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Repatriate embeddedness: The experience of Swedish repatriates

A qualitative study on the interconnectedness between the repatriate experience
and organizational commitment.

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“I’ll put it like this, if I hadn’t been this super loyal person and loved my colleagues and the company this much, I would have given up and left a long time ago. This time I barely even made it home before I received a really great offer from outside the organization, and so I said no. And I ask myself, ‘Why do I say no?’ And sometimes I see that I’m stupidly loyal. But I love this company, and it’s a love of a lifetime.” - Respondent 11

Abstract

Poorly managed repatriation processes on the part of MNCs are still frequently reported. Inadequate organizational support and lack of understanding result in high turnover rates among repatriates and deficient returns on the immense financial investments put into expatriation. At this rate, companies risk losing extensive valuable knowledge, talents and networks that have the potential to bring competitive advantages. While previous repatriation research has focused on repatriate turnover, this study seeks to understand why repatriates decide to stay. By conducting a qualitative study based on interviews with thirty repatriates, we uncover how various elements influence the repatriate experience and how the experience of repatriation affects organizational commitment. We extend previous research by combining repatriation research with conceptual theory of job embeddedness and elaborate the concepts of organizational and community embeddedness. Our findings show that the repatriate experience was influenced by changes in networks, cultural identity and subsequent career development. A positive repatriate experience tended to increase organizational commitment, while a negative experience showed the opposite result. Challenging repatriation did not necessarily reduce commitment. Here, long history with the company, career advancement and compatibility between corporate and personal values tended to outweigh setbacks in repatriation. When organizational commitment decreased, this was clearly founded in deficient organizational support and decreased organizational embeddedness. Our findings thus accentuate the importance of companies nurturing their human capital. Finally, in direct conflict with the original concept of job embeddedness, we found that decreased community embeddedness, even though it negatively impacted life satisfaction, did not influence repatriate commitment.

Keywords: Expatriate assignment, Expatriation, International assignment, Job embeddedness, Organizational commitment, Repatriate experience, Repatriation,

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Thank you,

Gothenburg, May 31st, 2021



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Abbreviations

COVID-19 - Coronavirus disease 2019

HQ - Headquarter

HR - Human resources

MNC - Multinational corporation

NGO - Non-Governmental Organization

Definitions

Expatriation: the phase in which an employee takes up residency outside of his/her native country during employment abroad (Oxford University Press, 2018).

Expatriate: an employee who is sent overseas to work in a company's foreign subunits in order to achieve various organizational objectives (Sánchez-Vidal et al., 2007; Kraimer et al., 2012; Chiang et al., 2018).

Experience: things that happen to a person that influence the way that person thinks, behaves and feels (Oxford University Press, 2021).

Home organization: the Swedish organization assigning the expatriate and retrieving the employee back upon repatriation.

Home country: the country of origin.

Host organization: the foreign sub-unit to which the employee is assigned during expatriation.

Host country: the country of expatriation.

Repatriation: the process of returning home after the completion of an international assignment (Chiang et al., 2018).

Repatriate: an employee who returns home after an international assignment (Chiang et al., 2018).

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background and problem discussion

Expatriation has become an attractive strategy to obtain organizational objectives in foreign markets (Kraimer et al., 2012; Chiang et al., 2018). As expatriates develop tacit knowledge and competencies through their international experience, they are a source for generating competitive advantage essential in today's global business environment (Rui et al., 2017; Burmeister et al., 2018). For the individual employee, expatriation is envisioned as a great opportunity to gain international experience, a wider network, develop capabilities and climb the career ladder (Bolino, 2007; Kraimer et al., 2009; Stahl et al., 2009). While expatriation has received extensive research attention, less emphasis has been placed on the subsequent phase, repatriation (Chiang et al., 2018). Repatriation has traditionally been assumed by both individuals, companies and research to be a "non-issue" (Nery-Kjerfve & Mclean, 2012). However, evidence from the repatriation literature shows that repatriates frequently experience difficulties with readjustment and that repatriation can be considered even more demanding than expatriation (Kimber, 2019). Several studies have emphasized high turnover rates among repatriates as a consequence of poorly managed repatriation processes (e.g. Baruch, et al., 2002; Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007; Brookfield Global Relocation Services, 2016; Chiang et al., 2018). Indeed, common estimates show that as many as 50% of returning employees leave their companies within two years (ibid.).

In this study, we look more deeply into the experience of repatriation by combining testimonies collected from qualitative interviews with thirty repatriates, with conceptual theory of job embeddedness and repatriation research. The repatriation literature applied concerns HR practices, organizational context and individual change. Several interrelated factors influence the repatriate experience and the process of returning home cannot be properly understood without also taking into account the preceding phases of pre-expatriation and expatriation (Lazarova & Caligiuri, 2001; Barusch et al., 2002; Bossard & Peterson, 2005; Osman-Gani & Hyder, 2008). Pre-departure expectations and individual as well as organizational changes during expatriation will affect the experience of repatriation (Black et al., 1992; Hyder &

Lövblad, 2007; Shen & Hall, 2009; O'Sullivan, 2013) Therefore, we adopt a holistic perspective where all phases are considered.

A great deal of repatriation research has focused on repatriate turnover (e.g. Yan et al., 2002; Sánchez-Vidal et al., 2007; Birur & Muthiah, 2013). Surprisingly, few studies concentrate on why repatriates decide to stay. Originally established by Mitchell et al. (2001), the concept of job embeddedness was developed to explain employee retention. It relates to the understanding of what binds a person to an organization and what specific components that play a part in the feeling of organizational commitment. The concept has been acknowledged for its multidimensionality and touches upon several relevant aspects related to the repatriate experience but has previously only been applied once to repatriation (Shen & Hall, 2009). The concept entails three different sub-categories: *fit* (the perceived compatibility between organization and individual), *links* (the formal and informal ties to other people in and outside of the job context), and *sacrifice* (the benefits that would be forfeited if the person leaves the organization) (Ampofo et al., 2017). All these dimensions will be altered by a potential move (Mitchell et al., 2001). Consequently, the job embeddedness concept offers a more complex and multifaceted framework for analyzing the various dimensions affecting the repatriate experience, beyond the general level previously applied in repatriation research.

Previous repatriation literature has shown that personal change as well as HR practices are significant antecedents for repatriate outcome (Pattie et al., 2010; Kraimer et al., 2012). During expatriation, employees are likely to experience personal growth, which can make them feel alienated from the colleagues back home (Tung, 1986; Oddou et al., 2013). The organizational environment in the focal company often changes in unanticipated ways, which results in readjustment difficulties since the setting will be in conflict with what was expected (O'Sullivan, 2013). These factors will impact the perceived fit and strength of links upon return. Further, the capabilities acquired by the employee that were particularly valuable in a foreign context may not be applicable in the home-country context (Bossard & Peterson, 2005; Oddou et al., 2013), leading to a perceived sacrifice. As HR practices have been shown to facilitate repatriate readjustment (Litrell et al., 2006; Furuya et al., 2009; Pattie et al., 2010), these could be used to counteract a decrease in job embeddedness and instead help rebuild it. The repatriation literature and the research on job embeddedness have evolved separately (Shen & Hall, 2009), but as we can see there are multiple intertwined and corresponding themes in these two research streams. Consequently, by combining these themes we will add a valuable

new perspective to the repatriation literature and expand current understanding of the repatriate experience and repatriate commitment.

Considering the substantial amount of financial as well as administrative resources that are put into expatriation (Fink & Meierewert, 2005; Nowak & Linder, 2016) and the high turnover rates among repatriates (Brookfield Global Relocation Services, 2016; Chiang et al., 2018), the lack of both research and company engagement to understand and facilitate the experience of repatriation is remarkable. Although the last two decades have seen a somewhat growing stream of repatriation research, there remains a lack of understanding for how different elements in the repatriation process is experienced by the individual repatriate, what influences this experience and how this affects repatriates' organizational commitment. In order for companies to facilitate readjustment, promote commitment and thereby retain newly acquired knowledge, capabilities and networks within the organization, a deeper understanding of how these different aspects of the repatriation process influence the employee is essential. From an international business perspective, deeper knowledge of this issue is essential to not risk losing potential sources of competitive advantage to competitors.

1.2 Purpose and research question

The purpose of this study is twofold. Primarily, we apply the concept of job embeddedness to enable a deeper understanding of the repatriate experience. Further, we seek to highlight how the repatriate experience in turn influences organizational commitment post an international assignment.

