

## **“Homeward Bound”: A Systematic Review of the Repatriation Literature**

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## **Abstract**

The increased levels of foreign direct investment have been matched with increasing international assignments initiated by multinational enterprises (MNEs). The academic literature acknowledges the significance of the expatriation process, but the studies on the final phase of this process, repatriation, remain fragmented. This paper systematically reviews and analyses 129 articles published in peer-reviewed journals. It explores the issues and procedures associated with the repatriation phase and examines significant individual and organizational outcomes. The study identifies key themes in the repatriation literature, including repatriates’ readjustment and expectations upon return, coping strategies and identity change, knowledge management, organizational support, and repatriates’ career goals. Finally, the paper highlights the emerging issues in the repatriation literature and practice and provides an agenda for future research.

*Keywords:* repatriation, organization-assigned expatriates, systematic literature review, international assignments

## **1. Introduction**

Effective expatriation management is a critical consideration in developing organizational strategies that facilitate knowledge exchange, resulting in enhanced global competencies and competitive advantage for multinational enterprises (MNEs) (Froese et al., 2022; Kraimer et al., 2009; Ren et al., 2015). The extant literature examines several types of international assignees, such as organization-assigned expatriates, self-initiated expatriates, flexpatriates, and international business travellers (Shaffer et al., 2012). However, while the number of published studies on expatriation has been increasing (Goede & Holtbrügge, 2021; Banai, 2022), the issue of repatriation of international assignees has historically received limited attention in the literature (Shen & Kim, 2022).

Repatriation is a critical phase of the expatriation process as organizations and individuals can benefit from a successful international assignment that includes developing new tacit knowledge and insights about other cultures (Pereira, 2022), which can translate into more innovative processes and product adaptation to suit international markets (Burmeister & Deller, 2016). Expatriate turnover has been observed to be high after the completion of international assignments. A key reason for this is the mismanagement of the repatriation stage, where the planning for the expatriates’ (and their families) return is not planned in the same way the expatriation process is. The failure to successfully manage the repatriation process results in a loss of tacit knowledge held by the expatriates.

While there is a lot of literature on the expatriate process, the failure linked to the lack of repatriation is not deeply understood. Some recent studies highlight an emergent trend toward acknowledging the issues associated with the repatriation of international assignees (Chiang et al., 2018; Froese et al., 2022), such as repatriates’ turnover, re-entry adjustment, knowledge transfer upon repatriation, repatriate knowledge typologies, organizational

commitment and expectations upon return, and organizational HR strategies concerning repatriates (Antal, 2001; Furuya et al., 2007; Lazarova & Caligiuri, 2001; Oddou et al., 2009; Pate & Scullion, 2010; Pattie et al., 2010). What has not been explained is how the lack of repatriation management is affecting both the loss of talented personnel and the additional tacit knowledge they acquire during the expatriation process. Although research on repatriation and the related processes and procedures is growing, the literature remains limited in scope and fragmented (Furuya et al., 2009; Peltokorpi et al., 2022). This study addresses this gap by consolidating and reviewing the literature on repatriation. In doing so, we identify the key challenges in managing the repatriation process with an emphasis on retaining the talent, and strategies that international firms can employ to successfully navigate the challenges.

The literature review studies from the last decade pave the way for future studies by highlighting recent repatriation research advancements. For instance, the first literature review on the repatriation phase was published in 2010, focusing specifically on the re-entry process of repatriates from a broader range of returning expatriates (Szkudlarek, 2010). Along with corporate repatriates, the review included international students, repatriating spouses, Peace Corps volunteers, returning migrants, missionaries, and third culture kids. Another literature review focused on corporate expatriates' traditional homecoming (Greer & Stiles, 2016), emphasizing corporate HR development functions such as repatriates' career development, training, and organizational development. Recent literature reviews have focused on the corporate return-on-investment perspective of repatriation (Breitenmoser & Bader, 2021; McNulty & Tharenou, 2004), the competitive and economic aspects of global mobility (Caligiuri & Bonache, 2016), and the methodological aspects of international assignments (Knocke & Schuster, 2017).

Chiang et al. (2018) defined repatriation as “the final phase of a prolonged international assignment that occurs when the international assignee (repatriate) returns home to his or her parent or initiating organization together with accompanying family members, if any” (p.192). Our focus is on traditional organization-assigned expatriates, which tend to involve longer assignments aimed at achieving organizational goals such as establishing new operations, gaining knowledge, and developing networks. These assignments bring unique challenges not typically faced by non-traditional assignments (Cole et al., 2014). For example, families are more likely to accompany the assignee on longer assignments than short-term ones (Dang et al., 2022; Goede & Holtbrügge, 2021). Organizational support, including pre-departure training, ongoing support during the assignment, post-assignment repatriation support, and career planning, are critical for these traditional assignments. Organization-assigned expatriates often see these assignments as opportunities for career progression within their organizations, leading to higher expectations regarding repatriation support and career planning (Guo et al., 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic brought significant attention to organizational support for assignees and their repatriation, highlighting the need for effective repatriation management. Global talent management in the post-pandemic era is expected to evolve, with long-term assignments becoming more common in knowledge-intensive sectors where interpersonal interaction is crucial for transferring tacit knowledge (Rammal & Ferreira, 2023). The literature suggests that repatriation should be viewed as a continuation of the expatriation

process, involving the utilization of repatriates' knowledge and support for their career growth and family concerns (Burmeister & Deller, 2016). Despite the recognition of these needs, around 50 to 70 per cent of repatriates leave their home organizations within one year of their return from international assignments (Chiang et al., 2018; Wang, 2023). Therefore, this study differs from existing reviews by providing comprehensive coverage of traditional organization-assigned expatriates, highlighting emerging challenges, and emphasizing structured organizational support. It also suggests practical guidelines and future research directions, addressing gaps and fragmentation in the existing literature.

