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## Reverse Knowledge Flows: How and When Do Preparation and Reintegration Facilitate Repatriate Knowledge Transfer?

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**ABSTRACT** This paper applies a generalized exchange perspective to examine how and when reintegration in headquarters (HQ) facilitates repatriate knowledge transfer (RKT). Specifically, we theorize how the preparatory stage for repatriation – when expatriates are still abroad – enhances reintegration in HQ upon repatriation and subsequently RKT via interpersonal and career-related pathways. For the former, we hypothesize that communication frequency with HQ actors before re-entry enhances RKT via reintegration. We also hypothesize that communication frequency with HQ actors before re-entry improves trust in HQ actors, which, in turn, strengthens the positive effect of reintegration on RKT. For the second pathway, we hypothesize that career and repatriate support before re-entry increases RKT via reintegration. We also hypothesize that career and repatriate support before re-entry enhances career satisfaction upon re-entry, which, in turn, strengthens the positive effect of reintegration on RKT. Time-lagged data from 129 assignees and their HQ supervisors support most of our hypotheses.

**Keywords:** expatriation, knowledge transfer, reintegration, repatriation, social exchange theory, generalized exchange

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## INTRODUCTION

Transferring knowledge across different units within multinational corporations (MNCs) is a key source for competitive advantage (Gupta and Govindarajan, 2000). In MNCs, knowledge flows consist of forward transfer from headquarters (HQ) to foreign units, reverse transfer from foreign units to HQ, and lateral transfer between foreign units (Yang et al., 2008). International assignments of expatriate employees are particularly effective ways to transfer knowledge in MNCs (Adler, 1981; Lazarova and Cerdin, 2007) – the process through which organizational actors ‘exchange, receive, and are influenced by the experience and knowledge of others’ (Van Wijk et al., 2008, p. 832). However, while expatriates have an organizational mandate to engage in forward knowledge transfer (Edström and Galbraith, 1977), this mandate rarely exists during repatriation, ‘the completion of the international assignment and the assignee’s move to a subsequent position, either at the individual’s home unit or another MNC unit’ (Reiche, 2012, p. 1052). Despite this important difference, repatriate knowledge transfer has received much less research attention compared to forward knowledge transfer (for reviews, see Burmeister, 2017; Chiang et al., 2018; Lazarova, 2015; Szkudlarek, 2010). This is unfortunate as expatriates can acquire valuable knowledge while working in host countries which, if effectively transferred upon their return, provides a source of competitive advantage in MNCs (Lazarova and Cerdin, 2007; Oddou et al., 2009).

In repatriate research, little is known about factors during the preparatory stage for and reintegration in HQ that affect repatriate knowledge transfer and how this process occurs upon return to the HQ (Burmeister, 2017; Froese et al., 2021) – to a point that ‘our understanding of repatriate knowledge transfer is still in its infancy’ (Chiang et al., 2018, p. 210). Repatriate knowledge transfer is argued to be challenging because it occurs during the often difficult and turbulent phase of reintegration in HQ (Lazarova and Tarique, 2005). Reintegration – assignees’ work-related immersion in HQ after repatriation – includes re-entry to HQ and adjustment to the home country environment (Linehan and Scullion, 2002). While repatriate adjustment has been conceptualized as an affective construct (Black et al., 1992), reintegration is broader because it taps into both affective and cognitive components, and thus promises to better reflect the re-entry experience (Haslberger et al., 2013). Moreover, little attention has been given to the preparatory stage for and the actual reintegration itself, and the conditions for successful reintegration. To advance our understanding of how and when repatriate knowledge transfer occurs, scholars have also made repeated calls for time-lagged and longitudinal research (Chiang et al., 2018; Furuya et al., 2009; Herman and Tetrick, 2009; Szkudlarek, 2010).

By addressing the aforementioned research gaps, this study contributes to the literature in two ways. First, we apply the generalized exchange perspective of social exchange theory (SET, Ekeh, 1974) to conceptualize and empirically examine how the preparation for re-entry during individuals’ international assignments enhances reintegration and knowledge transfer upon their return to HQ. More specifically, we build on the norm of indirect reciprocity (Ekeh, 1974) to propose that successful reintegration in the HQ and subsequent repatriate knowledge transfer serve as respective benefits of pure generalized exchanges between individual assignees and HQ actors. In doing so, we shift the attention from dyadic exchanges to a wider range of social

exchange relations within an organization, which allows us to consider that beneficiaries in a given exchange can select among different beneficiaries (Cropanzano et al., 2017; Takahashi, 2000). This is important because repatriates can receive support during reintegration from one HQ actor but transfer knowledge to another. Moreover, we distinguish between two types of assurances for assignees to indirectly reciprocate the benefits received from successful reintegration in the HQ by engaging in repatriate knowledge transfer: (1) nurturing interpersonal relationships, and (2) fostering career development. Through the lens of SET (Cheshire, 2007; Cropanzano et al., 2017; Foa and Foa, 1974), interpersonal relationships capture social assurances, whereas career development reflects economic assurances in exchange relations. We conceptualize how these two specific pathways have direct, indirect, and moderating effects on reintegration and repatriate knowledge transfer. In doing so, this study contributes to SET by disentangling the social and economic exchange dimensions that tend to occur in parallel, and we point to a primacy of social assurances. We also advance research in the expatriation context by examining both the antecedent and moderating conditions for generalized exchange relations between assignees and HQ actors as assignees prepare to move and actually move back from foreign subsidiaries to HQ.

Second, we use a stage-based conceptual rationale and multi-wave data from assignees and their supervisors to trace assignees' expatriation and repatriation experiences. We focus on the preparatory stage for and reintegration in HQ and examine how these two stages are related with repatriate knowledge transfer. Unlike prior works that have relied predominantly on cross-sectional repatriate data and self-report accounts of knowledge transfer (see Burmeister, 2017; Chiang et al., 2018), we consider how the preparatory stage during expatriation in the host country affects assignees' reintegration upon their return to HQ and, subsequently, repatriate knowledge transfer. We do so by conducting a time-lagged study that (1) surveyed assignees during their international assignments (three months prior to their return to HQ), (2) surveyed them (now repatriates) again three months after their return to HQ to examine their reintegration, and (3) surveyed these repatriates' immediate supervisors at HQ three months later to assess their knowledge transfer. This approach allows us to distinguish between the key mechanisms supporting repatriate knowledge transfer before and after re-entry. In this study, we also used an established three-step approach (Hinkin, 1998) to develop a scale to measure reintegration in HQ. While scholars have emphasized the importance of successful reintegration in HQ upon re-entry (Furuya et al., 2009; Huang et al., 2013; Reiche, 2012), they have not offered a scale to assess this construct.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

We apply SET to describe the generalized exchange relations between assignees and HQ actors before and after repatriation as facilitators of repatriate knowledge transfer. SET has been one of the primary theoretical perspectives in the social sciences since the early writings of Homans (1958), Blau (1964), and Emerson (1962). At the core of the different

versions of SET, which have their roots in various disciplines, is the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960). The norm suggests that if one party helps, or in any way benefits the other, the beneficiary is expected to reciprocate. Consequently, both exchange parties develop subjective cost-benefit analyses and compare alternative exchanges (Cropanzano et al., 2017). New exchange relations that can generate economic and social benefits are initiated and maintained to the extent that both involved parties expect the exchange to be rewarding (Homans, 1958). While economic benefits can also be important, social benefits are often valued more in exchange relations (Blau, 1964). Benefits need not be tangible in nature because exchange parties engage in an interaction with the general forward-looking expectation of some future returns—one party contributes to another as a gesture of goodwill, based on trust that the contribution will be reciprocated at some time in the future or to fulfil an obligation that resulted from a prior exchange (Cropanzano et al., 2017). Yet, when and in what form this exchange will occur is often uncertain.