To fulfill the purpose of this study, the following research questions will be addressed:

1. *How do changes in links, fit and sacrifice during international assignments affect the repatriate experience?*
2. *How does the repatriate experience influence repatriates' organizational commitment post-repatriation?*

By exposing how links, fit and sacrifice affect the repatriate experience, and how this in turn influences organizational commitment post-repatriation, we aim to provide valuable insights

that can enable managers and HR representatives to better promote repatriate readjustment, motivation and commitment. This in turn could help companies avoid unnecessary financial costs, retain valued employees and attain a higher return on the considerable investment that is expatriation. Additionally, we believe that further knowledge in this field will promote repatriates' professional development and help future repatriates to manage their expectations of the repatriation process. Finally, considering that job embeddedness has been successful in explaining various work-related outcomes, but never been applied to the repatriate experience, this study will provide valuable academic insights to the repatriation literature and expand theoretical development in the research field of international business.

1.3 Delimitations

In this study we make a number of delimitations in order to define the boundaries of the research. These include boundaries of theoretical framework, focus area of the study and choice of sample. First, in order to limit the scope of the study and choose relevant theories for our chosen purpose, we have delimited the literature to theory on repatriation related to HR practices, individual change and organizational context. Further, we add literature on job embeddedness, an alternative concept to the attachment literature. Second, the study centers on the experience of repatriation following expatriation initiated by companies. Accordingly, self-initiated expatriation, expatriation in NGOs and migration are not considered. Since we solely focus on repatriates' personal experiences, we exclude the organizational perspective of the repatriation process. Finally, this study is based on a qualitative research approach where the empirical data is based on semi-structured interviews. The sample consists of former expatriates from four large Swedish MNCs. Consequently, the empirical results of the study are valid for our chosen sample and may not be directly transferable to other samples or contexts.

1.4 Disposition

In chapter 1 we introduce and problematize our research topic "the repatriate experience". The chapter provides a generous description of the research context as well as an explanation for its relevance. The chapter further entails the purpose of the study, our research questions and delimitations. In chapter 2 we introduce our theoretical framework, starting with the theoretical concept of job embeddedness. We then apply repatriation literature concerning HR practices, organizational context and individual change to the job embeddedness concept. Finally, we

present and account for our conceptual model. In chapter 3 we present and motivate the methodology chosen for the research process. We discuss how the methodological choices have been influenced by our ontological and epistemological considerations. The chapter further accounts for our sample and the criteria set for selecting participants. Finally, we review the quality of the study and our ethical considerations.

In chapter 4 we combine the empirical findings and analysis. This chapter is divided into three main parts with related sub-chapters, where we discuss the relevant themes in accordance with our conceptual model. In each subchapter, we start with presenting our empirical results where we highlight important aspects and common patterns among the respondents. We then directly analyze the presented empirical findings in relation to our theoretical framework. In chapter 5 we draw the main conclusions from our analysis and answer the research questions of this study. We further present theoretical implications, practical implications and review the limitations of the study and provide suggestions for future research.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Job embeddedness

When looking at a combination of decisive factors for what binds a person to an organization and influence their feeling of commitment (Shen & Hall, 2009), the concept of job embeddedness has increasingly been applied in more recent business research (e.g. Crossley et al., 2007; Shen & Hall, 2009; Zhang et al., 2012; Kiazad et al., 2015; Lyu & Zhu, 2019; Susomrith & Amankwaa, 2019). The more attached an individual feels to a community, an organization and the people that work there, that is, the greater the job embeddedness, the more inclined that person is to stay (Holtom & Inderrieden, 2006). The concept of job embeddedness was first introduced by Mitchell et al. (2001). It was developed as an alternative model to the attachment literature with the aim of explaining why employees choose to stay or leave an organization. The authors divide the job embeddedness concept into two separate but related categories, organizational embeddedness and community embeddedness. To clarify the concept, the authors further identify three critical sub-dimensions of job embeddedness, entitled *links*, *fit* and *sacrifice*. All three aspects are considered significant for the individual's embeddedness both within and outside the immediate job context - see figure 1 below for illustration. The different dimensions can be viewed as threads of a web that reinforce the connection between employees, the corporation and the community.

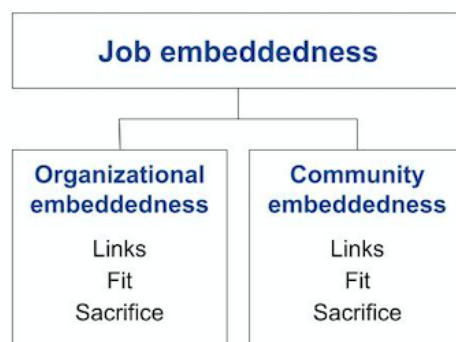


Figure 1: Schematic picture of Job embeddedness. Authors' compilation, based on Mitchell et al. (2001).

2.1.1 Links

Links refer to the extent people are formally and informally connected to activities and other people within the organization and community (Mitchell et al., 2001; Ng & Feldman, 2007; Ampofo et al., 2017). The number and strength of links vary considerably between people,

depending on surrounding factors (Mitchell et al., 2001; Halvorsen et al., 2015). Connections within the organization comprise social ties with colleagues and managers, whereas connections within the community comprise relationships with friends, relatives and other groups within the social circle (Zhang et al., 2012). Colleagues that also share leisure activities will create more and stronger links (Mitchell et al., 2001). The reasoning is that the stronger the connections with others within the organization and the community, the greater the job embeddedness, and thus the less likely people will be to leave their jobs (Ampofo et al., 2017). Furthermore, densely entangled employees will be more probable to get involved in and care about the organization's holistic performance (Zhang et al., 2012).

2.1.2 Fit

Fit refers to what extent there are similarities or a good compatibility between people's occupation, community activities and other features of their life (Mitchell et al., 2001). For instance, employees become embedded in their occupation when there is a good match between job requirements, culture and individuals' skills and capabilities (Bambacas & Kulik, 2013; Halvorsen et al., 2015). Personal values need to be compatible with the values held by the organization and career ambitions with the development opportunities provided by the firm (Ng & Feldman, 2014; Ampofo et al., 2017). To become embedded in the community, there must be a good fit between a person's individual preferences and the different factors that the community entails, such as the religious and political environment, entertainment activities and weather climate (Mitchell et al., 2001; Kiazad et al., 2015). Overall, there needs to be a perceived compatibility with an individual's personal traits and the occupation and community they are in (Lee et al., 2004; Ampofo et al., 2017). The greater perceived fit with both their workplace and residential community, the greater the job embeddedness.

2.1.3 Sacrifice

Sacrifice refers to the fragility of the links, how easily they can be broken and what the person perceives might be lost should s/he decide to leave an organization or community (Mitchell et al., 2001). The fragility of these links is especially related to the situation of a potential move, where a person physically moves to a different home, or a different city. Sacrifices can further be viewed as current or anticipated advantages that an employee surrenders if deciding to exit the community or organization, resulting in a perceived psychological or material cost (Ampofo et al., 2017). The aggregated perceived advantages will have a significant impact on

a decision to leave and people with a lot of perceived benefits will find the leave more troublesome. The advantages can for example include compelling projects and tasks, health benefits, number of vacation days, favorable relationships, supportive management, high salary and non-transferable tacit benefits (Mitchell et al., 2001; Zhang et al., 2012; Bambacas & Kulik, 2013). The perceived value and importance of different benefits will vary depending on personal objectives, life situation and individual preferences.

2.1.4 Further theoretical development of the job embeddedness concept

Shen and Hall (2009) apply the concept of job embeddedness to repatriation, acknowledging that this has never been done before. They suggest that job embeddedness together with repatriation adjustment will have a strong effect on repatriates' desire to stay in their organization, and there, explore new career opportunities. Personal changes during the international assignment will influence the level of job embeddedness. The more the employee experiences changes in identity, social networks, competencies and skills, the lower the job embeddedness at home will become. One of their main findings is that the length of the international assignments will be the most decisive factor for the degree of job embeddedness and repatriate readjustment. Accordingly, the longer expatriation, the harder it is for the repatriate to readjust, resulting in a lower level of embeddedness and thus, a decreased desire to stay and explore intra-organizational job opportunities.