Despite the growing body of literature on expatriation and repatriation, clear and robust questions about gaps in the literature, the organizational challenges in managing the repatriation process through organizational support and the transfer of tacit knowledge are yet to be answered. To address these issues, we conducted a systematic literature review, motivated by the following research questions: What are the current research themes and theoretical frameworks used in previous studies? What challenges do individuals face during and after repatriation? What organization support is provided, and what have organizations done over time to try to create a more profound and structured process for repatriation? What are some of the strategies employed to facilitate repatriate knowledge transfer in organization-assigned expatriate assignments? Therefore, this study makes three significant contributions: highlighting key issues and challenges in the repatriation phase, identifying key issues related to the intra-organization transfer of repatriates' newly acquired knowledge, and consolidating the extant literature to identify current research gaps and suggesting research avenues that acknowledge the changing nature of global talent management in the post-pandemic era.

## **2. Review Process, Scope and Coding**

We apply the systematic literature review (SLR) process to study and consolidate the extant research on the repatriation process of organization-assigned expatriates. SLR allows literature synthesis to be conducted accurately and according to rigorous standards (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Pereira et al., 2021). Moreover, SLR adopts a replicable, scientific, and transparent process (Tranfield et al., 2003). The review process in the paper follows the three steps identified by Linnenluecke et al. (2020). The first step consists of defining keywords, setting the criteria for search inclusion, and searching in established databases. The second step consists of data cleaning, removing duplicates, and analyzing and categorizing studies. This step includes thematic coding and analysis. In the final step, the results of the SLR are presented either qualitatively or quantitatively using meta-analyses or bibliometrics.

We followed the qualitative, theme-centric approach in this study. As the first step, we searched Google Scholar for repatriation studies. Through an initial scan of the literature, we read through 30 sample articles to identify and define the following keywords: 'repatriation', 'repatriated employees', 'returned executives', 'returned expatriates' and 'returned employees' and 'returning employees'. For more comprehensive results, the time frame of the search was not limited, and the following root search string was employed to identify a broader range of studies related to the research criteria: (repatriate\*) OR (return\*

employee) OR (return\* expatriate) OR (return\* executive). The relevant publications were then searched using these keywords in the Scopus, Web of Science and Google Scholar databases. These databases were chosen because they include a wide range of research studies from management journals and more than one million research articles from social sciences and business. In total, 2338 articles were obtained from Scopus by searching for the defined keywords. The number of articles was further refined by applying inclusion and exclusion criteria. First, the inclusion criteria of the subject areas were limited to business, management and accounting, psychology, and social sciences. Also, the research areas were limited to international business, human resource management, knowledge management, and applied psychology. This restricted the search to the repatriation of international assignees in MNEs and excluded unrelated studies, such as the repatriation of artifacts and studies from other disciplines, including forensic sciences, biological conservation, medicine, and archaeological sciences. We further refined the sample by excluding studies that did not report the repatriation of organization-assigned expatriates, the process of repatriation in MNEs, the issues faced by returnees upon repatriation, or the procedures involved in the repatriation phase of international assignments. Studies on self-initiated expatriates and other non-traditional forms of assignments, including flexpatriates and inpatriates were excluded. This is because the more time expatriates spend on international assignments, the greater the opportunities for them to become more bi-cultural and accumulate knowledge over that period than in short business visits as flexpatriates. Also, the odds of experiencing reverse cultural shock are much higher for expatriates who spend more than a year on international assignments (Cole et al., 2014). After applying the filters to the subject and research areas, we were left with 160 relevant studies.

The same search strategy was used for the Web of Science database, and the results were cross-checked with the studies found in Scopus. As a result, one additional publication was identified, bringing the number of studies to 162. Finally, Google Scholar was searched using the advanced search option, and no limits were applied to the inclusion of journals. This approach allowed relevant studies from journals not included in Scopus and Web of Science to be identified. After cross-checking the studies found in Google Scholar with the previously identified studies, 17 more were added. Hence, 177 potentially relevant studies were identified, including conceptual studies, literature reviews, qualitative and quantitative studies, books, book chapters, book reviews, and conference papers.

The selected articles were analyzed by screening their title, abstracts and keywords (Grégoire et al., 2011; Sageder et al., 2018). Following the approach used by Ott and Michailova (2018), only peer-reviewed journal articles were included in this review. Therefore, conference papers, books, and book chapters were excluded from the 177 studies as they do not undergo similar stringent peer review levels of journal articles. Also, in the repatriation literature, many studies published in leading business journals, we focused on exploring the research trends and the studies' practical outcomes. Therefore, 129 research articles were finalized for review. Figure 1 summarises the review process followed in this study.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

We followed the thematic analysis technique (Braun & Clarke, 2006) using a combination of manual and automated coding to organize, collate and interrogate the emerging themes and patterns in the published articles. The articles were categorized according to their year of publication, journal, research method, theoretical foundation, sample information, and research area. The automated coding process involved uploading the PDF copies of the published articles to the Leximancer software (see Appendix A for the list of the studies included in the review). The Leximancer software generates automated themes from the uploaded articles and shows linkages between the various themes (Dang et al., 2022). For our study, the software generated themes relating to repatriates' adjustment; expectations; coping strategies; international identity; ability and motivation; knowledge types and characteristics; interpersonal trust; employee engagement; disseminative capacity; knowledge-sharing opportunities; repatriate career support; perceived benefits of international assignments; and knowledge teachability. The manual coding involved each member of the author team identifying themes and codes independently. The authors then discussed and refined these manual codes and the themes generated by the software, and a consensus was reached by using patterns within the themes. For example, terms like "knowledge transfer", "knowledge disseminative capacity", "absorptive capacity" and "social capital and interpersonal relations" were identified from the literature and coded under the "Knowledge Management" theme. The themes, codes, and corresponding studies are summarized in Figure 4. Supplementing the automated coding with manual coding ensured consistency and enhanced the robustness of the process (Sinkovics et al., 2008, Sinkovics & Archie-acheampong, 2020).

