-based facet of trust (McAllister, 1995), when assessing the suitability of certain recipients for their tacit knowledge. Conversely, knowledge recipients appeared to focus more strongly on the cognition-based facet of trust (McAllister, 1995) when their decision about their willingness to listen to the repatriate was made. This finding supports the results of Andrews and Delahaye (2000), who reported that the perceived knowledge quality was largely dependent on the perceived credibility of the knowledge holder. Therefore, the treatment of trust as a one-dimensional construct by knowledge transfer researchers should be reconsidered (Bakker *et al.*, 2006).

The second phase, initiation, combines elements from Szulanski's (1996) initiation and Kwan and Cheung's (2006) matching phase. Following the positive assessment of repatriates' knowledge criticality and each other's trustworthiness, repatriates, recipients and supervisors are involved in creating formal or informal opportunities to interact. For example, supervisors might task repatriates with specific assignments that involve working

closely with domestic work unit members. Consequently, they share their overseas knowledge during this interaction. The intensified interaction between repatriates and potential recipients enables repatriates to detect the right timing for the execution of knowledge flows.

Third, the results demonstrate how the actual flow of knowledge takes place during the execution phase, which is similar to Szulanski's (1996) and Kwan and Cheung's (2006) implementation phase. Thus, knowledge flows between repatriates and recipients occur in a stepwise manner, building up intensity and complexity to prevent the recipients from feeling overwhelmed. During this phase, repatriates and recipients engage with the repatriate knowledge and recreate the original knowledge through social interaction (Nonaka, 1991, 1994; Oddou *et al.*, 2009; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). As a result, the knowledge is adjusted to fit the context of the domestic work unit.

Finally, the evaluation phase includes first applications of the acquired knowledge and is therefore similar to Szulanski's (1996) ramp-up stage. These results shed light on how the perceived success of one knowledge transfer attempt impacts subsequent knowledge transfers. Accordingly, recipients seem to be more motivated to engage in knowledge transfer behavior and are more willing to occupy a more active role, once a previous transfer attempt has been successfully completed. This dynamic and iterative nature of the RKT process is highlighted by the feedback loops.

6. Conclusion

The results of this study contribute to a more detailed understanding of the micro-processes during RKT and have been summarized in a proposed RKT process model. A more nuanced view on the topic of RKT has emerged from this study and managers as well as researchers can apply the findings for their different purposes.

Nevertheless, a few limitations inherent in this paper need to be acknowledged. First, as the data and analysis focused on the individual level, specifically the micro-processes after reentry of the repatriate into the domestic work unit as perceived by the repatriates, the authors were unable to investigate the subsequent knowledge integration, retention or storage activities in the work unit. Therefore, it was not possible to include an integration or retention phase in the model. Second, only German and US American repatriates were interviewed. The experiences of repatriates from different geographic areas and especially countries with more emerging economies might lead to different results and more interest in repatriate knowledge. Third, the critical incident methodology allowed us to capture the perspective of repatriates in their own words; that was not the case for knowledge recipients and supervisors, whose voice is missing here. For example, the identified lack of involvement of the facilitators during the execution of the knowledge flow between knowledge senders and recipients might be influenced by this shortcoming.

For managers, this paper provides input on how the organizational support that is offered to facilitate repatriation and RKT can be made more effective by aligning the type of support with the changing needs of the different actors during the four phases. First, during the assessment phase, repatriates could be supported in assessing the criticality of their newly acquired knowledge for members of the domestic work unit through structured debriefing sessions after their reentry. At the same time, publicizing the specific and valuable areas of expertise of repatriates through internal communication mechanisms, for example newsletters, could help to establish the credibility and trustworthiness of repatriates. This in turn could positively affect the motivation of the members of the domestic work unit to engage in knowledge transfer behavior. Second, and to facilitate the initiation phase, specific training sessions for repatriates could be offered to improve repatriates' ability to communicate and present their knowledge effectively. Repatriates need to be able to tailor their knowledge to different audiences and detect suitable situations to initiate knowledge flows. In

addition, an expert or knowledge directory could be created to reduce the effort for potential knowledge recipients to identify and consult with those employees (Oddou *et al.*, 2013). This might help to increase the chances that potential knowledge recipients approach the repatriates on the search for useful knowledge. Third, organizations need to be aware that the execution of knowledge flows and the iterative nature of the RKT process require time. Therefore, the organizational strategy and the organizational culture should support an open environment for learning and amplify that engaging in knowledge transfer behavior is expected of all employees. In addition, opportunities for interaction, such as informal meeting areas, need to be available and easily accessible for repatriates and potential knowledge recipients to interact with their counterparts (Huang *et al.*, 2013). Finally, organizations can share examples of successful knowledge transfers and their potential impact on individual and work unit performance to increase the visibility of the value of knowledge of repatriates, and motivate other employees to reach out to repatriates and learn from them. Additionally, employees who engaged in RKT might appreciate being recognized for their knowledge transfer behavior. Knowledge transfer behavior could be rewarded with appropriate financial and non-financial benefits, such as organization-wide acknowledgment in newsletters.

For scholars interested in researching knowledge transfer, repatriation and RKT, this paper provides ideas for future research directions. First, the critical incidents as narrated by repatriates provided important insights into the RKT process. Future research could analyze whether the identified micro-processes are also applicable to general knowledge transfers or whether they are specific to the context of repatriation. Earlier research on RKT (Berthoin Antal, 2000; Oddou *et al.*, 2009) had proposed that some attributes of RKT, for example the type of knowledge acquired abroad or the socialization process after reentry into the domestic work unit, imply that RKT is different from regular knowledge transfers in organizations. However, empirical evidence about the differences between RKT and regular knowledge transfers is currently missing. Second, the findings of the current study provide a starting point to follow-up on the idea that trust should be treated as a complex and multi-dimensional construct. This approach would allow for an analysis of the potential differences among actors in the knowledge transfer process, regarding the importance attributed to the underlying facets of the construct. Consequently, an even more nuanced view on the relationship between trust and knowledge transfers could be generated. However, this would also require a more differentiated construct measurement during data collection. Third, future research could aim to integrate more diverse perspectives of all three groups of actors. It would be interesting to understand how recipients and supervisors reflect on the RKT process and whether any differences among the groups of actors can be identified. Finally, this study gives the impression that repatriates primarily transfer their knowledge to their previous work unit. However, some repatriates also transfer to other parts of the organization (Oddou *et al.*, 2013), making repatriation a trilateral process and therefore even more complex and dynamic. Future research could clarify the antecedents and moderators of knowledge transfers to other units of the organization.

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