In a study of the relationship between life satisfaction and job embeddedness, Ampofo et al. (2017) found that employees with a strong embeddedness perceive that they have considerable valuable benefits, and that the loss of these benefits will reduce their satisfaction with life. Life satisfaction indicates the individual's cognitive appraisal of their contentment with life circumstances and is a significant notion for employee well-being (Susomrith & Amankwaa, 2019). According to Ampofo et al. (2017), employees' perceived fit with their organization and community is the single most important predictor for life satisfaction. A person's embeddedness and subjective well-being can be enhanced if the organization helps and encourages their employees to construct and preserve job resources, such as opportunities for professional development, autonomy, job security and social support. These job resources can increase life satisfaction since they generate opportunities for personal growth, cognitive development, and possibilities to feel meaning at work.

2.1.5 Opposition towards the concept

Criticism has been leveled at the original concept of job embeddedness, implying that job embeddedness does not have the same gravity in explaining employee retention as similar constructs have (e.g. Maertz & Campion, 2004; Crossley et al., 2007). While Mitchell et al. (2001) suggest that factors related to both the organization and community play an equally important role for employee retention, Crossley et al. (2007) argue that this two-tailed orientation is rather unfocused, compared to constructs that focus solely on organizational explanatory factors. Nevertheless, empirical evidence reveals that it is important, if not crucial, to understand how individual's personal lives inform and impact their career decisions in order to understand career development (Ng & Feldman, 2014). Kiazad et al. (2015) highlight that although the effect is relatively weaker compared to the effect of organizational embeddedness, the community embeddedness has been shown to have a significant effect on turnover intention and employee behavior. Ng and Feldman (2014) found that changes in community embeddedness influence employees' networking behavior, work motivation and organizational identification.

Ng and Feldman (2007) direct additional criticism towards the original concept, for not separating occupational embeddedness from organizational embeddedness, arguing that a person can lack embeddedness in the organization while feeling well embedded in their particular profession. This could be exemplified by a situation where the employee is satisfied with work-related tasks, but opposes the corporate values, or that a person changes jobs within the organization because they feel committed to the organization, but not to their current role (ibid.; Kiazad et al., 2015). We consider the proposition noteworthy and relevant for an understanding of the repatriate experience. Accordingly, the separation of organizational and occupational embeddedness will be considered in this study.

2.2 Applying repatriation literature to job embeddedness

2.2.1 Changes in the individual, social and organizational context

2.2.1.1 Links

The social network is seen as a valuable asset for learning (Bonache & Zárraga-Oberty, 2008) and it is usually through these informal relationships that promotion opportunities occur, especially through the relationships with managers (Shen & Hall, 2009). During expatriation,

employees will feel a need to expand the domestic network, as it is a source for gaining valuable knowledge and increasing psychological well-being (Hall & Kahn, 2001; Wang & Kanungo, 2004; Claus et al., 2015). As expatriates extend their social network in the foreign community and organization, they establish new links and become more embedded in the host organization. While expanding the social network abroad, the expatriates will simultaneously care to maintain the social network at home because of the many opportunities that it brings (Shen & Hall, 2009). To keep strong ties with colleagues back home has shown to have a positive effect on the feeling of organizational commitment upon return. However, the repatriates usually encounter difficulties in the attempt to maintain links to home (Kimber, 2019).

During international assignments, expatriates risk becoming “out of sight, out of mind” (Benson & Pattie, 2008; O’Sullivan, 2013). To attain the links to home requires a great effort by the individual. Factors such as time difference and lack of face-to-face interactions make it hard to maintain contact, and the social network at home weakens (Shen & Hall, 2009; Shen & Kram, 2011; Boros et al., 2017). Kimber (2019) suggests that weakened relationships with colleagues in the home country is a natural effect of expatriates’ stay abroad, where they come to rely more on the local network for psychological and career support, whereas less attention is paid to the one back home. The weakening of links to people and activities in the home country happens due to a shift in commitment from the home environment to the host environment. This leads to a decrease in job embeddedness, which in turn makes the repatriates less inclined to remain within their organization upon return.

International assignments often stretch for several years (Wu et al., 2014) and it is likely that the home organization undergoes unanticipated changes (Black et al., 1992; Hyder & Lövblad, 2007; O’Sullivan, 2013). This generates readjustment difficulties for repatriates (Bossard & Peterson, 2005; Kimber, 2019). The changes can include structural changes in the organization or changes in group composition, such as new management and/or colleagues (Oddou et al., 2013). Consequently, upon repatriation the organizational context that the employee was previously part of might have become dissolved. Dissolution of the organizational context leads to a loss of previous links to activities, managers and colleagues. As the strength of links varies, depending on surrounding factors (Mitchell et al., 2001), the vastness of the loss or weakening of links and what effect this has on a person also vary. Accordingly, the weakening or loss of links will reduce a person's perceived level of job embeddedness, but to different degrees.

As group dynamics tend to change over time, repatriates will feel varying degrees of insecurity as they return to the social context of their home country (Bossard & Peterson, 2005; Oddou et al., 2013). A downward shift in social status increases anxiety and reduces the feeling of control, while new group compositions generate challenges for the repatriate to learn and adapt to new social codes, expectations and norms (Black et al., 1992). Previous research has shown that greater organizational change during expatriation is negatively related to repatriate readjustment (Feldman & Tompson, 1993; Macdonald & Arthur, 2005). However, Oddou et al. (2013) mean that even though the social context of the organization has not explicitly changed, the repatriate still has to regain trust and re-build former relationships with coworkers in order to become an insider in the network again. Many repatriates report that colleagues and friends back home, without international experience, rarely show much interest in their international experience (Bossard & Peterson, 2005; Yeaton & Hall, 2008). Consequently, even when former links remain in place upon return, the properties of the relationships may have changed, leading to uncertainty and impaired embeddedness for the repatriate (Black et al., 1992).

2.2.1.2 Fit

Expatriation is argued to offer a great platform for the building and transformation of identity (Kohonen, 2005). During their time abroad, expatriates will experience changes in the perceived identity influenced by the sociocultural environment in which they live (Black et al., 1992; Osman-Gani & Hyder, 2008; Shaffer et al., 2012). Sussman (2002) defines cultural identity as “*the degree to which an individual identifies with the home country and the host country*” (p. 392). Hyder and Lövblad (2007) state that cultural identity change happens slowly over time during expatriation. In accordance with this, Shen and Hall (2009) found that the length of the international assignment will be a decisive factor for the degree of job embeddedness. Consequently, the perceived fit between employee, organization and community is likely to decrease more the longer the expatriate stays abroad.

The concept of cultural shock has frequently been applied in expatriation literature, as employees tend to experience cultural clashes when faced with a new environment (Cox, 2004; Hyder & Lövblad, 2007). When expatriates start to adjust to the foreign socio-cultural environment, this tends to stimulate various explorations (Shen & Hall, 2009). Not seldom, while observing different cultures norms, people become eager to try out new things and behaviors, which in turn triggers their individual personal development. Upon return,

repatriates often instead experience a reverse-culture shock (Sánchez-Vidal et al., 2007; Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012; Ho et al., 2016). The different attitudes, behaviors and values that have been inflicted upon them while adapting to the new culture abroad, could now contradict the ones held by the organization back home (Kimber, 2019). As suggested, job embeddedness will increase when personal values are compatible with the values held by the organization (Mitchell et al., 2001; Ng & Feldman, 2007). If the values diverge upon repatriation it will lead to a decreased level of fit, generating a feeling of reverse-culture shock. If there is a perceived mismatch between the repatriate and the home environment, it will lead to reduced life satisfaction upon return (Ampofo et al., 2017).

The learning and experience from expatriation generate significant personal growth (Oddou et al., 2013). This results in a shift of perspectives, development of new competencies and global mindsets. Shen and Hall (2009) state that since the home organization is often unaware of the individual change of the repatriates, managers are many times unable to properly manage the returning employees. Thus, the readjustment could also imply challenges on their part, which further accentuates the discrepancy between repatriate-organization fit. Macdonald and Arthur (2005) argue that expatriates sometimes experience changes upon their return as external, without realizing that it is actually themselves who have changed. Crossley et al. (2007) argue that embeddedness can be regarded as the employee's gestalt subjective perceptions, meaning that focus lies on the feeling of aggregated embeddedness. Accordingly, the job embeddedness will primarily be decided by the subjective experience of the repatriate.