### **3. General Characteristics of the Reviewed Literature**

#### ***a) Temporal Development and Studied Contexts***

The first article on repatriation issues was published in 1989 (see Figure 2). Therefore, we did not place any time restriction in our study and captured all studies published between 1989 and April 2024. Most articles published in the 1990s and 2000s examined the repatriation's individual outcomes and linked them to repatriates' readjustment difficulties. Later, the focus of publications shifted to organizational outcomes such as repatriates' retention, performance and knowledge transfer. The greatest number of articles was published in 2009 ( $n = 16$ ), most of which examined knowledge management and knowledge transfer issues in the repatriation phase. These articles depicted the emerging organizational outcome of repatriation - repatriate knowledge transfer and provided the basis for some of the studies published in 2013 ( $n = 11$ ) and 2017 ( $n = 9$ ).

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

Most studies on repatriation were conducted in the United States of America (US,  $n = 14$ ) and European countries ( $n = 23$ , mainly from Finland, Spain and Germany). Almost 70% of studies included repatriates from developed economies, such as the US, Australia,

European countries and Japan (see Figure 3). In comparison, a limited number of studies explored the repatriation of expatriates from emerging economies, such as China, Vietnam and India. Hence, our knowledge about the differences in practice between developed and emerging market repatriations is limited (Briscoe, 2015). As emerging market MNEs continue to rapidly increase their global presence, we expect to see more international assignees from emerging economies. These organizations can learn from the experience of MNEs who have experienced the challenges of successfully repatriating their talent after the assignments.

Regarding journals, the International Journal of Human Resource Management ( $n = 33$ ) published the greatest number of articles on repatriation, followed by Human Resource Management ( $n = 16$ ), Journal of Global Mobility ( $n = 10$ ), Journal of International Business Studies ( $n = 8$ ), International Journal of Intercultural Relations ( $n = 7$ ), and Journal of World Business ( $n = 6$ ).

INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE

#### ***b) Methodological Observations and Theories Used***

The methodologies used in the included studies show the maturing of the field. Starting with conceptual articles ( $n = 23$ ), empirical studies followed by 61 quantitative studies and 36 qualitative studies. The remaining studies included literature reviews and mixed-method studies. As the issue of repatriates becomes a prominent research theme, we expect more studies using longitudinal data to map the issues faced by international assignees throughout the expatriation and repatriation process and would also capture significant disruptive events such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Theories such as boundaryless career and psychological contract theories were used in eight and four studies, respectively. Ten studies used human capital theory, relative deprivation theory and role theory to discuss specific repatriation issues. The dynamic theory of organizational knowledge creation and the firm's resource-based and knowledge-based views were primarily utilized in repatriation studies related to knowledge management and transfer ( $n = 12$ ). Some studies ( $n = 9$ ) used social capital, resource, social exchange, and communication theories to describe the knowledge perspective in the repatriation phase. Finally, 21 repatriation studies employed the cultural adjustment framework to study how the cultural distance between home and host countries influences repatriation issues, such as difficulty in re-adjusting due to 'reverse cultural shock' (Chiang et al., 2018). The theoretical application confirms that many of the studies focused on cultural adjustment in the host country and adjusting back to the home country upon return. What remains underresearched is how repatriates transfer the knowledge they gained during the assignment by developing relevant social networks, especially in developed economies, where informal institutions play a prominent role in business. Theorizing the social network development and repatriate knowledge transfer process is missing from the extant literature. We discuss these methodological and theoretical gaps in the *Future Research Agenda* section.

#### 4. Thematizing Existing Studies

The thematic findings highlight multifaced concepts in the repatriation literature. Six themes emerge from the thematic analysis of the repatriation literature. Figure 4 illustrates the connections between the areas of emphasis, repatriation outcomes, and future research directions.

INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE

The first four themes cover the repatriation issues highlighted in the literature, and themes five and six specifically discuss the repatriation outcomes. The themes emerged after collating codes leading to sub-themes. The extant repatriation literature focuses on readjustment expectations, repatriate turnover due to distress, repatriation knowledge management, organizational support for career goals, and individual and organizational outcomes. The various themes and subthemes are highlighted in Figure 4.

##### ***Theme 1: Repatriates' Readjustment Issues and Expectations***

Repatriates tend to have an 'altered perspective' after working internationally (Andreason & Kinneer, 2005), which likely leads to readjustment issues when returning to their home country (Shaffer et al., 2012). Black et al.'s (1991) theoretical framework identifies three forms of adjustment: general, work and interaction. General adjustment is associated with employees' self-adjustment to their living environment and international cultures (Pereira, 2022). Work adjustment refers to employees' international adjustment to changes in supervision (in their newly appointed positions), the methods used to perform allocated tasks, and the nature of work in the organization. Finally, interaction adjustment refers to employees' adjustment to different communication styles, interpersonal dynamics and diverse social customs in the home and host organizations (Paik et al., 2002; Kumar et al., 2022).

Although initially developed for expatriates' international adjustment, Black et al.'s (1991) framework also applies to repatriation adjustment. For example, Sánchez Vidal et al. (2010) suggest that frequent communication with home country organizations during expatriation and work autonomy upon return affect repatriates' general and work adjustments. Other authors extend the work adjustment dimension in the context of repatriation by proposing subcategories, such as organization and job adjustment (Suutari & Välimaa, 2002; Kumar et al., 2022). While more recent conceptualizations of expatriate adjustment are developed in the literature (Haslberger et al., 2013), some topics warrant further research, such as the adjustment of female repatriates and dual-career couples. Linehan and Scullion (2002) highlight that female repatriates face more significant uncertainty and adjustment difficulties in the repatriation phase, hindering their networking relationships. Where dual-career couples are concerned, the organization-assigned expatriates with male spouses experience more adjustment issues than expatriates with female spouses upon repatriation (Kierner, 2018; Kierner & Suutari, 2018), especially when the expatriate is from a developing country (Shah & Barker, 2020). As evident from the literature, repatriation

research on gender disparity is scarce. Organization-assigned repatriates face many of these challenges after completing a traditional international assignment. Having spent years internationally, with or without family, the assignee returns to their home country where the social networks they had may have changed, and there may also be the need to adjust their lifestyle to suit the changes (Mao & Shen, 2015). The work environment may have also changed due to staff turnover and changes in the leadership and work processes (Tsai & Qiao, 2023; Stahl et al., 2009). These adjustments require support for the repatriate and/or their family members.