While Homans, Blau, and Emerson's contributions form the backbone of SET, they all focus on dyadic exchange relations (Takahashi, 2000). Moving beyond dyadic relations, Ekeh (1974) introduced generalized exchange in which material, social, or other forms of support flow unilaterally between three or more exchange parties who belong to the same group, organization, or social network (Willer et al., 2012). Further, instead of simply assuming trust to exist between exchange parties (Blau, 1964), trust develops over time in high-quality generalized exchange (Ekeh, 1974). In generalized exchange, trust is important because the risk of non-reciprocity and freeriding is higher than in dyadic exchange (Yamagishi and Cook, 1993). Among several types of generalized exchange, we focus here on the pure generalized exchange that does not follow any specific pattern (Takahashi, 2000) – it is not clear to the giver at the time of giving which organizational actor reciprocates the favour, in what form, or when (Molm et al., 2007). Because givers in pure generalized exchange can explicitly choose their recipients (Takahashi, 2000), the benefactors and the beneficiaries are not always the same actors. For instance, repatriates may receive support during reintegration from one HQ actor but choose to transfer knowledge to another. Generalized exchange occurs through various mechanisms, such as givers' altruistic motivation (Sahlins, 1972), the norm of reciprocity (i.e., takers feel obliged to be givers) (Ekeh, 1974), rational choice (i.e., individuals give resources when this behaviour is beneficial to them) (Takahashi, 2000), selective incentives for givers such as social approval (Cheshire, 2007), and identification (Willer et al., 2012).

We apply the SET-based perspective of generalized exchange to propose that assignees' relationships with other HQ actors before and after re-entry affect repatriate knowledge transfer. Repatriate knowledge transfer is thus conceived as an act of indirect reciprocity, i.e., indirectly reciprocating the benefits received from successful reintegration in HQ. We expect assignees' reciprocation to be indirect because their reintegration experience is shaped by various HQ actors, such as colleagues and supervisors (Linehan and Scullion, 2002). Importantly, both assignees and HQ actors benefit from functioning generalized exchange relationships. Prior works, for instance, suggest that supervisors and colleagues generally value the knowledge that repatriates transfer upon their return from an international assignment (Froese et al., 2021; Reiche et al., 2019). Perhaps more importantly, the generalized exchange

perspective can be applied to suggest that repatriates transfer knowledge to reciprocate the benefits that they have received from successful reintegration. Given that reintegration is typically a difficult and turbulent experience (Lazarova and Tarique, 2005), successful reintegration in the HQ is likely a desired benefit for repatriates. It might not only provide repatriates with sufficient comfort while settling back into the HQ but also involve the recognition and acceptance from HQ colleagues (Reiche et al., 2019). Indeed, recognition and the reputation that derives from it can motivate repatriate knowledge transfer as reputation is the ‘money that fuels the engines of indirect reciprocity’ (Nowak, 2006, p. 1561). As such, from the perspective of indirect reciprocity, reputation, and recognition by others allow future acts of cooperation.

## HYPOTHESES

We use the above rationale to suggest that successful reintegration and subsequent repatriate knowledge transfer serve as respective benefits of generalized exchanges between assignees and HQ actors. While any social exchange involves the risk of non-reciprocity, this risk is greater in generalized exchange where the potential of freeriding exists (Yamagishi and Cook, 1993). For instance, HQ actors can benefit from the knowledge repatriates transfer upon their re-entry without engaging in further indirect reciprocity. Thus, assignees need additional assurances that their act of indirect reciprocity – in the form of repatriate knowledge transfer – will contribute to future exchanges with HQ actors (Cheshire, 2007). Applying the generalized exchange perspective, we propose that such assurances exist in the form of social and economic benefits. While the importance of social over economic benefits has been emphasized in dyadic (Blau, 1964) and generalized (Ekeh, 1974) exchange relations, the exchanged resources can be social (socioemotional) and/or economic by their nature, and these resources satisfy different needs of the exchanging parties (Foa and Foa, 1974; Molm, 2010).

Accordingly, we distinguish between two specific pathways that reflect social and economic assurances for assignees to indirectly reciprocate their successful reintegration in the form of repatriate knowledge transfer: (1) nurturing interpersonal relationships, which captures the perceived social assurances, and (2) fostering career development, which reflects the perceived economic assurances. We suggest that social assurances (i.e., frequency of communication with and trust in HQ actors) and economic assurances (i.e., perceived career and repatriate support and career satisfaction) reflect the antecedent and moderating conditions for how and when reintegration (an exchange benefit for the assignee) relates to repatriate knowledge transfer (an exchange benefit for HQ actors). We focus here on trust and communication due to their key roles in the works on SET (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005) and repatriate knowledge transfer (Burmeister, 2017). We consider career and repatriation support and career satisfaction because economic relations also contain symbolic dimensions without direct tangible economic outcomes (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005) and because the inducements offered in organizations usually go beyond short-term

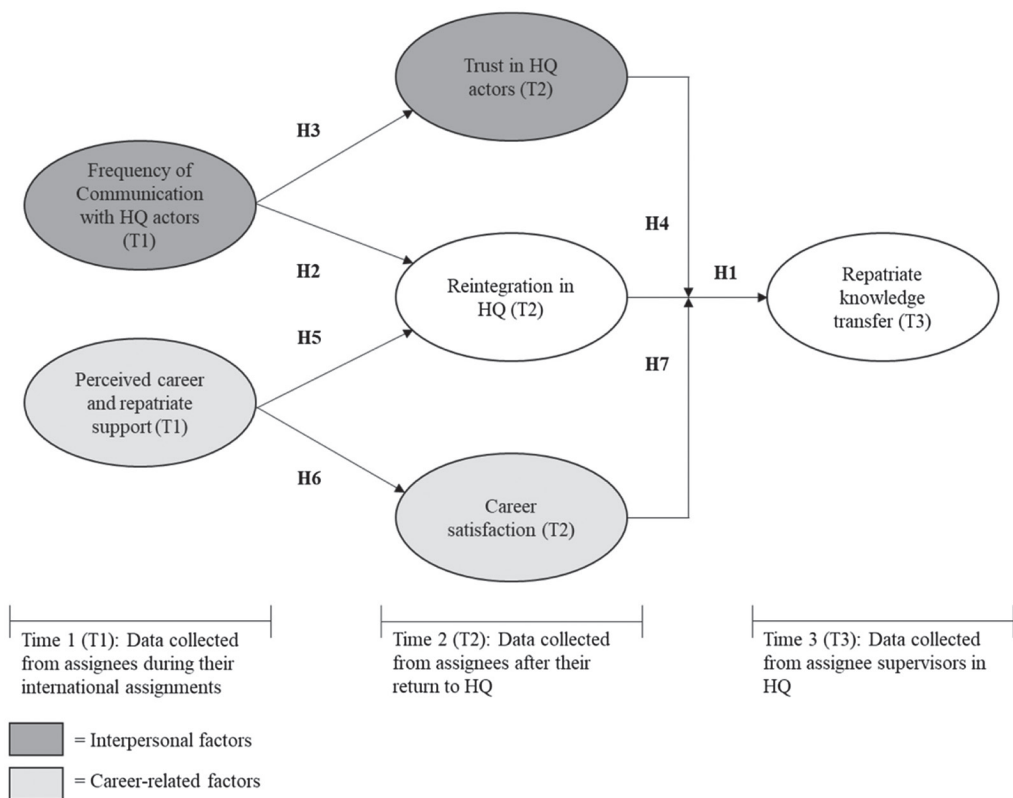


Figure 1. Research model and hypotheses. Notes: H2 and H5 are mediation hypotheses on repatriate knowledge transfer via reintegration.

monetary benefits (Tsui et al., 1997). Figure 1 summarizes our research model and hypotheses.