2.2.1.3 Sacrifice

Reiche et al. (2011) found the sub-dimensions to be interrelated and that perceived links and fit will influence perceived sacrifices connected to resignation. Expatriation will inevitably entail sacrifices as the employee leaves the home company and community behind (Mitchell et al., 2001). The magnitude of the sacrifices will vary depending on how embedded the individual is pre-departure (Mitchell et al., 2001; Zhang et al., 2012). However, since the expatriate decides to leave, the benefits associated with expatriation, such as opportunities for personal and professional development (Bolino, 2007; Stahl et al., 2009), will be deemed to outweigh the vastness of the sacrifice. Secondly, sacrifices occur when repatriation begins. From previous sections we have learned that changes that can be witnessed during expatriation include the acquisition of newly learned skills, localized social networks and work-related enhanced competencies (Black et al., 1992; Yeaton & Hall 2008; Oddou et al., 2013). If the

skills and networks are specific to the foreign context and thus, not easily transferable to the home context, this leads to a perceived sacrifice of newly obtained personal resources. Similarly, if the home organization fails to show that they value the repatriate's international experience, the investment of the employee as well as of the organization become sunk costs and the perceived sacrifice of capabilities leads to negative sentiments for the repatriate (Kraimer et al., 2009; Ampofo et al., 2017).

An international assignment is commonly envisioned to positively impact future career development (Bossard & Peterson, 2005; Aldossari & Robertson, 2018). Empirical evidence, however, shows that repatriates frequently face positions that have little or no connection to the knowledge and capabilities acquired during expatriation (Benson & Pattie, 2008; Shen & Hall, 2009). Expatriates tend to have managerial positions during their international assignment, but return to positions with less responsibilities, autonomy and prestige (Macdonald & Arthur, 2005). Some even feel that expatriation has harmed, rather than furthered, their career development (Bolino, 2007; Benson & Pattie, 2008; Ren et al., 2013). Most expatriates are not promised career advancement upon return (Bossard & Peterson, 2005) and the repatriation phase tends to entail feelings of uncertainty and anxiety related to change in income and life situation (Suutari & Brewster, 2003; Aldossari & Robertson, 2018). If the forfeited benefits of expatriation are not compensated with new benefits upon repatriation, it will lead to reduced job embeddedness and thus lower organizational commitment. If the repatriate expects a promotion, but returns to a job of lower rank, s/he will experience a sacrifice of an anticipated benefit. Research shows that a loss of benefits, actual or anticipated, has a greater influence on well-being, compared to expected new benefits in the future (Brotheridge & Lee, 2002; Gorgievski & Hobfoll, 2008).

As mentioned, personal commitment shifts to the host environment during expatriation (Shen & Hall, 2009). Expatriates who develop strong positive feelings for the host country will face more difficulties upon repatriation than a person with strong positive sentiments for the home country culture (Sussmann, 2002; Shaffer et al., 2012). Expatriates with strong sentiments for the host country will therefore perceive a greater sacrifice during repatriation than expatriates with distinct home country sentiments. Benefits related to the host organization and community will be forfeited upon repatriation, leading to perceived material as well as psychological costs (Ampofo et al., 2017). Employees that regularly go on international assignments adopt a global mindset, which makes adapting to a new culture, including the home country culture, less

dramatic (Sussmann, 2002). Greer and Stiles (2016) contradict this by stating that a prolonged international career with long or multiple assignments results in more readjustment difficulties, since the repatriation process is postponed.

2.3 Rebuilding job embeddedness through organizational support

From the previous section, we have seen that changes in the individual, social and organizational context during expatriation will impact all the three subdimensions links, fit and sacrifice, and tend to decrease the perceived level of job embeddedness upon repatriation. With a lower level of job embeddedness, employees will experience a decrease in life satisfaction (Ng & Feldman, 2014; Ampofo et al., 2017), reduced organizational commitment and be less likely to stay in the company (Mitchell et al., 2001). In repatriation studies, HR practices have frequently been highlighted as essential to facilitate repatriate readjustment, enhance the feeling of obligations towards the company and increase repatriate retention (e.g. Yeaton & Hall, 2008; Pattie et al., 2010; Chiang et al., 2018). Despite this, repatriates frequently report inadequate or non-existent repatriation support from their employers (Bossard & Peterson, 2005; Osman-Gani & Hyder, 2008; Greer & Stiles, 2016). In this section, we discuss how companies can implement support measures to reinforce repatriates' perceived level of job embeddedness.

2.3.1 Customizing organizational support in the repatriation process

Bambacas and Kulik (2013) argue that in order to develop suitable HR practices to increase job embeddedness, organizations should use strategies that impact the different subdimensions. This way, targeted measures can be implemented to strengthen weaker or lagging components during repatriation to promote repatriate satisfaction and commitment (Tian et al., 2016; Ampofo et al., 2017). For instance, with reward systems and performance appraisal, objectives and tasks can be tailored to the corporate goals as well as the employee's personal goals and thereby help shape the employee's attitudes and behavior into a better perceived fit (Bambacas & Kulik, 2013; Kiazad et al., 2015). Links can be ameliorated by creating opportunities for interaction among co-workers and provide backdrops for the creation of high-quality relationships. Finally, perceived sacrifice can be increased by training employees to gain firm-specific knowledge and skills that would be sacrificed as sunk costs upon resignation.

Lazarova and Caligiuri (2001) found that the availability of organizational repatriation practices is related to repatriates' perceptions of to what degree the company supports and values them. Repatriates gain valuable knowledge from their international postings and prefer employers that value and acknowledge their potential contributions (Oddou et al., 2013). Perceived repatriation support has shown to positively relate to the repatriates' degree of job satisfaction and job attachment (Stevens et al., 2006). Nevertheless, research shows diversified results when it comes to appropriate HR practices for repatriation. Some studies indicate that HR practices generally have a positive effect on repatriation (e.g. Litrell et al., 2006; Yeaton & Hall, 2008), while others show that all available repatriation support is not necessarily appreciated by the repatriates (Sánchez-Vidal et al., 2007; Greer & Stiles, 2016). Tian et al., (2016), found similar results regarding the use of HR practices to enhance job embeddedness. In particular, ability-enhancing practices, such as skill development and performance appraisal are positively related to employee attachment and performance, whereas too much gravity on compensation packages is less efficient. Sánchez-Vidal et al. (2007) argue that HR practices need to be adapted to the returning individual, as personal characteristics influence different people to value different kinds of support. Customizing support to the repatriates' personal needs, will enable a better perceived fit on the part of the individual, resulting in a greater job embeddedness.

Hyder and Lövblad (2007) argue that the key when designing appropriate repatriation programs is to concentrate on the employee's experience of repatriation. Even if a repatriate readjusts successfully to the home company setting, s/he might still be dissatisfied with the reception received from the organization, which in turn can reduce work motivation and weaken the intention to stay with the employer. On the contrary, a repatriate may be more inclined to stay if they feel well-treated upon return, even if readjustment initially proves to be difficult. According to Lazarova and Caligiuri (2001), the answer to repatriate retention is building an organizational environment that appreciates and applies global experience. The expatriation and repatriation stages are not separate entities, and the organization should therefore offer support during as well as after the international assignment. This will contribute to the preservation of job embeddedness during expatriation. A high job embeddedness upon return will tend to moderate negative reactions to changes in the environment (Holtom & Inderrieden, 2006). Further, repatriates with a higher degree of job embeddedness will put more effort into readapting to the home organization, since they will want to protect the perceived valuable benefits connected to the job.

2.3.1.1 Repatriation support: career planning

Several authors have highlighted career planning as an important strategic element in the repatriation process (e.g. Macdonald & Arthur, 2005; Zikic et al., 2006; Greer & Stiles, 2016). When the employer puts careful attention into the future career development of the repatriate, it signals that the organization values international experience, which can increase repatriate commitment and entice other employees to take on international assignments (Kraimer et al., 2009; Bailey & Dragoni, 2013). Without proper career planning, repatriates instead end up in a situation where they do not have a job upon return or are placed in a position with less responsibility or little connection to their newly acquired capabilities (Bossard & Peterson, 2005; Yeaton & Hall, 2008). This tends to lead to frustration and disappointment with the employer since the international experience has not helped the anticipated intra-firm career development (Suutari & Brewster, 2003). This ultimately generates reduced job performance (Lazarova & Caligiuri, 2001; Osman-Gani & Hyder, 2008) and urges the repatriate to look for career opportunities elsewhere. Since repatriates are attractive to competitors, the international experience can still benefit the personal career, while the full value of expatriation simultaneously risks being lost for the organization making the investment (Suutari & Brewster, 2003).