Repatriates' perceptions and expectations of repatriation often differ from the reality they face when readjusting upon their return (Knocke & Schuster, 2017). When assignees accept international assignments, they expect opportunities for career advancement and higher organizational support upon return (Suutari & Brewster, 2003). If these expectations are met when the assignment is completed, repatriates report high levels of job performance, organizational commitment and job satisfaction (Black, 1992; Sánchez-Vidal et al., 2007). However, repatriates' expectations upon re-entry are often higher than what organizations are willing to meet, ultimately leading to disappointment (Chiang et al., 2018). The level of satisfaction also decreases when assignees realize that the careers of their local peers are advancing more than their own upon repatriation (Peltonen, 1997).

The dichotomous examination of repatriates' expectations and their association with organizational and individual repatriation outcomes indicate that repatriates' organizational commitment is likely to be higher when the interpersonal relationships exceed expectations as compared to when the expectations are either merely met or not met (Hyder & Lövblad, 2007; Sánchez-Vidal et al., 2007; Stroh et al., 2000). However, Suutari and Brewster (2003) emphasise that repatriates should have realistic expectations and must consider the organization's capacity to meet their expectations upon return. Also, MNEs need to work with repatriates to develop more realistic expectations during and after international assignments (Kulkarni et al., 2010) and support them in coping with repatriation challenges effectively.

### ***Theme 2: Repatriation Distress***

Repatriation distress results from changed cultural identity and coping strategies to prepare for repatriation (Sussman, 2001). Strategies that seek to remove repatriates' distress upon return are conceptualized as problem-focused strategies and positively correlate with readjustment. In contrast, strategies that seek to decrease repatriates' negative emotions from stress upon return are emotion-based and negatively affect repatriate readjustment. Stahl and Caligiuri (2005) argue that repatriates are more likely to prefer emotion-based coping strategies if they experience readjustment issues and avoid seeking help from their work-unit colleagues. However, well-adjusted expatriates with positive repatriation experience are more likely to prefer problem-focused coping strategies. In addition, they are more inclined to actively communicate with their work colleagues when seeking support or help.

While the issue of pre-departure training for expatriates has been discussed in previous literature, the pre-repatriation training and information don't seem to be captured in the academic or professional practice literature. Also, the literature is largely silent on whether organizations can recognize repatriates' distress and provide support to prevent

turnover intentions. Coping strategies for effective management of the repatriation phase relate to compensation systems, training and development activities, and formal and informal communication opportunities (Huselid, 1995) that retain repatriates in the organization (Lazarova & Caligiuri, 2001).

Repatriates' overseas exposure during international work may influence their cultural identity (Hyder & Lövblad, 2007; Kraimer et al., 2012). Identity is a fundamental concept that determines how people act in a certain way and think in a particular environment; it determines the repatriates' interaction with host-unit colleagues, work performance and turnover decisions upon return from overseas assignments (Hyder & Lövblad, 2007; Sussman, 2002). Hence, identity plays a crucial role in the repatriation experience.

The literature highlights that repatriates' identity change is not visible during expatriation but is realized during the repatriation phase (Kraimer et al., 2012). During international assignments, expatriates socialise and are embedded in the host communities; their self-concepts from global roles develop their international identity upon repatriation. After completing their assignment, repatriates' interaction and socialization with the home organization's employees and colleagues influence their organizational identity (Kraimer et al., 2012; Cave et al., 2023). In addition, repatriates who strongly identify with their home country's organization and the global society are likely to have a more positive repatriation experience and less repatriation distress than those who are more integrated towards the host country's organizational culture (Hyder & Lövblad, 2007).

### ***Theme 3: Repatriation and Knowledge Management***

The literature linked the repatriation phase of international assignments with knowledge management because repatriates gain valuable knowledge and global management competencies (Furuya et al., 2009; Lazarova & Tarique, 2005). After completing international assignments and re-entering the home country organization, the skills and knowledge acquired by repatriates can be used to generate new organizational knowledge (Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007; Mäkelä & Brewster, 2009; Oddou et al., 2013; Stevens et al., 2006), which ultimately adds to the organization's ability to compete and expand its business operations globally (Zaragoza-Sáez et al., 2016). However, poorly planned repatriation and unsupportive organizational environments impede repatriates' knowledge-sharing intentions, negatively affecting their readjustment experience (Peltokorpi et al., 2022).

Recent studies have combined the individual and organizational repatriation outcomes to examine how an individual's abilities, motivations, career considerations and relationship-building influence the repatriate knowledge transfer process in MNEs (Burmeister et al., 2018; Sánchez-Vidal et al., 2018; Van Gorp et al., 2017). Therefore, organizational outcomes are dependent on the repatriates' individual outcomes. As such, scholars demonstrate how the disseminative capacity of the knowledge source (repatriates' abilities and motivation) and the absorptive capacity of the knowledge receiver (local work-unit employees' abilities and motivation) facilitate successful knowledge transfer in the organization.

The first conceptual framework for the repatriates' knowledge transfer process was developed by Oddou et al. (2009). The framework demonstrates that repatriates' abilities to transfer knowledge—including their expertise developed overseas, social network, position

power and management capabilities—can only be realized if driven by organizational reasons, such as career advancement opportunities upon re-entry. This will likely result in repatriates having greater work commitment, job satisfaction, job motivation, readjustment, job performance and readiness to share their knowledge (Furuya et al., 2009; Lazarova & Tarique, 2005). Failed repatriation can be costly to organizations in terms of lost investment in repatriates; lost skills, knowledge and networks that repatriates acquire and develop abroad; and the reduced productivity associated with their readjustment and replacement (Kraimer et al., 2012; McNulty & Tharenou, 2004; Lazarova & Caligiuri, 2001).