### Reintegration in HQ and Repatriate Knowledge Transfer

We start by proposing that well-integrated repatriates will reciprocate the received exchange benefits in the form of successful reintegration by transferring knowledge after re-entry. In particular, the norm of reciprocity in dyadic (Blau, 1964) and generalized exchange (Ekeh, 1974) relations suggests that successful reintegration creates an obligation to reciprocate for repatriates. Receiving support from HQ actors with the reintegration process can serve as a sign of social approval and recognition that incentivizes repatriates to reciprocate the received benefits (Cheshire, 2007). Further, being well-integrated can allow repatriates to better navigate the HQ environment and enable them to better use their accumulated knowledge as a resource in generalized exchange with HQ actors. In other words, successful reintegration should motivate and enable indirect reciprocity in the form of repatriate knowledge transfer.

Prior works provide some support for our contention (Furuya et al., 2009; Huang et al., 2013; Lazarova and Tarique, 2005; Reiche, 2012). Lazarova and Tarique



(2005) proposed that reintegration is often filled with uncertainty and work-related disappointments. In this regard, successful reintegration is noted to foster repatriates' disseminative capacity and willingness to transfer knowledge (Huang et al., 2013; Reiche, 2012). In particular, successful reintegration in terms of identifying the right re-entry position, in which the acquired knowledge can be used and appreciated by HQ actors, is identified to strengthen repatriates' readiness to transfer knowledge upon re-entry (Lazarova and Tarique, 2005; Reiche et al., 2009). Because a study in Japanese MNCs further shows that the provision of support for re-entry assisted repatriates with applying their acquired skills, knowledge, and abilities (Furuya et al., 2009), we formulate the following baseline hypothesis.

*Hypothesis 1:* Reintegration in HQ is positively related with repatriate knowledge transfer.

### **Interpersonal Factors: Communication and Trust**

We continue by proposing that frequency of communication with and trust in HQ actors, which capture interpersonal elements of exchange relations (Becerra and Gupta, 2003; Blau, 1964) during expatriation and upon re-entry, enhance reintegration and strengthen the positive relationship between reintegration and repatriate knowledge transfer. From the perspective of generalized exchange, frequent communication with HQ actors before re-entry should make it more likely that the parties engage in generalized exchange. Indeed, communicative acts create a sense of collectivity and solidarity, which are used to sustain generalized exchanges (Molm et al., 2007). Frequent communication between assignees and HQ actors also allows the latter to better assist repatriates with their respective reintegration. This is because HQ actors need to be made aware of repatriates' acquired skills, knowledge, and abilities to find an adequate position for them upon re-entry. However, if communication has been infrequent, HQ actors are less aware of the acquired skills, knowledge, and abilities (Berthoin Antal, 2001; Kraimer et al., 2009). Partly for this reason, the 'out-of-sight, out-of-mind' syndrome is a frequently mentioned indicator of unsuccessful reintegration (Allen and Alvarez, 1998; Oddou et al., 2013). The evidence provided above suggests that the frequency of communication with HQ actors prior to re-entry facilitates reintegration upon repatriation. In line with Hypothesis 1 and our SET-based rationale, we also expect that repatriates, who more frequently communicate with HQ actors, experience a more successful reintegration, which in turn leads to them being more willing to transfer their knowledge.

*Hypothesis 2:* Reintegration in HQ mediates the positive relationship between frequency of communication with HQ actors and repatriate knowledge transfer.

SET states that trust – a belief that the exchange partner will not exploit the actor (Molm et al., 2007) – is a socioemotional assurance that reduces the perceived risk of non-reciprocity in social exchange because it signals a desire to continue the exchange



relation (Blau, 1964; Ekeh, 1974). In generalized exchanges, the need of trust is high because the exchanges are carried out by multiple actors that may not reciprocate with each other in a direct manner (Ekeh, 1974). To benefit from generalized exchange with HQ actors upon their re-entry, assignees should thus be motivated to develop trust with HQ actors. One efficient way to accomplish this is via frequent communication with HQ actors during their assignment. Trust depends on the exchange of veridical information over time (Quigley et al., 2007), suggesting that frequent communication fosters trust formation in exchange relations (Becerra and Gupta, 2003; Thomas et al., 2009). For example, Kim (2016) proposed that SET yields answers concerning the formation of exchange relations from initial interaction, maintenance, and dissolution, and Blau (1964, p. 94) noted that trust is formed and maintained in exchange relations over time through the regular 'discharge of obligations' i.e., reciprocating benefits received from others. Through frequent communicative interactions, the trustee's individual characteristics become more visible to the trustor and have greater influence on the trustor's evaluation of the trustee's trustworthiness and the trustee's intentions and behaviours in their interactions (Becerra and Gupta, 2003). Accordingly, we expect that the more frequent the communication between assignees and HQ actors before re-entry, the higher repatriates' level of trust in HQ actors upon their re-entry.

*Hypothesis 3:* Frequency of communication with HQ actors prior to repatriation is positively related to trust in HQ actors upon repatriation.

We also propose that assignees' trust in HQ actors moderates the positive relationship between reintegration and repatriate knowledge transfer. This is because individuals are more likely to indirectly reciprocate received benefits, such as successful reintegration at HQ, if they expect that generalized exchange parties will reciprocate in the future (Blau, 1964; Molm et al., 2007). Trust in HQ actors can lead well-reintegrated assignees to share knowledge because they expect exchange parties to reciprocate in the future rather than misappropriate the transferred knowledge (McEvily et al., 2003). In some support, prior research suggests that repatriates are unwilling to share knowledge when they perceive that the recipients will use it for their own advantage (Berthoin Antal, 2001; Bock et al., 2005). Trust also alleviates the risks associated with sharing and receiving knowledge (e.g., admitting knowledge gaps and being regarded as less knowledgeable by HQ actors) (Bender and Fish, 2000; Borgatti and Cross, 2003). At high levels of trust, the recipients (HQ actors) should also be more willing to accept the transferred knowledge from well-reintegrated repatriates at face value rather than checking its accuracy (Squire et al., 2008). Further, while repatriates themselves might be interested in transferring knowledge either to impress HQ employees or because they think their knowledge should be relevant and valuable to them, research also suggests that HQ employees tend to reject knowledge from sources they consider as outsiders, including repatriates (Antons and Piller, 2015). In this regard, trust in HQ actors should indicate to repatriates that HQ staff is less hostile to their knowledge. In sum, we expect that at high levels of trust in HQ actors, well-integrated repatriates are more willing to transfer knowledge and HQ actors are more inclined to accept knowledge, facilitating the knowledge transfer.