Career management for repatriation involves formulating objectives and action plans, which benefit the company in terms of improved processes and learning, and the repatriate in terms of identifying credentials and capabilities, the ability to make more informed career decisions as well as constructing career goals within the organization (Macdonald & Arthur, 2005). By formulating tasks and professional objectives that are aligned with both the corporate goals and the individual's personal preferences, career planning can be used to increase the perceived organizational fit (Bambacas & Kulik, 2013). A better perceived fit between individual and organization has further been shown to enable more effective knowledge transfer (Lazarova & Tarique, 2005). Several authors emphasize the need to start career planning sessions prior to repatriation in order to early on prompt a sense of security and help the expatriate to manage the expectations of future position, job tasks and responsibilities upon repatriation (Lazarova & Caliguri, 2001; Oddou et al., 2013). The feeling of control is a strong determinant for psychological well-being during cross-cultural adaptation (Macdonald & Arthur, 2005). Thus, by enabling the expatriate to negotiate post-expatriation job assignments, the firm can promote

the individual's sense of career self-efficacy and facilitate readjustment to a better perceived fit (Bambacas & Kulik, 2013).

With long-term career planning, the repatriate will formulate anticipated benefits such as job security, future promotion and salary increase, which strengthens the feeling of perceived sacrifice upon resignation (Holtom & Inderrieden, 2006; Reiche et al., 2011; Ampofo et al., 2017). Accordingly, career planning can be used to form benefits that will increase the repatriate job embeddedness and life satisfaction. Satisfied repatriates tend to report that their new work positions enable them to utilize their international experience and that they have received tasks that are interesting and challenging (Macdonald & Arthur, 2005; Kraimer et al., 2009). By formulating job tasks that enable repatriates to continue to use their newly attained abilities, the company can prevent the skills from remaining specific to the host environment and avoid a perceived psychological cost for the individual. Overall, several researchers highlight career development as an important variable for the repatriate experience (e.g. Bossard & Peterson, 2005; Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007; Osman-Gani & Hyder, 2008).

2.3.1.2 Repatriation support: information and communication

The individual's preconceived expectations of the repatriation process will to a great extent influence how the factual process will be perceived (e.g. Hyder & Lövblad, 2007; Sanchez-Vidal et al., 2018). Adjusting to a new environment involves a certain degree of uncertainty and people have in general a need to decrease that uncertainty (Black et al., 1992). Consequently, continuous information and communication between the repatriates and the company are central matters for managing repatriate expectations and thereby promoting a positive experience of repatriation (ibid.; Bailey & Dragoni, 2013). The company should through communication ensure that the expatriate feels that they maintain visibility with the home organization during the posting overseas (Osman-Gani & Hyder, 2008). By ensuring that the expatriate remains involved in operations back home, the company can counteract the otherwise natural weakening of links during expatriation and ensure that important networks are maintained. Research suggests that the repatriation process should be planned and communicated prior to homecoming in order to ensure a smooth transition, but evidence shows that repatriation is often managed more ad hoc and opportunistically than expatriation (Baruch et al., 2002; Howe-Walsh & Torka, 2017). Hyder and Lövblad (2007) state that organizations should establish checkpoints and contact persons for continuous and tailored follow-up rather than a standardized repatriation program.

As different categories of communication and information will be related to different expectations and perceptions, repatriation will be positively influenced if the organization utilizes various forms of contacts (Hyder & Lövblad, 2007). Research asserts that the repatriate experience can be ameliorated if a mentor is accessible during as well as after expatriation to provide information, networks, support and career guidance (Crocitto et al., 2005; Hall & Chandler, 2007; Yeaton & Hall, 2009; Wu et al., 2014). A mentor constitutes a strong link, which will generate support and stability for the employee during international assignments (Mitchell et al., 2001; Holtom & Inderrieden, 2006). A continued relationship with a mentor post-assignment can also foster intra-firm knowledge transfer across borders and reduce turnover intentions (Crocitto et al., 2005; Reiche et al., 2011). O’Sullivan (2013) argues for the empowering potential of social media, both in reducing the risk of “out of sight, out of mind” during expatriation and in allowing repatriates a better access to the firms’ decision-making forums. By establishing several types of channels for links, the employee will become more densely entangled within the corporate web, increasing involvement and job embeddedness during expatriation (Zhang et al., 2012). Aldossari & Robertson (2018) found that employees who had maintained frequent contact with management during expatriation, did not experience a reverse culture shock to the same extent as others.

2.4 Summary of theoretical framework

Certain recurring theoretical notions related to the repatriation process are worth highlighting to better understand the repatriate experience. These concern individual changes as well as changes in the social context that take place during expatriation (Black et al., 1992). Simultaneously, organizational changes occur in the home country. Research shows that these changes do not usually become evident until repatriation, generating an unexpected gap between expectations and reality (O’Sullivan, 2013; Hyder & Lövblad, 2007; Knocke & Schuster, 2017; Aldossari & Robertson, 2018; Kierner & Suutari, 2018; Sanchez-Vidál et al., 2018). These changes impact the different sub-dimensions of job embeddedness.

2.4.1 Conceptual model

In this section, we present our conceptual model meant to facilitate understanding for you as a reader. It includes a distinct overview of the main theoretical themes of this study. The model

illustrates the interrelated factors that influence the repatriate experience, which in turn influence organizational commitment.

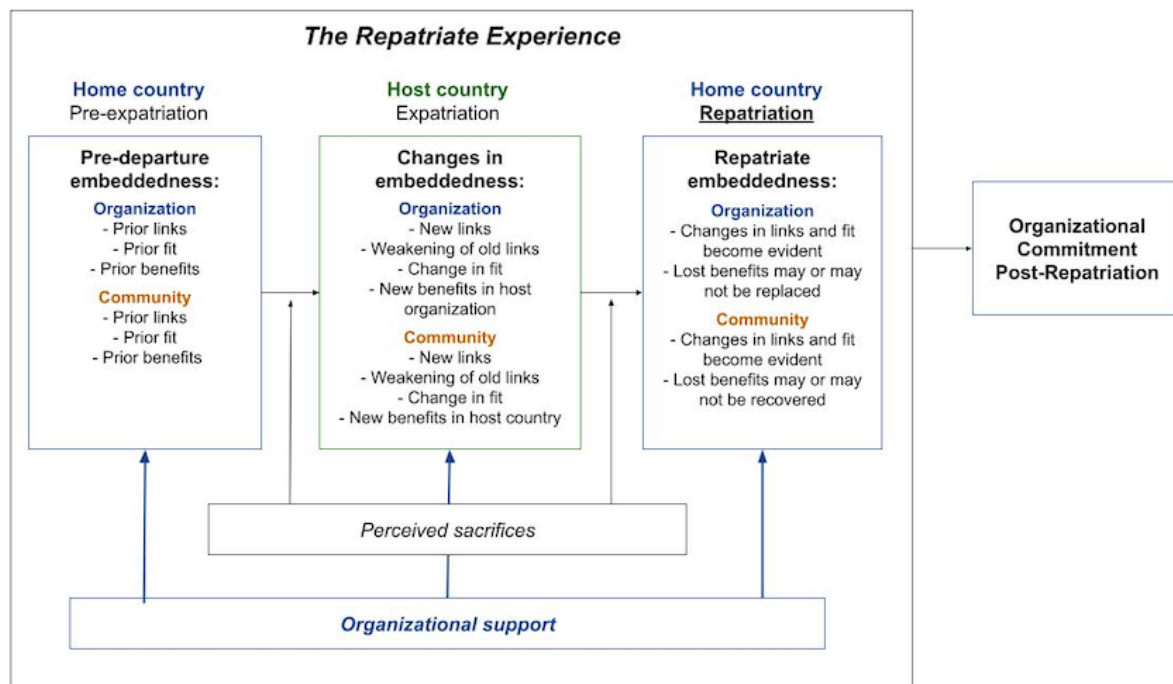


Figure 2: Conceptual model. Compiled by the authors.