Expatriation allows employees to develop tacit cross-cultural behavioural skills that can only be acquired with multicultural international experience (Sánchez-Vidal et al., 2018). The transfer of these skills and knowledge is potentially valuable for MNEs to ensure their competitiveness and the growth of their local employees (Oddou et al., 2013; Bucher et al., 2022). The value of repatriates' knowledge in inter-organizational knowledge transfer has been emphasized in previous studies (Lazarova & Tarique, 2005; Oddou et al., 2013; Stahl et al., 2009). Repatriates' knowledge is based on new business practices, ideas, national markets abroad, foreign cultures and work experience with key local suppliers and clients (Lazarova & Tarique, 2005; Stevens et al., 2006). Furthermore, the transfer of repatriates' knowledge can be beneficial for MNEs to attain a competitive edge in the international market (Oddou et al., 2013).

The literature associates knowledge transfer with organizational support in terms of knowledge-sharing behaviours. Huang et al. (2013) examined multiple formal and informal knowledge governance mechanisms and evaluated how these mechanisms positively affect repatriates' knowledge-sharing motivation and opportunities. Moreover, Sánchez-Vidal et al. (2018) associated repatriation with the reverse knowledge transfer process and stressed the significance of organizational support during expatriation and after repatriation to examine repatriates' knowledge disseminative capacity and the subsequent knowledge transfer process in the home organization. Structured and predefined support practices enhance repatriates' disseminative capacity and lead to the application of repatriates' knowledge, skills and competencies upon re-entry. Furthermore, Furuya et al. (2009) and Burmeister and Deller (2016) articulate that organizational support before, during, and after international assignments enhances repatriates' readjustment and encourages them to engage and participate in knowledge-sharing activities on repatriation.

#### ***Theme 4: Repatriates' Career Goals and Organizational Support***

Regarding repatriates' career goals, the literature considers international corporate assignments as human capital investments for MNEs (Benson & Pattie, 2008; Suutari et al., 2018). Moreover, the social capital developed by assignees through their international experience is significant for MNEs (Mäkelä, 2007). Breitenmoser et al. (2018) empirically investigated career-related repatriation outcomes and analyzed repatriates' subjective and objective career success, emphasizing the organization's role in repatriation. However, employees' long-term career goals in the repatriation process do not solely focus on the organization—they also focus on self-directed career management (individual repatriation outcome) (Breitenmoser & Bader, 2021; Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007). Furthermore, repatriates seek external career opportunities if they lack support from their home organization. Hence,

to sustain repatriates' social capital (Mäkelä, 2007), MNEs need a proactive career support management system, intra-organizational career support programs and strategic integration of international assignments for their global employees in the repatriation phase (Lazarova, 2014; Haq et al., 2023).

Despite repatriates being a multicultural workforce and a significant strategic resource for MNEs, more than 50 per cent of repatriates leave the organization within one year of returning from international assignments (Burmeister et al., 2018). Consequently, multinational enterprises that provide repatriation programs, career development support, structured repatriation expectations and repatriation practices—for example, career planning, repatriate agreement, skills utilization upon re-entry, formal recognition of their international work experience, repatriate training and relocation support (Burmeister & Deller, 2016; Ye et al., 2022; Yakob, 2023)—are more likely to retain and reintegrate their valuable employees in the home organization (Lazarova & Caligiuri, 2001).

### ***Theme 5: Individual Repatriation Outcomes***

The literature explores various criteria to measure individual and organizational repatriation outcomes (see, for example, Burmeister, 2017 and Mäkelä & Brewster 2009). Most research on individual outcomes relates to repatriates' job, career, and development success (Cerdin & Le Pargneux, 2009; Chiang et al., 2018). Job success is associated with repatriates' job satisfaction and job commitment. Lankau and Scandura (2002) define job satisfaction as 'an affective attitudinal response to the work environment' (p. 781), while Feldman and Tompson (1993) describe it as 'a positive general job satisfaction and important indicator of adjustment to new jobs' (p. 509). Upon repatriation, the readjustment of employees is considered a criterion of individual success that determines their job commitment and, ultimately, defines job success (Cerdin & Le Pargneux, 2009).

Moreover, measures of repatriates' career success are discussed in the literature from the perspective of career satisfaction (meeting career expectations upon re-entry), promotion, reward and salary increase upon repatriation. Seibert et al. (2001) studied repatriates' career considerations subjectively as they 'reflect not only conventional standards of success but also feelings of success relative to an individual's own goals and expectations' (p. 220). Career success is a key concern for repatriates before and during international assignments and when returning to the home organization (Cerdin & Le Pargneux, 2009; Tung, 1998).

Repatriates' development success is measured from the perspective of their long-term career growth, continued development opportunities, learning, marketability and network-building and relationship-building (Osman-Gani & Hyder, 2008; Yan et al., 2002). In addition, individual job-related factors—such as increased job responsibilities, promotions, challenging job assignments upon re-entry, and the possession of skills, abilities, and international knowledge acquired during expatriation—affect repatriates' career growth and development opportunities. An essential criterion for repatriates' development is the network of international contacts they develop during their overseas assignments (Antal, 2000). Repatriates' network-building enables them to develop a diversified skillset and improved performance capabilities through shared international experience (Cerdin & Le Pargneux, 2009). When repatriates cannot apply or transfer their learned knowledge and skills in the home organization, they prefer working in other organizations that value their expatriation

experience and provide them with opportunities to enhance their career and personal development through their international knowledge, experience, skills, and capabilities (Osman-Gani & Hyder, 2008).