*Hypothesis 4:* Trust in HQ actors moderates the positive relationship between reintegration in HQ and repatriate knowledge transfer such that the relationship is stronger when trust in HQ actors is high.

### **Career-Related Factors: Career and Repatriate Support and Career Satisfaction**

Whereas the above interpersonal pathway reflects the social assurances for assignees to indirectly reciprocate their successful reintegration in the form of repatriate knowledge transfer, SET perspectives (Cheshire, 2007; Cropanzano et al., 2017; Foa and Foa, 1974) maintain that actual or perceived economic assurances serve this purpose as well. This might occur because social (or socioemotional) and economic resources satisfy different needs of the exchange parties (Foa and Foa, 1974; Molm, 2010). We thus propose that perceived career and repatriate support and career satisfaction reflect such economic benefits. More specifically, we expect this career-related pathway to foster reintegration and strengthen the relationship between reintegration and knowledge transfer, similar to the interpersonal pathway.

We first suggest that perceived career and repatriate support before re-entry (Kraimer et al., 2001) has a positive relationship with reintegration. This is expected to occur partly because perceived career and repatriate support signals to the assignee that he or she is valued by other organizational actors (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Others should thus be more willing to help him or her at work because doing so increases the likelihood that he or she will cooperate in future social exchanges (e.g., Eisenberger et al., 2001; Molm et al., 2007). For instance, scholars have argued that assignees are concerned with a range of issues regarding their reintegration, such as finding suitable positions after re-entry (Kraimer et al., 2009; Lazarova and Cerdin, 2007), and receiving mentoring (Lazarova and Caligiuri, 2002; Mezias and Scandura, 2005). If assignees receive sufficient career and repatriate support, they should engage in indirect reciprocity by transferring knowledge. Perhaps due to the obligation to reciprocate (Ekeh, 1974), a prior study suggests that repatriation support is related to competency transfer upon repatriation (Furuya et al., 2009). Combined with Hypothesis 1, we thus expect that reintegration mediates the positive relationship between perceived career and repatriate support and repatriate knowledge transfer.

*Hypothesis 5:* Reintegration in HQ mediates the positive relationship between perceived career and repatriate support and repatriate knowledge transfer.

We next propose that career and repatriate support has a positive relationship with career satisfaction after re-entry. Career satisfaction – a favourable attitude toward one's own career and career achievements (Judge et al., 1995) – is a key indicator of subjective career success (Spurk et al., 2019). From a SET perspective, career satisfaction is a relevant construct in our study because economic relations also have symbolic dimensions without direct tangible outcomes (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005) and because the incentives that organizational actors provide go beyond short-term monetary benefits (Tsui et al., 1997). In some support, Shore and Wayne (1993) used SET to argue that when people perceive the ability to gain valuable resources and career

opportunities from organizational members, they develop feelings of personal obligation and respond favourably in the form of positive job attitudes and behaviours. Furthermore, a cross-sectional study among German repatriates suggests that perceived repatriation support can serve as a form of appreciation of repatriates' efforts made while working abroad and that repatriates who received this support reported having higher career satisfaction (Breitenmoser et al., 2018). Because prior works also suggest that assignees who received adequate support throughout the international assignment process perceived a stronger link between their international assignment and their future career (Shaffer et al., 2012), we hypothesize:

*Hypothesis 6:* Career and repatriate support prior to repatriation is positively related with career satisfaction upon repatriation.

Finally, consistent with the expected positive returns of generalized exchanges in SET, we propose that well-reintegrated repatriates with higher career satisfaction are more willing to transfer knowledge with HQ actors because they expect the latter to provide more career-related benefits in the future. From a generalized exchange perspective (Ekeh, 1974), career satisfaction is a forward-looking economic assurance that repatriates' knowledge transfer will be reciprocated in the future. The point here is that repatriates expect to gain career-related benefits in exchange for knowledge transfer. When and how these benefits will materialize in the future and how much they satisfy the knowledge providers is subject to individual variation.

In some support, prior works suggest that assignees typically believe that international assignments entitle them to career-related benefits after their re-entry (Bolino, 2007; Dickmann and Harris, 2005) and assignees who perceived fewer career benefits were more likely to leave their organization two to four years later (Reiche et al., 2011). Indeed, SET suggests that even in the case of generalized exchanges actors are guided by self-interest (Molm, 2010) and that career satisfaction moderates a positive relationship between self-motivated intentions and behaviours (Seibert et al., 2013). More specifically, if repatriates have high levels of career satisfaction, they can consider generalized exchanges with HQ actors to hold future benefits – including for their career progression within the organization (Cabrera and Cabrera, 2005) – and should therefore be more willing to reciprocate with more knowledge transfer. Indeed, related studies have stressed social exchange considerations as an important aspect of career satisfaction (Ensher et al., 2001; Gibney et al., 2009). Thus, we expect that career satisfaction moderates the positive relationship between reintegration and repatriate knowledge transfer such that the relationship is stronger when career satisfaction is high.

*Hypothesis 7:* Career satisfaction upon repatriation moderates the positive relationship between reintegration in HQ and repatriate knowledge transfer such that the relationship is stronger when career satisfaction is high.

## METHOD

### Procedures and Data

We collected time-lagged data in collaboration with one large German conglomerate from assignees and their immediate HQ supervisors. At Time 1 (T1), global mobility or human resource (HR) departments sent out online questionnaires to assignees three months before the end of their international assignment. At Time 2 (T2), we surveyed the same assignees three months after their repatriation. At Time 3 (T3), three months after T2, we invited the immediate HQ supervisor to rate the assignee. The questionnaires had individual codes to match the respondents.

We invited 570 assignees and their HQ supervisors to participate in this study. The consecutive response rates were (T1) 356/570 questionnaires (62.46 per cent response rate), (T2) 339/570 questionnaires (59.47 per cent), and (T3) 178/570 questionnaires (31.23 per cent). We then deleted listwise respondents who did not complete all surveys; the final sample consists of 129 assignees who participated in T1 and T2 and their HQ supervisors in T3. The cumulative response rate was 22.98 per cent. In line with the general scarcity of female international assignees (Bhaskar-Shirinivas et al., 2005), our final sample consists of 88.37 per cent males and 11.63 per cent females. On average, the respondents were 42.38 (SD = 9.35) years old, and were based in Europe (32.56 per cent), Asia-Pacific (36.43 per cent), and the rest elsewhere during their assignments. We conducted t-tests to test for potential attrition bias but found no significant differences in demographics (age and gender), and our T1 independent and control variables.

### Measures

We devised the original survey items in English and subsequently translated them to German using the back-translation method (Brislin, 1980). The survey was implemented in both German and English. Unless otherwise noted, all items were measured by 7-point (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) Likert-type scales.

*Frequency of communication with HQ actors (T1).* This was measured by a three-item scale from Subramaniam and Venkatraman (2001). We asked the assignees about their frequency of communication with HQ actors through phone, email, and video conference during their international assignment. Because the scale is dated, we replaced the communication channel of fax with video conference. A sample item is 'I frequently email people in my home company'. Cronbach's alpha of the scale was 0.80.

*Perceived career and repatriate support (T1).* This was measured by a six-item scale from Reiche (2012). A sample item is 'I believe the company handles the repatriation of its expatriates well'. Cronbach's alpha of the scale was 0.91.