As noted, the process of returning home cannot be properly understood without considering the preceding phases of pre-expatriation and expatriation. Therefore, the model is presented as a timeline stretching from pre-expatriation to post-repatriation. Since expatriation and repatriation constitute dramatic changes in a person's professional and private life, the job embeddedness is bound to change (Shen & Hall, 2009). In the model, each phase entails changes in the different sub-dimensions of organizational embeddedness and community embeddedness. Our empirical investigation is derived from the conceptual model and aims to provide factual insights to the theoretical themes. Specifically, we explore if and how links, fit and perceived sacrifice change over this period and how these changes tend to influence the repatriate experience. We further investigate the role of organizational support and how the repatriate experience in turn influences repatriates' subsequent organizational commitment. The conceptual model is hence used as a tool to guide us in answering our research questions.

3. Methodology

3.1 Scientific approach

3.1.1 Ontological and epistemological considerations

In the philosophy of social science, ontology concerns philosophical assumptions of how the world is viewed (Bell et al., 2019). The foundational aim of ontology is to understand reality and it can be divided into two separate branches, objectivism and constructivism. Constructivism, which is the ontological position of this study, suggests that culture, organizations and social actors should be regarded as socially constructed entities, i.e. social phenomena that are made real by human actions and understandings. Knowledge about reality is therefore viewed as indefinite and to some degree subjective. With this view, constructivism opposes the objectivism perspective which asserts that social phenomena exist independent or detached from social actors. Meaning that there is an objective reality without influence from a social actor or observer. Since this study aims to shed light on repatriates' personal accounts of their experience, and thus the reality as they experience it, the research is conducted through the perspective of constructivism.

From a predicted ontological position, a specific epistemological position naturally follows (Bell et al., 2019). While ontology refers to the understanding of a reality and what that reality is, epistemology concerns the understanding of how to gather knowledge about that reality. Hence, epistemology is deemed critical to business research as it facilitates answering the question of how research should be conducted. Interpretivism is the epistemological position of this study. It logically follows a social constructivism ontology which asserts that actions and meaning-making by humans are what constitutes reality. Consequently, interpretivism suggests that knowledge should be gathered from individuals through interviews or through observations, to understand their perception of reality (ibid.). Since this study solely focuses on repatriates' personal experiences, and thus, excludes the organizational perspective of the repatriation process, empirical data i.e. knowledge about reality is gathered through semi-structured interviews.

3.1.2 Qualitative research strategy

A qualitative research strategy was chosen for the present study since we aim to convey the experience of repatriation from the eyes of former expatriates. Based on the definitions by Oxford University Press (2021), we argue that the term *experience* is a complex notion, colored by individuals' perceptions, beliefs and emotions. This makes a quantitative research strategy impractical since it has very limited capacity for describing complex relationships and unveiling hidden meanings (Bell et al., 2019). Qualitative research on the other hand enables abundant descriptions and explanations of the motivations, behavior and attitudes of individuals (Hakim, 2000). It is especially appropriate when wishing to unfold organizational processes and the "how" and "why" of individual actions (Doz, 2011).

As we intend to increase the understanding of a complex and multidimensional social phenomenon, a quantitative method would further not have been appropriate since the methods and results would inevitably be influenced by our and other researchers' predetermined perceptions (Bell et al., 2019). The qualitative research method allows more flexibility, sensitivity and the possibility to deeper explore patterns as well as discrepancies between repatriates' stated attitudes and their actual behavior (Hakim, 2000). The rich descriptions and deep thought offered by qualitative research methods makes it well-suited for generating new conceptualizations, testing current theories and enabling further development of theory (Doz, 2011). This makes it particularly suitable for our study since we integrate and elaborate the two previously rarely combined research streams, job embeddedness and repatriation.

3.1.3 Abductive research approach

When deciding upon the role of theory, we have chosen an abductive approach. An abductive approach is a mode of reasoning, used to make logical assumptions and develop theories about the social reality studied (Bell et al., 2019). This has involved us interpreting the empirical material in regard to theory, but also for us to remain open to being surprised by the data and challenging our own preunderstanding (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007; Mantere & Ketokivi, 2013). The initial point of interest was the repatriate experience and how it is affected by job embeddedness and companies' repatriation policy. However, during the process of data collection, we encountered other but related dimensions and with that we allowed the empirical data and theoretical framework to evolve in parallel. As described by Dubois and Gadde (2002), we believe that knowledge develops in the interface between search and discovery. The early

theoretical framework has therefore been used to steer the research process but then been successively adapted.

The initial literature review conducted was fundamental to increase our knowledge and develop an interview guide with relevant questions. As the interviews progressed, we realized for instance that lack of formal policies by the companies often could be counterbalanced by support from informal networks. In the end, the research focus has been reoriented to make inferences about how job embeddedness changes during international assignments, how these changes enable a more profound depiction of the repatriate experience and how this experience in turn affects repatriates' organizational commitment. According to Bell et al. (2019), an abductive approach is appropriate to get past the limitations of deductive and inductive approaches and is especially effective for development of new theory.

3.2 Developing the theoretical framework

The research process started with a comprehensive literature review of contemporary repatriation literature, including prior empirical as well as conceptual research. The purpose was to create a fundamental understanding of the research field in order to enable relevant problematization and formulation of an interesting research question (Bell et al., 2019). We created a spreadsheet where we compiled a list of articles that were considered potentially relevant to the study and then went through it systematically. The articles were then reviewed and categorized according to prominent themes, including 'HR practices', 'cultural adjustment', 'knowledge transfer', 'career development', 'repatriate turnover', etc. The process enhanced our general knowledge of previous repatriation research and enabled us to find areas of further interest for our theoretical framework. In addition to the literature review, we also had conversations with two HR representatives from two different multinational companies, who shared their views on which aspects of repatriation that are problematic, interesting and/or in need of additional knowledge. These conversations gave us a wider understanding of the challenges that companies face regarding repatriation.

In line with an abductive approach, the theoretical framework has developed in a dynamic process during the research process, where we have continuously moved between theory and empirical facts (Mantere & Ketokivi, 2013). In order to give credibility to the theoretical framework, only peer-reviewed articles from academic journals have been used (Bell et al.,

2019). The majority of prior studies included in the theoretical framework were published during the 21st century, but a number of key contributions from the 1990s are included as well. The articles were found using a combination of different keywords, e.g. ‘repatriation’, ‘repatriate’, ‘international assignments’, ‘job embeddedness’, ‘organizational embeddedness’. The primary search engines used were Supersearch provided by the Gothenburg University Library and Google Scholar. In addition, the systematic literature reviews of repatriation studies by Chiang et al. (2018) and Knocke and Schuster (2017) were used to get an overview of, and to not risk overlooking, relevant and prominent articles, journals and researchers.

3.3 Empirical data collection

3.3.1 Data sources

Since the level of analysis in this study is the experience and perceptions of repatriates, the empirical material has exclusively been based on primary data from interviews conducted with former expatriates. Interviews have been widely applied in qualitative research and is considered one of the most important methods for collecting qualitative data (Qu & Dumay, 2011). Qualitative interviews were the obvious choice for this study, since it allows us to gather detailed information about past events and the coherent attitudes, feelings and behaviors of the respondents (Bell et al., 2019). An advantage of collecting data through interviews is the potential to uncover the respondents’ personal perceptions of their social world (Qu & Dumay, 2011).

3.3.2 Sampling

3.3.2.1 Sampling approach

Our sample consists of thirty former expatriates at Swedish multinational companies. All respondents had been restationed in Sweden for at least nine months prior to the interview. Accordingly, they had all been through the repatriation process which enabled them to talk about their experiences from repatriation. The respondents were purposively chosen based on their estimated ability to contribute with content that was considered relevant to our study. Purposive sampling is a common sampling approach in qualitative research (Bell et al., 2019), and best describes the sampling approach for this study. By strategically targeting specific cases and/or participants to suit the specific field of research or research question posed, purposive sampling constitutes a non-probability form of sampling (Patel & Davidson, 2019).

Consequently, generalizing the results to a larger population is not allowed for this type of sampling. However, as this is not the intention with our study, purposive sampling was deemed appropriate. The concept of purposive sampling further includes the sampling approach snowball sampling, which partly has been applied in this study. Through snowball sampling, the researcher establishes new contacts through the initial contact with people of relevance to the study (Bell et al., 2019). In order to achieve a sample size of thirty respondents, we allowed one of the respondents to mediate an additional contact who fit the set criteria for potential participants.