### ***Theme 6: Organizational Repatriation Outcomes***

At the organizational level, successful repatriation outcomes involve achieving key organizational objectives and tasks (Cerdin & Le Pargneux, 2009). These outcomes are measured by repatriates' retention, performance, network-building and relationship-building at the organizational level and transfer of knowledge in the home organization (Burmeister et al., 2018; Furuya et al., 2009; Kraimer et al., 2012; Lee & Liu, 2007; Mäkelä & Brewster, 2009; Sánchez-Vidal et al., 2018; Yan et al., 2002). Furthermore, due to the role of repatriates as boundary spanners between the operations of the home and host country organizations, MNEs need to retain their talent upon repatriation (Harzing et al., 2016; Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007; Oddou et al., 2009). Most studies measure repatriates' retention or turnover using 'turnover intention' (Cerdin & Le Pargneux, 2009; Chi & Chen, 2007; Lee & Liu, 2007). However, whether turnover intention leads to actual turnover is yet to be determined and measured (Chiang et al., 2018; Van Dick et al., 2004).

The literature examines repatriates' performance conceptually, such as accomplishing organizational tasks like successfully implementing defined processes. Key organizational objectives include expanding networks, opening new markets, establishing operations, building international experience and transferring newly acquired skills and knowledge (Cerdin & Le Pargneux, 2009). Furuya et al. (2009) investigated repatriates' general work performance by examining how their job motivation and performance were influenced by organizational support and how it led to the transfer of repatriates' global management competency upon re-entry.

Concerning repatriates' network-building and relationship-building abilities, Cerdin & Le Pargneux (2009) argue that repatriates' career variables (e.g., career anchors, careerist orientation, adaptive attitude towards job demands and boundaryless work attitude) before, during and after expatriation influence the success of international assignments. Hence, these career variables benefit organizations in transferring expertise and achieving key organizational tasks and objectives upon repatriation. Furthermore, as international assignees have a boundary-spanning role in facilitating the control and coordination within multiple organizational units of MNEs during expatriation, their network and interpersonal relationships are important to develop their transnational management capabilities upon repatriation (Yan et al., 2002). Therefore, retaining these employees for their international relationships is also considered organizational success (Cerdin & Le Pargneux, 2009).

Finally, studies on repatriation and knowledge transfer primarily discuss repatriates' knowledge from a strategic perspective, emphasizing the skills and capabilities that are developed during expatriation, the value of acquired knowledge, the mechanisms through which knowledge and capabilities transfer upon repatriation, and how the transfer of repatriates' knowledge is strategically significant for an MNEs' ability to compete in the market (Crowne, 2009; Oddou et al., 2013). More recently, the significance of organizations' repatriation support practices, knowledge governance mechanisms, reintegration and the dyadic nature of repatriates' knowledge transfer process have been discussed (Burmeister et

al., 2018; Burmeister & Deller, 2016; Huang et al., 2013; Peltokorpi et al., 2022; Cave et al., 2023). Therefore, the repatriation and knowledge transfer processes emerged as a significant research area that draws attention to MNEs' support practices in the repatriation phase of international assignments.

## **5. Discussion**

The themes identified in the extant literature underscore the multifaceted nature of repatriation, highlighting the importance of organizational support, realistic expectations, effective coping strategies, and knowledge management in ensuring successful readjustment and retention of repatriates. The study of repatriates' readjustment issues and expectations highlights the complex nature of returning home after international assignments. Repatriates experience various readjustment challenges.

The literature emphasizes the significance of realistic expectations for repatriates to mitigate readjustment difficulties and enhance job performance, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction (Black, 1992; Sánchez-Vidal et al., 2007). MNEs must align their support mechanisms with repatriates' expectations to prevent disappointment and ensure a smoother transition (Chiang et al., 2018). Furthermore, gender disparities in repatriation experiences and challenges faced by dual-career couples underscore the need for more inclusive and supportive repatriation policies (Linehan & Scullion, 2002; Kierner & Suutari, 2018).

Repatriation distress, often resulting from changes in cultural identity, is another critical aspect of the repatriation process. We observe that well-adjusted expatriates prefer problem-focused strategies and actively seek support from colleagues, whereas those experiencing readjustment issues may lean towards emotion-based strategies and avoid seeking help.

A critical reason for MNEs relying on expatriation is to facilitate inter-organizational transfer of knowledge. Expatriates bring knowledge from their home countries and absorb new knowledge while working with colleagues. This added knowledge that the expatriate gains is meant to help the organization at the completion of the international assignment. However, if the organization is not able to retain these expatriates, they risk not gaining the benefits from the assignment, and other competitors would be keen to access their services to tap their recently acquired knowledge. Hence, organizational support facilitates successful knowledge transfer and enhances repatriates' motivation and abilities to share their acquired knowledge (Huang et al., 2013; Sánchez-Vidal et al., 2018).

Emphasising repatriates' career goals and repatriation outcomes is pivotal in ensuring successful reintegration and retention. MNEs that provide comprehensive repatriation programs, career development support, and recognition of international work experience are more likely to retain their valuable employees (Lazarova & Caligiuri, 2001). However, repatriates who cannot apply their acquired skills and knowledge in their home organizations may seek external career opportunities that value their international experience (Osman-Gani & Hyder, 2008).

From the organizational perspective, successful repatriation outcomes include achieving key objectives, retaining talent, and transferring knowledge (Cerdin & Le Pargneux, 2009). Repatriates' performance, network-building, and knowledge-transfer abilities are crucial for accomplishing organizational tasks and maintaining competitiveness (Furuya et al., 2009;

Oddou et al., 2013). Hence, emphasising the career progression of the expatriates, the well-being of the expatriates' families, and providing opportunities for dual-career couples can help organizations retain the talent and achieve their goals.

## **6. Avenues for Future Research**

This review highlights the publication trends of repatriation studies over three decades, identifying the geographical focus and the methodological and theoretical focus of the repatriation literature, and discussing the key themes. However, we also find several gaps in the extant literature and emerging issues that we identify as avenues for future research on organizational-assigned repatriates. Five research avenues are proposed: (a) methodological and theoretical contributions; (b) repatriates' adjustment after assignments; (c) the cycle of expatriation and repatriation; (d) repatriates' knowledge transfer; and (e) the repatriate's interpersonal relationships and communication.