*Trust in HQ actors (T2).* This was measured by a five-item scale from Quigley et al. (2007). A sample item is 'I believe that the colleagues and staff in my department are

honest with me when they provide me with information'. Cronbach's alpha of the scale was 0.93.

*Career satisfaction (T2).* This was measured by the five-item scale from Greenhaus et al. (1990). An example item is 'I am satisfied with the success I have achieved in my career'. Cronbach's alpha of the scale was 0.87.

*Reintegration in HQ (T2).* Reintegration has been a key concern for the participating conglomerate. Due to the lack of a validated scale, we used an established three-step approach – item identification, item purification, and scale validation (Hinkin, 1998) – to develop a scale of reintegration in HQ. First, we interviewed five HR professionals and eight repatriates, as well as reviewed the relevant literature (e.g., Black et al., 1992; Chiang et al., 2018) to identify items for the scale. This resulted in six items. We dropped one item due to a conceptual overlap with our dependent variable. Second, we conducted exploratory factor analysis (maximum likelihood as the extraction method and rotated factors orthogonally by using the Varimax method) to purify the item list, splitting the T2 sample ( $N = 339$ ) and using the incomplete T2 data that were not used for hypothesis testing ( $339 - 129 = 200$ ) to refine the item list. All factors loaded on one factor. We then dropped two items with correlations of less than 0.30, retaining three items (see appendix for all items). The Bartlett's test of sphericity also shows that our correlation matrix is significantly different from an identity matrix: one factor explained satisfactorily 72.03 per cent of the total variance (Hair et al., 2010). Cronbach's alpha of the scale was 0.81. Third, we conducted confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to validate the scale on the complete T3 data set ( $N = 129$ ). Given that tests for single factors using CFA often have poor fit, we report CFA of our scale in a model that includes all our latent variables. The results were satisfactory and are reported below when we validate all multi-item scales. As an additional robustness test, we replaced our multi-item scale with the last item of our scale, 'All in all, I am satisfied with the reintegration'. The results of our path analysis largely remain the same. We thus recommend the use of our multi-item scale to allow for the assessment of internal reliability (Kline, 2000).

*Repatriate knowledge transfer (T3).* This was measured by an eight-item, 7-point Likert-type (1 = very little, 7 = a lot) scale with four items for each two subdimensions (task-oriented knowledge transfer and relationship-oriented knowledge transfer) from Froese et al. (2021). We asked immediate supervisors at HQ to evaluate repatriates' knowledge transfer. A sample item is 'Please rate to which extent your repatriate from abroad, after re-entry, has been able to use market knowledge (structure, products, customer needs) in their new position or has been able to share their knowledge with other colleagues in the company'. Cronbach's alphas for the task- and the relationship-oriented knowledge transfer respectively were 0.93, and 0.95. In line with Froese et al. (2021), we created a second-order construct that aggregated both task- and relationship-oriented dimensions.

*Control variables.* Considering prior related research (Burmeister, 2017; Chiang et al., 2018),

we controlled for assignee age (in years), gender (1 = male, 0 = female), occupation type (1 = production/technical worker, 0 = others), and assignment region (dummies for Asia-Pacific and Europe). Because most respondents worked for one German manufacturing MNC with the conglomerate, we created a dummy for that MNC. Strict data and privacy regulations by the participating companies prevented us from using data related to assignment length and tenure in our analysis. The HR department informed us that most assignees spend three to five years abroad and had served many years in their company prior to their assignment.

## RESULTS

We first conducted CFA with AMOS Version 26. The six-factor measurement model of latent variables – frequency of communication with HQ actors, perceived career and repatriate support, trust in HQ actors, career satisfaction, reintegration in HQ, and repatriate knowledge transfer – showed good fit to the data:  $\chi^2_{(388)} = 633.71$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , CMIN/DF = 1.63, confirmatory fit index (CFI) = 0.93, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.07 (Hu and Bentler, 1999). As shown in Table I, alternative models had worse fit to the data than did the six-factor model. Thus, the six-factor model was retained. Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations of all study variables are reported in Table II.

We used path analysis with AMOS Version 26 to test our hypotheses (see Figure 2 for results). We centred all moderating variables to reduce multicollinearity concerns (Cohen et al., 2003). All control variables were regressed on the dependent variable. To report 95% confidence intervals (CIs) and test for indirect effects, we used a bias-corrected bootstrap procedure with 5000 bootstrap samples. The hypothesized model showed a good fit:  $\chi^2_{(53)} = 84.61$ ,  $p = 0.004$ , CMIN/DF = 1.60, CFI = 0.90, RMSEA = 0.07. The

Table I. Measurement model comparisons

Model	Description	$\chi^2$	df	CFI	RMSEA	Comparison with Model 1	
						$\Delta\chi^2$	$\Delta df$
Model 1	Six-Factor Model	633.71	388	0.93	0.07		
Model 2	Five-Factor Model	796.59	393	0.88	0.09	162.88	5
Model 3	Four-Factor Model	1112.77	397	0.79	0.12	479.06	9
Model 4	One-Factor Model	2504.60	405	0.37	0.20	1870.89	17

Notes: N = 129. Model 1 includes all six factors, as shown in Figure 1. Model 2 combines Frequency of Communication with HQ Actors and Perceived Career and Repatriate Support into one factor, while the other factors are the same as in Model 1. Model 3 combines Trust in HQ Actors, Reintegration in HQ, and Career Satisfaction into one factor, while the other factors are the same as in Model 1. Model 4 combines all items into one factor. All  $\Delta\chi^2$  are significant at  $p < 0.001$ .

Table II. Means (M), standard deviations (SD), and correlations of variables

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1 Assignee age	42.38	9.35											
2 Assignee gender	0.88	0.32	0.31										
3 Occupation type: production/technical worker	0.26	0.44	-0.01	0.05									
4 Assignment region: Asia	0.36	0.48	0.07	0.02	-0.12								
5 Assignment region: Europe	0.33	0.47	0.02	-0.06	-0.08	-0.53							
6 German manufacturing company	0.87	0.34	0.06	0.07	0.18	0.10	-0.37						
7 Frequency of communication with HQ actors	4.32	1.69	0.02	-0.02	0.00	0.08	-0.13	0.04					
8 Perceived career and repatriate support	5.05	1.60	-0.10	-0.02	-0.08	0.02	-0.01	-0.10	0.33				
9 Trust in HQ actors	5.91	1.03	-0.05	-0.14	-0.02	0.12	-0.09	0.02	0.18	0.29			
10 Career satisfaction	5.17	1.24	0.08	-0.07	-0.05	0.02	-0.07	0.10	0.30	0.40	0.17		
11 Reintegration in HQ	4.74	1.57	0.04	-0.03	-0.11	0.06	-0.09	0.10	0.32	0.45	0.43	0.67	
12 Repatriate knowledge transfer	5.20	1.52	-0.08	0.03	-0.03	-0.06	-0.07	0.08	0.34	0.15	0.04	0.21	0.30

Notes: N = 129. Correlations >0.17 and <-0.17 are significant at the p < 0.05 level.