3.3.2.2 Sampling criteria

When deciding on a sample for our research, we established certain relevant criteria. To fit the criteria of being a repatriate, all the respondents had to have returned home from their international assignments. We decided that a minimum of six months since their homecoming was necessary, since repatriation can be a protracted process. We considered six months to be sufficient for the respondents to have become resettled in the home environment and have had time to reflect on their experiences from repatriation. Further, the international assignments had to have lasted for at least one year and been initiated by the company. Regarding the companies where the respondents were employed, and from which they were sent on expatriation, they had to be multinational corporations, originating from Sweden with international sub-units in several countries and have relatively long experience of expatriation/repatriation. With these set criteria, we assumed that the companies would have a comprehensive history of international assignments and thus, likely to have established routines and standards around these processes. We further believed that it would enable us to gain a large sample where all respondents would have a similar point of departure.

3.3.2.3 Compilation of sample

The initial intention for this study was to conduct twenty-five interviews. Considering our given time frame, we believed this would be manageable within that time and that the sample size would be abundant enough to access diverse complex dimensions of the same phenomena and generate a trustworthy result. We were delighted to find that there was a great interest to participate in our study, from companies as well as from employees. We ended up conducting a total of thirty interviews. Many studies on repatriation have relied on relatively small sample sizes of 10-30 respondents (e.g. Bossard & Peterson, 2005; Vidal et al., 2007; Starr, 2009; Howe-Walsh & Torca, 2017). According to Chiang et al. (2018), most repatriation studies have

relied on less than 100 respondents. This could be explained by the perceived difficulty in recruiting a sufficient number of respondents, due to the stringent eligibility criteria (Kraimer et al., 2009). Given the number of interviews that previous researchers have relied on, along with the given scope of our research, we argue that thirty interviews are sufficient to gain a trustworthy result. Additionally, when applying a thematic analysis, it is common to use a sample size of 20-30 respondents (King, 2004). As a thematic analysis is used in this study, this further supports our size of sample.

3.3.2.4 Distribution of sample

Out of the thirty respondents, thirteen (43%) were women and seventeen (57%) were men. The length of employment at the companies varied between 8-37 years, and the average number of years was 23 years. The number of assignments per respondent varied between 1-5 and the length of the assignments also varied between 1-5 years. The longest period abroad was 17 years in a row and included five different assignments in four different countries. A more detailed breakdown of the respondent data is presented in the table below:

Table 1: Overview of participants in the study

Respondents	Years at company	No. of assignments	No. of repatriations (cases)	Years abroad	Years abroad in a row	Brought family (at least once)
Respondent 1	24	1	1	1	1	Yes
Respondent 2	9	1	1	1,5	1,5	No
Respondent 3	26	1	1	1,5	1,5	Yes
Respondent 4	8	1	1	2	2	No
Respondent 5	30	1	1	2	2	Yes
Respondent 6	10	1	1	2,5	2,5	Yes
Respondent 7	27	1	1	3	3	No
Respondent 8	17	1	1	4	4	Yes
Respondent 9	18	2	2	5	3	Yes
Respondent 10	23	3	2	6	5	No
Respondent 11	28	2	2	6	3	Yes
Respondent 12	24	2	2	8	6	Yes
Respondent 13	27	2	1	8,5	8,5	No
Respondent 14	21	1	1	1	1	Yes
Respondent 15	10	1	1	2	2	No

Respondent 16	10	1	1	3	3	Yes
Respondent 17	21	1	1	3	3	Yes
Respondent 18	24	1	1	3	3	Yes
Respondent 19	20	1	1	4	4	Yes
Respondent 20	21	1	1	4	4	Yes
Respondent 21	26	2	2	5	3	Yes
Respondent 22	22	2	2	5,5	4	Yes
Respondent 23	23	1	1	7	7	Yes
Respondent 24	37	2	2	7	5	Yes
Respondent 25	20	3	3	10	4	Yes
Respondent 26	37	4	4	11	4	Yes
Respondent 27	20	5	1	13	13	Yes
Respondent 28	34	5	2	13	9,5	Yes
Respondent 29	32	5	3	15	7	Yes
Respondent 30	24	5	1	17	17	Yes

The table presents an overview of the respondents but does not indicate in what order the interviews were conducted.

As seen in Table 1, the term “respondent” refers to the people interviewed and accounts to a total number of 30. Since several of the respondents have been on multiple assignments, the number of respondents does not correspond to the same number of assignments (60) or repatriation processes (45). Some have been on several assignments in a row and repatriation has thus only occurred once, whereas others have been on several assignments but returned to Sweden in between. In the report, the term “case” or ”cases” refer to repatriation processes, which account to a total number of 45. Accordingly, we have 45 cases on which the analysis is based, indicating an abundant sample.

The host countries of expatriate assignments included: Algeria, Australia, Austria, Argentina, Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, China, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Japan, Nigeria, Peru, Portugal, Russia, Singapore, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, Switzerland, Thailand, Turkey, Ukraine, The United Arab Emirates, The United Kingdom, The United States and Vietnam.

The most common countries for expatriation in this sample were: The United States (9), China (5), India (4) and Singapore (4).

3.3.3 Interviews

The method used for data collection in this study was semi-structured interviews, which is commonly used in qualitative research (Qu & Dumay, 2011). The semi-structured approach was deemed preferable since it allows flexibility to explore issues especially important to the respondents and the opportunity to disclose essential, often concealed, aspects of human behavior (ibid.). We wanted to facilitate for the respondents to describe their experiences and feelings in their own words, based on what they personally deemed most important. Consequently, a more structured method would not have been appropriate since this risks imposing an inaccurate frame of reference on the respondents (Bell et al., 2019). We did not want our own preconceptions and expectations to limit the results or lose the possibility to genuinely adopt the perspective of the respondents. Accordingly, by using a semi-structured approach and allowing the respondents to steer the conversation, we opened up the opportunity to be surprised and challenged during the interviews.

In preparation for the interviews, we developed an interview-guide based on the identified themes in our theoretical framework (Qu & Dumay, 2011), e.g. links, fit, sacrifices and organizational support. The interview-guide can be found in appendix I. The aim of the interview guide was to guide the conversations towards relevant aspects for our purpose and ensure that each of the themes would be covered in all the different phases of international assignments, namely pre-departure, expatriation and repatriation. The guide was not always followed exactly as outlined since respondents had their own personal description of events that sometimes interconnected different phases or themes, but it ensured that we during all interviews used the same thematic approach and covered all the essentials. Consequently, by listening to the respondents speak freely, we were able to advance our understanding of how the various theoretical themes sometimes interrelate and discover aspects not covered by theory.

The interviews took place in 2021 between March 8th and April 14th and were scheduled in advance via email. Prior to the interviews, we sent out information to the respondents regarding our data policy, practical details and the general content of the interview. The aim of this was to manage the expectations of the interviews and give the respondents means to prepare if they

wanted to. Due to the prevailing COVID-19 pandemic, face-to-face interviews were not deemed an option. For that reason, the interviews were instead conducted via the online tool Microsoft Teams. However, this proved to be an excellent choice since it still enabled face-to-face interaction but also provided more flexibility and saved time for us as well as the respondents. Many of our respondents were senior executives and had already extensively booked calendars. The flexibility of online meetings meant that some interviews could be rescheduled without trouble and the convenience probably encouraged some respondents to participate that had otherwise declined, as suggested by Bell et al. (2019). All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed to enable a thorough examination of the answers. All interviews were conducted in Swedish, with one exception, and have been translated for the empirical result. Each interview lasted around 1 hour. As different interviewers have the potential to evoke different responses from the same respondent (Qu & Dumay, 2011), we were both present and active during the interviews. Only one of the interviews was conducted by solely one author. This was due to conflicting schedules.

3.4 Data analysis

3.4.1 Discourse analysis

During our data collection and subsequent analysis, we adopted the constructivist position that language is not simply a tool for communication, but an important area of interest in itself (Bell et al., 2019). While analyzing our data set, we have consequently considered not only what has been said during the interviews, but also how it has been said, why and by whom. This has involved paying attention to how arguments and descriptions have been put together by the respondents and how this impacts our understanding of the social reality being narrated. For instance, when describing certain situations or feelings the respondents sometimes started to say things without finishing their sentences completely, which can have meaning in itself. For this part of the analysis, the use of face-to-face interviews and audio recordings have been essential since facial expressions, emphasis on certain sentences or words and how things are said tell things that cannot be fully incorporated by simply reading notes. We have further strived to be sensitive towards what is left unsaid by respondents. This part of the analysis has been done in as humble a way as possible, because we did not want to risk interpreting things incorrectly or marginalizing the non-discursive aspects. It has been argued that discourse has powerful, but ambiguous ways of forming reality (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011). Accordingly,

if there has been any degree of uncertainty, we have preferred to assume what has been said literally and to not put too much emphasis on discourse.