### ***a) Methodological and Theoretical Extensions***

The findings of our review highlight the emergence of empirical studies on repatriation. However, there is a dearth of studies that use longitudinal data. Such studies would provide better opportunities to explore the repatriation process over time and contrast the adjustment challenges and strategies over the initial culture shock felt as an expatriate and the reverse culture shock felt as a repatriate. Longitudinal studies would also allow researchers to explore the impact of disruptive events on the repatriation process and the family's well-being. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic left many expatriates stranded in host countries and unable to return home (Caligiuri et al., 2020). How did organizations continue to support the assignees and their families, what challenges did the expatriates and their families face when attempting to repatriate, and how did the events affect their mental and physical well-being are some of the questions that longitudinal studies could capture.

Regarding theoretical application, most of the studies focus on cultural adjustment. However, studies using social networks and the knowledge-based view are also emerging. Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) suggest that socialization is one of the first steps towards exchanging tacit knowledge and converting it into an explicit form. While the theoretical application in the repatriation literature has been on either social networks or knowledge, future studies that combine these two perspectives would allow deeper theorization of the social and work aspects and how this helps organizations achieve their goals. Other theoretical approaches, such as the family systems theory, which has been applied in the expatriation literature to study how international assignments affect the family (Dang et al., 2022; Goede & Holtbrügge, 2021), could also be applied to explore the impact of repatriation on the family unit and their influence on the family turnover decision. Other theoretical concepts, including organizational learning theory and knowledge creation and transfer theory, have received little attention in the literature. Also, the ability-motivation-opportunity framework could apply to the repatriation adjustment process.

**b) *Repatriate Readjustment and Reintegration after Assignments***

The literature suggests that repatriates in organizations based in developed economies are likely to face fewer readjustment difficulties than those in emerging economies (Chiang et al., 2018). Moreover, the differences in the national culture of the host and home countries affect repatriation outcomes differently. For example, social support and interpersonal relationships in collectivist societies, as opposed to individualistic societies, are salient and positively affect repatriation readjustment (Sánchez-Vidal et al., 2007). Future research can consider the differences between the host and home countries' social and economic environments and examine their effect on the repatriates' readjustment.

Despite the high cost of expatriation and cross-cultural adjustment (McNulty, 2015; Banai, 2022), the literature on organizational support seems to focus primarily on the initial adjustment phase (Lazarova and Caliguiri, 2001; Burmeister & Deller, 2016; Kumar et al., 2022), and the support during the repatriation phase remains under-researched. A successful expatriation should include support for repatriation and talent retention. Future studies could explore the types of support required by the assignee, their family, and other employees in the home and host country who work with the assignees.

The social (based on trust) and economic (based on career development) reintegration of repatriates is critical for home organizations. Thus, future studies can explore this context further by applying social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Gould-Williams & Davies, 2005). Moreover, concerning the relationship between repatriates' turnover and career considerations, the literature has indicated that MNEs in Western societies offer fewer career opportunities to repatriates (Kraimer et al., 2009; Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007; Stahl et al., 2009) than those in emerging economies (Guo et al., 2013; Kulkarni et al., 2010). Therefore, researchers can use a social exchange perspective to compare employees' career opportunities and repatriation experience with their host organizations in developed and home organizations in emerging economies, and vice versa.

**c) *The Cycle of Expatriation and Repatriation***

Studies on international assignments have primarily focused on the expatriation or repatriation phases when examining assignment success. Few studies have considered a dyadic process that compares expatriation, repatriation and other factors involved in the process, such as the involvement of domestic work-unit employees. Bolino's (2007) research framework examines successful repatriation by linking organizational and repatriation outcomes during and after international assignments. Two additional criteria have been suggested by Reiche (2012) to assess the success of international assignments, consisting of access to and transfer of the host organization's knowledge upon repatriation.

Moreover, Yan et al. (2002) and Cerdin and Le Pargneux (2009) discuss the link between the success of expatriation and repatriation. In addition, Burmeister and Deller (2016) examine organizational support practices to evaluate the success of knowledge transfer practices by focusing on the phases before, during, and after international assignments. However, the limited empirical evidence of the success of expatriation and repatriation leaves a significant gap in the literature. As international assignment success is beyond merely the relocation stage, future researchers should focus on both expatriation and repatriation issues to fully understand the success of international assignments. Individual and

organizational perspectives should be considered while examining international assignment success as an integral process.

**d) *Repatriate Knowledge Transfer Process***

Despite knowledge being a significant organizational resource, the literature review showed that only a small percentage of papers focused on the knowledge aspect in the repatriation phase (Burmeister, 2017). Our study indicates that repatriates' turnover and adjustment difficulties are significant issues caused by the mismanagement of their knowledge in the repatriation phase. This has emerged as a primary organizational concern that prevents sustained competitive advantage. Nevertheless, only a few studies have discussed the issue (Furuya et al., 2007; Lazarova & Caligiuri, 2001; Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007; Newton et al., 2007; Yogeswaran et al., 2017). From the perspective of knowledge transfer in the repatriation phase, the literature identifies the importance of interpersonal and team characteristics such as ability, motivation, shared cognitive ground, trust and social interaction between repatriates and domestic employees (Mäkelä & Brewster, 2009; Oddou et al., 2009). However, other variables, such as repatriates' in-group and out-group members in the socialization period of the repatriation phase, may affect repatriation outcomes relating to social interaction. This context needs further development as a heterogeneous group of repatriates and domestic employees can adversely affect organizational outcomes like repatriates' performance and turnover intentions (Milliken & Martins, 1996).