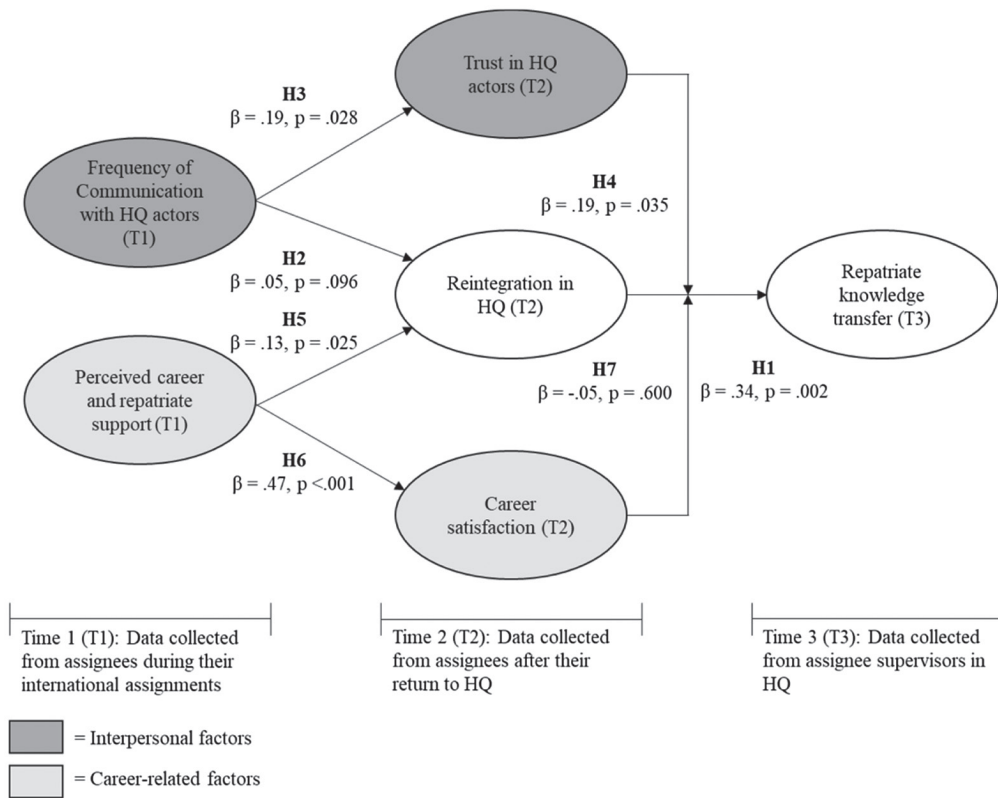


Figure 2. Summary of findings of reintegration and repatriate knowledge transfer. Notes: N = 129. H2 and H5 are mediation hypotheses on repatriate knowledge transfer via reintegration.

hypothesized model explained 28.10 per cent of the variance of reintegration in HQ and 12.94% of the variance of repatriate knowledge transfer.

Hypothesis 1, stating that reintegration in HQ has a positive relationship with repatriate knowledge transfer, was supported ( $\beta = 0.34, p = 0.002, 95\% \text{ CI} = 0.13, 0.56$ ). Hypothesis 2 stated a positive mediating effect of reintegration in HQ between frequency of communication with HQ actors and repatriate knowledge transfer. While frequency of communication with HQ actors had a significant positive relationship with reintegration in HQ ( $\beta = 0.16, p = 0.036, 95\% \text{ CI} = 0.01, 0.29$ ), the indirect effect on repatriate knowledge transfer was marginally significant ( $\beta = 0.05, p = 0.096, 95\% \text{ CI} = -0.01, 0.15$ ). Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was partially supported. Hypothesis 3, stating that frequency of communication with HQ actors has a positive relationship with trust in HQ actors, was supported ( $\beta = 0.19, p = 0.028, 95\% \text{ CI} = 0.02, 0.33$ ).

Hypothesis 4, stating that trust in HQ actors moderates the positive relationship between reintegration in HQ and repatriate knowledge transfer such that the relationship is stronger when trust HQ actors is higher, was supported ( $\beta = 0.19, p = 0.035, 95\% \text{ CI} = 0.01, 0.39$ ). To facilitate interpretation of the interaction term, we plotted the relationship, showing the high levels (+1 standard deviation) and low levels (-1 standard deviation) of the independent and moderator variables. As shown in Figure 3,

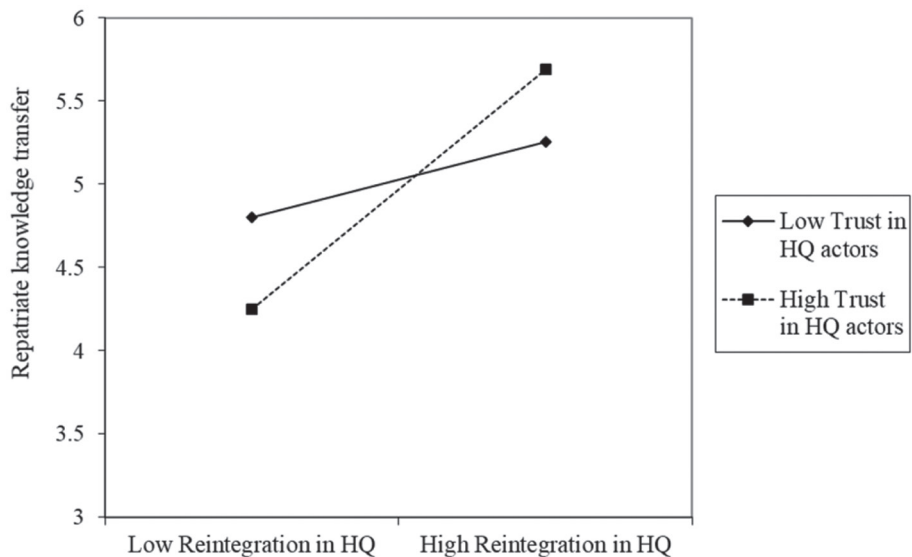


Figure 3. Interaction plot of reintegration in HQ and trust in HQ actors on repatriate knowledge transfer.

the relationship between reintegration in HQ and repatriate knowledge transfer is more positive when trust in HQ actors is high. Simple slope analysis showed that reintegration was significantly related with repatriate knowledge transfer when trust was high (+1 standard deviation,  $\beta = 0.48$ ,  $p = 0.001$ , 95% CI = 0.20, 0.76). When trust was low, the relationship was positive but not statistically significant (−1 standard deviation,  $\beta = 0.14$ ,  $p = 0.186$ , 95% CI = −0.07, 0.38).

Hypothesis 5 stated that reintegration in HQ mediates the positive relationship between perceived career and repatriate support and repatriate knowledge transfer. Results in support for Hypothesis 5 showed a significant mediating effect of perceived career and repatriate support on repatriate knowledge transfer via reintegration in HQ ( $\beta = 0.13$ ,  $p = 0.025$ , 95% CI = 0.02, 0.25). The direct effect of perceived career and repatriate support prior to repatriation on reintegration in HQ was significant ( $\beta = 0.46$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , 95% CI = 0.31, 0.60). Hypothesis 6, stating that perceived career and repatriate support has a positive relationship with career satisfaction, was supported ( $\beta = 0.47$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , 95% CI = 0.31, 0.60). Hypothesis 7, stating that the positive relationship between reintegration in HQ and repatriate knowledge transfer is moderated by career satisfaction such that the relationship is more positive when career satisfaction is high, was not supported ( $\beta = -0.05$ ,  $p = 0.600$ , 95% CI = −0.29, 0.20).