Despite the emerging interest in the knowledge management of repatriates, there is limited information about repatriates' knowledge characteristics and potential to create new organizational knowledge that is likely to generate organizational competitiveness (Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007; Lazarova & Tarique, 2005; Mäkelä & Brewster, 2009; Oddou et al., 2009; Stevens et al., 2006). Future research should empirically examine repatriates' knowledge categories for knowledge tacitness, then investigate their significance for MNEs in a reverse knowledge transfer process (transfer of knowledge from subsidiary to parent organization). Furthermore, future studies can examine the characteristics of transferred knowledge, such as corporate culture and local market knowledge from the subsidiary, and how it will facilitate MNEs' strategic objectives in future international assignments. The literature has also highlighted a noticeable difference in the significance of repatriates' knowledge to MNEs in developed and emerging economies (Chiang et al., 2018), which requires further examination.

The individual processes involved in knowledge transfer—such as the ability and motivation of individuals (repatriates and local work-unit employees) and the utilization of interaction opportunities for knowledge transfer in the home organization (Kang & Kim, 2017)—is another area that is worthy of further research (Burmeister, 2017). Other issues that could be examined include how organizational support practices facilitate individual ability, motivation and interaction opportunity and their effect on the reverse knowledge transfer. The ability-motivation-opportunity framework (Blumberg & Pringle, 1982) could be used to examine the role of individual ability, motivation, and interaction opportunities as mediators to explain how organizational repatriation support is mostly studied in the expatriation context, influences knowledge transfer and the success of international assignments.

***e) Interpersonal Relationships and Communication***

The expatriation literature emphasizes the importance of networking relationships to reduce uncertainties, such as the stress associated with working internationally (Kraimer & Wayne, 2004; Wang & Kanungo, 2004). However, the repatriation literature contains limited information about the implications of networking relationships with domestic employees and supervisors in the home organization. Social support and networking during expatriation facilitate assignees' work adjustment, relationship quality, task performance, cultural diversity and frequency of contact with the host organization; furthermore, they provide emotional and informational support to expatriates (Farh et al., 2010; Kraimer & Wayne, 2004).

Positive interpersonal relationships between repatriates and domestic employees can significantly affect individual repatriation outcomes. Ashforth et al. (2008) explain that interpersonal relationships in a new environment provide individuals with a sense of connection and order and reduce interaction uncertainties. Hence, researchers should examine the development of interpersonal relationships from the frequency of communication between individuals in the repatriation phase and how these relationships facilitate repatriation outcomes. With the increased use of electronic communication and social media, it is much easier to communicate with colleagues in the home and host countries. Therefore, using technology can help maintain some level of interpersonal communication, and access to the latest social media posts about the country of origin can help reduce some of the repatriates' uncertainty and reverse culture shock. The emergent literature discusses some of these issues from the expatriates' perspective (Sahakiantz & Dorner, 2021), and future studies could look at these issues from repatriates and their families' perspectives as to how they can maintain the interpersonal relations and communications that they built during the international assignment.

Relationship-building and knowledge transfer upon repatriation are critical organizational outcomes in the repatriation phase (Oddou et al., 2009), where organizations' intercultural communication is crucial to investigate (Lauring, 2011). Furthermore, since organizational structure shapes the communication frequency and patterns among workplace colleagues and influences the effectiveness and efficiency of how new ideas and knowledge are implemented, its effect on repatriation outcomes needs to be further investigated (Zheng et al., 2010).

Furthermore, ineffective social interaction opportunities in the home organization can lead to negative team experiences, lower organizational commitment and other relational conflicts (Harrison et al., 2002; Riordan & Shore, 1997). Hence, repatriates working in heterogeneous groups in the home organization may experience higher job dissatisfaction (Milliken & Martins, 1996). Therefore, there is an opportunity for future research to examine the influence of group compositions in the repatriation phase on organizational outcomes. Such research could explore cognitive, affective, symbolic, and communication processes to understand how team composition and interaction variables relate to repatriation outcomes.

Our study provides a comprehensive overview of the repatriate literature. However, like all studies, it also has several limitations. First, the study only focuses on journal articles and leaves out other sources such as books and book chapters. Therefore, future reviews

could extend their range of outlets to capture a broader range of studies. Second, we only reviewed articles published in English, and future studies could add to our work by incorporating relevant articles published in other languages.

The study expects to provide implications for academia and practice. It will provide MNEs with a deeper understanding of the challenges associated with the repatriation phase. The study can guide HR managers and policymakers to recognise the repatriation phase as a critical phase in the process of international assignments.

## **7. Implications and Conclusion**

The study has several implications for academia and practice. For MNEs, understanding the challenges and support needs of repatriates can lead to the development of more effective repatriation programs, reducing turnover rates and enhancing knowledge transfer. By addressing gaps in the literature, this study informs HR managers on the importance of structured support mechanisms, such as pre-departure training and career planning, which can significantly impact repatriates' reintegration and job satisfaction.

Additionally, the study's findings can guide the creation of policies that recognize repatriation as a critical phase in the expatriation process rather than its conclusion. At the policy level, governments and international regulatory bodies can use these insights to develop frameworks that support the mobility and reintegration of global talent, ensuring that expatriates' skills and knowledge are effectively utilized in their home countries. Policies fostering collaboration between private enterprises and public institutions can enhance support systems for repatriates, contributing to national economic growth and competitiveness.

Regarding theoretical contributions, this study offers a comprehensive synthesis of recent advancements, and identifies key gaps by looking at the expatriation and repatriation stages and incorporating organizational support and knowledge transfer dynamics. Focusing on traditional organization-assigned expatriates provides insights into career development, identity transformation, and coping strategies. The study also highlights the importance of structured organizational support throughout the expatriation-repatriation cycle, enriching theories on knowledge management and global talent management. These contributions pave the way for future research on repatriates' readjustment, knowledge transfer processes, and the impact of organizational practices on repatriation outcomes.

A limitation of this study is that it covers literature on organization-assigned expatriates and their repatriation process. Future studies could incorporate the challenges that self-initiated expatriates face in their repatriation process and the issues related to their tacit knowledge transfer process.

## **Data Availability Statement**

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article and its supplementary materials.

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