## DISCUSSION

In this study, we applied the generalized exchange perspective in SET and used a time-lagged, multisource research design to highlight the importance of the preparatory stage during an international assignment and reintegration in HQ for successful repatriate

knowledge transfer. We also distinguished between social (socioemotional) and economic pathways and compared their relative salience regarding reintegration and repatriate knowledge transfer. Our findings suggest that frequency of communication with HQ actors and perceived career and repatriate support prior to actual repatriation were positively related to reintegration in HQ, which in turn was positively related to subsequent repatriate knowledge transfer. The findings further suggest that trust in HQ actors moderated the positive relationship between reintegration and repatriate knowledge transfer such that this relationship was stronger when trust is high. At the same time, the relationship was not significant at low levels of trust.

### Theoretical Contributions

First, this study shifts the attention from dominant dyadic exchanges to generalized exchanges in the management discipline and its subdomains, such as knowledge management (Cropanzano et al., 2017). The generalized exchange perspective in SET (Ekeh, 1974) allowed us to move beyond direct, reciprocal dyadic exchanges and consider a wider range of possible social exchange relations and indirect reciprocity between assignees and HQ actors. More specifically, the generalized exchange perspective allowed us to conceptualize the role of assurances that assignees require to engage in knowledge transfer upon repatriation, *even if* they have had a positive expatriate and reintegration experience. For instance, the SET literature has pointed to a range of social assurances that are needed to buffer the potential of non-reciprocity (e.g., Cheshire, 2007; Sahlin, 1972; Willer et al., 2012), which is greater in generalized than dyadic exchanges given the heightened risk of freeriding (e.g., Ekeh, 1974; Takahashi, 2000; Yamagishi and Cook, 1993). Importantly, we believe that a shift from the dominant dyadic to the relevant, but less used, generalized exchange perspective would allow scholars to capture more complex exchange relations between various actors in organizational settings. Of course, initial research suggests that individuals engage in generalized exchange relations within and across organizational boundaries (Baker and Bulkley, 2014; Westphal et al., 2012). Examined in tandem, the generalized exchange perspective contributes to the literature by furthering our understanding of why assignees may not automatically engage in knowledge transfer upon repatriation (Lazarova and Tarique, 2005).

Furthermore, this study contributes to the wider generalized exchange literature by comparing two complementary mechanisms that facilitate pure generalized exchange. While scholars have differentiated between social and economic assurances in generalized exchange relations several decades ago (e.g., Ekeh, 1974; Yamagishi and Cook, 1993), the distinction has received surprisingly little attention in research on management (Cropanzano et al., 2017) and knowledge transfer (Chiang et al., 2018). To that end, we conceptualized both social and economic assurances to facilitate knowledge transfer as an act of indirect reciprocity. We proposed that frequency of communication with and trust in HQ actors can serve as a social assurance for generalized exchange. In doing so, our conceptualization goes beyond previous accounts of trust as an outcome (Molm, 2010) or an antecedent (Reiche et al., 2014) of indirect reciprocity and highlights that trust may also be a facilitating condition for the extent to which actors

engage in indirect reciprocity. Further, we suggested that career and repatriation support and career satisfaction might serve as economic assurances to facilitate generalized exchange, building on the notion that economic assurances typically take the form of longer-term non-tangible benefits (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). Our results suggest that repatriates indirectly reciprocate the benefits received from successful reintegration in HQ by engaging in knowledge transfer only if they perceive social assurances. This does highlight the prevalent risks of non-reciprocity in generalized exchanges (Yamagishi and Cook, 1993). However, because we did not find support for the moderating effect of career satisfaction on the positive relationship between reintegration and repatriate knowledge transfer, our findings point to a primacy of social over economic assurances. Nevertheless, we believe that the consideration of both economic and social assurances is beneficial in organizational settings, and we encourage future research to examine this in more depth.

Relatedly, this study empirically contributes to SET-related works. Because exchange relations are essentially developed over time (e.g., Blau, 1964; Ekeh, 1974; Homans, 1958), we conducted a carefully designed multi-wave, multisource study, surveying assignees both before and after their re-entry and their immediate HQ supervisors to examine repatriate knowledge transfer. As a result, we were able to verify whether assignees communicating with HQ actors and assignees' perceptions of support from HQ actors before their actual re-entry assist with successful reintegration and subsequently facilitate repatriate knowledge transfer. We believe that our SET-based rationale can be used to examine a wide range of related phenomena, such as repatriate turnover and prosocial behaviours (Reiche et al., 2014). Importantly, our study advances SET-related research because it allowed us to explicitly examine the antecedent and moderating conditions for generalized exchanges between assignees and other organizational members over time as assignees move between different MNC units. In other words, we examined a specific and, in some ways, more extreme exchange setting and demonstrate that assignees' generalized exchanges with HQ actors can be sustained during and after their relocation if the norm of indirect reciprocity is adequately served.

Second, this study focuses on the roles of the preparatory stage for repatriation and reintegration in HQ for repatriate knowledge transfer, a phenomenon that has received less attention than it deserves in theory, research, and practice (Burmeister, 2017; Chiang et al., 2018; Szkudlarek, 2010). To date, reintegration has been conceptualized and operationalized in indirect ways. Repatriate adjustment has typically been conceived and assessed similar to expatriate host-country adjustment through general, interaction, and work-related factors (Black et al., 1992; Black and Gregersen, 1991; Gregersen and Stroh, 1997). Compared to repatriate adjustment, reintegration refers to an assignee's work-related integration in HQ after repatriation, consisting of both re-entry and work-related adjustment (Linehan and Scullion, 2002). Whereas repatriate adjustment is an affective construct (Black et al., 1992), reintegration also encompasses both affective and cognitive components of the re-entry experience. Thus, our focus on reintegration complements and extends prior works on adjustment and identity-related aspects of repatriation (Black and Gregersen, 1991; Kraimer et al., 2012). Importantly, while adjustment and identity-related studies have taken an *intrapersonal* focus to understanding the re-entry experience, our SET-based perspective on reintegration highlights the *interpersonal* elements of

repatriation and its subsequent outcomes. Our study also brings reintegration to the centre of empirical attention by using rare time-lagged, multisource data to examine how reintegration and other supporting mechanisms facilitate repatriate knowledge transfer. To our knowledge, this is the first empirical study on the role of reintegration in repatriate knowledge transfer. Taken together, our findings support the argument that MNCs benefit from their repatriates' knowledge if repatriates' motivation to transfer knowledge can be sustained (Lazarova and Tarique, 2005).

Third, this study sheds light on the reintegration-related factors that facilitate repatriate knowledge transfer. Building on the SET-based notion of generalized exchange (Ekeh, 1974) and differentiating between social and economic assurances (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005; Foa and Foa, 1974), we used a stage-based rationale to distinguish between two pathways that reflect the antecedent and moderating conditions for how the preparatory stage for repatriation and actual reintegration in HQ enhance repatriate knowledge transfer: (1) nurturing interpersonal relationships and (2) fostering career development. We theorized, and empirically showed, that these two pathways have direct, indirect, and moderating effects on reintegration and repatriate knowledge transfer. While our findings largely support our hypotheses, they suggest that the interpersonal pathway – and thus social exchange benefits – are more important for repatriate knowledge transfer, pointing to the need to explicitly distinguish between different pathways (Lavelle et al., 2007).

Regarding these two pathways, our findings suggest that reintegration in HQ mediates the positive relationships between frequency of communication with HQ actors and perceived career and repatriate support, on the one hand, and repatriate knowledge transfer on the other. Our study, by focusing on the mediating role of reintegration, goes beyond prior works that have mentioned, but not empirically examined, the impact of frequency of communication with HQ actors (Berthoin Antal, 2001; Furuya et al., 2009; Lazarova and Tarique, 2005; Oddou et al., 2009) and perceived career and repatriate support (Baruch et al., 2013; Suutari and Mäkelä 2007) on repatriate knowledge transfer. Nor have prior works linked these constructs to the preparatory stage for repatriation and actual reintegration. Further, advancing prior research by focusing on the mechanisms between the reintegration-related factors and repatriate knowledge transfer, our findings suggest that trust in HQ actors moderates the positive relationship between reintegration and repatriate knowledge transfer. In contrast to prior research that has examined direct (Oddou et al., 2009) and mediated effects of trust (Mäkelä and Brewster, 2009) in repatriate knowledge transfer, our SET-based findings suggest that well-reintegrated repatriates need to perceive high trust in HQ actors for effective knowledge transfer to occur. In other words, trust in HQ actors is a necessary moderating condition for indirect reciprocity. However, our findings do not provide support for our hypothesized moderating effect of career satisfaction between reintegration and repatriate knowledge transfer. We speculate that this relationship is not significant since career satisfaction may not be sufficiently motivating for well-reintegrated repatriates to expend more personal resources to engage in knowledge sharing. It is also possible that various intrinsic factors, such as good interpersonal relationships at work, are more important than extrinsic, economic exchange-related benefits for repatriate knowledge sharing (Nguyen et al., 2019).

## Practical Implications

Our study has implications for practice. First, the findings highlight the importance of smooth reintegration for reverse knowledge transfer. To improve reintegration-related factors and reverse knowledge transfer, MNCs can systematize and intensify career development and reintegration activities. In addition to training programs that prepare repatriates to cope with the emotional, behavioural, and cognitive challenges accompanied with re-entry (Martin and Harrell, 2004; Szkudlarek and Sumpter, 2015), MNCs would be advised to formalize repatriate support programs and identify relevant HQ staff to engage with them during the repatriation process. Our findings also suggest that effective knowledge transfer presumes organizational activities during international assignments. Assignees need to feel that HQ actors are taking care of their career and reintegration expectations. Because repatriates often expect some form of career assistance and development after their return to HQ (e.g., Bolino, 2007; Lazarova and Cerdin, 2007), these expectations need to be discussed and stipulated honestly before actual re-entry. To that end, our findings suggest that frequent communication with HQ actors during an assignment and well-organized career development facilitate reintegration in HQ. Szkudlarek and Sumpter (2015) also suggested that pre-entry training sessions could include teaching assignees to maintain open lines of communication with various HQ actors during international assignments.

Second, our findings in line with prior works (Adler, 1981; Szkudlarek and Sumpter, 2015) suggest that assignees also need to take an active role in their own reintegration process. Not only is it important for HQ actors to facilitate repatriates' reintegration process, our results suggest that assignees also need to make efforts to increase the frequency of communication with HQ actors during international assignments to ensure more successful reintegration upon their return. Pre-entry training can help make assignees understand the importance of taking a proactive stance in managing their own re-entry process (Szkudlarek and Sumpter, 2015). To that end, recurring business trips and home leaves during an international assignment and shortly before re-entry can help build trust with HQ actors and thus improve reintegration. If this is not possible due to cost or other reasons, communication via phone, email, and video conference can be reinforced.

Third, given our finding that high levels of trust in HQ actors are necessary for a positive relationship between reintegration and repatriate knowledge transfer, MNCs can consider initiating various activities, such as increasing the frequency of communication, to strengthen the trust between assignees and HQ actors. In a similar vein, Oddou et al. (2009) have emphasized the importance of trust with home-unit staff for repatriate knowledge transfer. To that end, we have empirically verified this and recommend that organizations assist assignees to develop trust before their return so that successful knowledge transfer can take place over the course of re-entry. Furthermore, HQ actors are advised to show interest in ideas originating from foreign locations provided by the repatriates to decrease the 'not-invented-here syndrome' and provide opportunities to discuss more openly the potentially valuable knowledge. Indeed, Wilkesmann et al. (2009) found that non-financial incentives, such as recognition and appreciation by peers and higher-ranked employees, facilitated knowledge sharing behaviours.



## Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

This study has limitations that may provide relevant directions for future research. First, our sample size is modest ( $n = 129$ ), which, however, is comparable to prior studies on repatriate knowledge transfer (Chiang et al., 2018). In contrast to accumulated research based primarily on cross-sectional data, we also conducted a multi-wave and multisource survey, tracing assignees during and after their expatriation and matching them with their supervisors. Despite our time-lagged approach, it is possible that the direction of causality also travels from knowledge transfer to reintegration since knowledge transfer can have positive effects on reintegration (e.g., getting along well with supervisors and co-workers). Furthermore, our reintegration scale might not fully capture the multidimensionality of this construct. Then again, our short scale has the advantage to be included in longer future surveys. We encourage future research to replicate our findings by using a longitudinal design over a longer period and a larger sample. While we surveyed both assignees and their HQ supervisors, future research could expand the breadth of our reintegration measure and consider additional aspects of the reintegration experience. Scholars could also survey assignees' colleagues and subordinates to zoom in on the knowledge transfer process.

Second, we were not able to control for assignees' international assignment tenure, position, and host-country location due to data security and anonymity concerns in the MNCs where we collected the data. Future research can explore the role of these and other individual-, firm-, and country-level characteristics (Stoermer et al., 2021). Moreover, various motivation-related factors (Nguyen et al., 2019), such as recognition from colleagues and supervisors (Wilkesmann et al., 2009), as well as knowledge characteristics (Berthoin Antal, 2001) and the level of codifiability of the knowledge (Lazarova and Tarique, 2005) may potentially influence repatriate knowledge transfer and should thus be considered in future research. Various other factors might also influence repatriate knowledge transfer and the acceptance of the transferred knowledge by managers and colleagues at the HQ. For instance, assignees who identify closely with their host countries can be motivated to transfer knowledge but might meet resistance from HQ actors who perceive assignees to 'oversell' this knowledge. Host-country context could also affect how important both assignees and HQ actors perceive the acquired knowledge (Stoermer et al., 2021; Valk et al., 2015). Future research could dig deeper into these and other relevant factors. In sum, we hope that our study encourages future research to further advance our understanding of the salient factors that facilitate the repatriation experience and, in turn, benefit the employing organizations more broadly.

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## APPENDIX

### REINTEGRATION SCALE

Please rate the following statements with regard to your professional reintegration. (Likert-scale, 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree).

The foreign assignment has had a positive impact on my professional development.

*I am satisfied with the knowledge transfer during my reintegration.*<sup>[1]</sup>

*My colleagues supported me in the process of my reintegration.*<sup>[2]</sup>

My supervisor supported me in the process of my reintegration.

*The area of my duties during my assignment abroad matches my duties upon return.*<sup>[2]</sup>

All in all, I am satisfied with the reintegration.

## NOTES

[1] This item was dropped due to conceptual overlap with the dependent variable.

[2] These items were dropped as a result of exploratory factor analysis.