3.4.2 Thematic analysis

In line with an abductive research approach, the analysis of our data set has been carried out iteratively, where we have continuously integrated the theoretical analysis and the collection of data (Bell et al., 2019). This process has meant that the method for data analysis has been considered from an early stage and that as the theoretical framework has evolved, we have refined our method for data collection. In order to disentangle our final data set, consisting of more than 30 hours of interviews, we decided to apply thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a tool used by researchers to identify, systematize, describe and analyze themes observed within a qualitative data set (Nowell et al., 2017). The technique is especially effective for exploring different views of members in a specific context, bringing attention to patterns and deviations and generating unforeseen insights (King, 2004). We chose thematic analysis over grounded theory since grounded theory prescribes more specific procedures for data collection and analysis that must be obeyed. Thematic analysis, on the other hand, entails a higher flexibility and has allowed us to tailor the process to fit with our own requisites.

In order to increase trustworthiness of the study, we took inspiration from the step-by-step approach for conducting a thematic analysis developed by Nowell et al. (2017). For starters, we have documented all our raw data thoroughly by using separate documents for each respondent and a joint spreadsheet for comparison. As mentioned, all interviews have been audio-recorded and transcribed. After each interview, we discussed our thoughts and interpretations with each other and took notes of potential ideas for coding. We have engaged with the final data set by going through it multiple times before creating a summarizing master document of the empirical findings. In the compilation, we focused on highlighting patterns and dissimilarities among the respondents in line with the suggestions by Bell et al. (2019). Where there were notable differences, we examined the explanations and arguments related to these in order to distinguish causal connections. In the spreadsheet, we assembled important aspects, sorted them and attached labels (King, 2004). The preliminary themes were identified, defined and analyzed based on our theoretical framework together with recurring topics during the interviews (Nowell et al., 2017; Bell et al., 2019). Commonly, themes are generated from empirical data if one uses an inductive approach and from theory or previous research if one

uses a deductive approach. As we have applied an abductive approach, we have combined both strategies in the formulation of our themes.

We developed three umbrella categories to sort out the empirical findings: 'Before take-off', 'During the time abroad' and 'Repatriation'. Within each category, we established pertinent themes based on both our theoretical framework and the social reality as told from the participants. The different themes included, but were not limited to, 'perceived sacrifices', 'personal change', 'social network', 'cultural adjustment', 'career development' and 'organizational support'. Within certain themes, such as 'organizational support', we established sub-themes of e.g. 'communication and information', 'mentorship', 'career planning', 'preparatory activities' etc. In order to establish the job embeddedness level of the respondents, statements that describe the different sub-dimensions links, fit or sacrifice have been identified, analyzed and selected. For instance, a statement like "*all those who were my bosses before and those I worked with before were no longer there*" - Respondent 23 was interpreted as a loss of links, while "*I had a lot of colleagues since before, that I knew very well, so I felt very safe in that*" - Respondent 8 was interpreted as that links had remained despite expatriation. This method used for measuring job embeddedness was inspired by the study of job embeddedness and work-behavior conducted by Susomrith and Amankwaa (2019).

The thematic analysis has facilitated for us to grasp the overall story told by the respondents and helped us to see how different themes fit together (Nowell et al., 2017). In the end, the themes were reviewed, ranked and culled so that the final themes included in the empirical results of the report should be directly relevant to the research questions. The empirical findings feature multiple quotations from the interviews in order to highlight certain themes, enhance credibility and facilitate understanding for the reader. The quotations selected represent either common tendencies or significant discrepancies worth highlighting. To illuminate the repatriate experience, the primary focus of the empirical result is placed on the repatriation phase. However, since the experience of repatriation is also influenced by aspects in the preceding phases, pre-expatriation and expatriation, these are covered in the empirical findings as well, albeit to a lesser extent.

3.5 Quality of research

Criticism has been leveled at qualitative research for being too subjective, suggesting that qualitative findings are to some extent colored by the researchers own perceptions and beliefs (Bell et al., 2019). In order to ensure high quality of our study, and to overcome this predicament, we have aimed to provide full transparency and highlight the possible limitations to our study throughout this chapter. Reliability and validity have traditionally been seen as the most prominent criteria when evaluating business research. However, the relevance of the two concepts in relation to qualitative studies has been questioned (Welch & Piekkari, 2017). Bell et al., (2019) propose Lincoln and Guba's (1986) alternative criteria for trustworthiness to be more applicable to qualitative studies. Accordingly, these are the criteria that are applied in our research and they include: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

Credibility is determined by a study's sampling method (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) and parallels internal validity (Bell et al., 2019). As this study specifically aims to understand how the repatriation process is experienced by the repatriates, achieving generalization, through e.g. triangulation, was never our intention. Welch and Piekkari (2017) suggest that triangulation can enable insights from various perspectives and hence generate more accurate results. As individuals are the primary unit of analysis in this study, adding perspectives from other units would only risk making cross-level misattribution (Rousseau, 1985). By continually asking follow-up questions during the interviews, we limited the risk of misinterpreting the respondents. To further avoid deportation of what was said, we chose to largely base the empirical chapter on quotes. Translation of the quotations was done with the greatest precision possible to ensure that no meanings were lost, or perceptions were distorted. The translations were further reviewed by two native English friends of the authors.

Transferability refers to the relevance of the study's findings in a different context (Bell et al., 2019). That is, if it is possible to generalize the study's findings at the inquiry of other researchers. To meet the criteria, we have aimed to provide a generous description of our research. In the introductory chapters, background/problem discussion and purpose of the study, we have been especially prone to clarify the scope of the study and be specific about what we aim to achieve. By doing this, we hope to enable other researchers to judge the transferability and make this assessment early on. Nevertheless, we want to point out that this study aims to particularize the empirical results, rather than generalize them. The theoretical

findings expand previous knowledge of repatriate commitment and provide valuable theoretical insights deemed to be transferable to other samples of repatriates.

To judge the dependability of conducted research, other researchers should be able to examine the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Tobin and Begley (2004) suggest that dependability can be achieved by ensuring that the research process is clearly documented and traceable. Transparency of the empirical material and keeping all documentations throughout the research process are other important aspects for achieving dependability (Bell et al., 2019). To secure dependability of our research, we recorded and transcribed all interviews. We developed an interview guide which was consistently used for all interviews. The planning and execution of the study has been clearly documented, and all transcriptions and documentation have been organized and saved in a joint, but private online folder.

Confirmability refers to the objectivity of the study (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Bell et al., 2019). That is, if the findings derive from the empirical data or if the researchers have allowed their own interpretations to intrude (Tobin & Begley, 2004). As the purpose of this study is to shed light on the experiences and perceptions of the respondents, we have been especially careful not to let our own interpretations interfere. To the greatest extent possible, we have aimed to maintain a neutral approach throughout the research process. We as researchers were not personally acquainted with any of the respondents, except one, where one of the researchers had met this person on one occasion. This issue was discussed between the researchers and was deemed to not constitute a conflict of interest that could impact the results.

3.6 Ethical considerations

In order to maintain the integrity of the research, we have made a number of ethical considerations throughout the research process. Before data collection started, we had several discussions among ourselves and with our supervisor, to outline our ethical principles in advance. The first discussions were held while we formulated our research proposal, before the factual research process had started. Since the study is based on the portrayed experiences of individuals, one fundamental aspect of good research practice in this research project has been to ensure that respondents do not risk being harmed or violated in any way as a result of their participation (Swedish Research Council, 2017). This risk has been assessed and actions have been taken to minimize this risk (Bell et al., 2019). These precautions include informing all

participants of the purpose and method of the study in advance, ensuring anonymity for the participants and establishing and complying with a data policy plan.

In order to enable informed consent, we sent out comprehensive information about the research project, including our data policy plan, the aim of the interviews and examples of the kind of topics and questions that might be covered during the interviews, prior to including any participants in the study. At the start of the interviews, we repeated the ethical considerations and asked to record the sound of the interview, as suggested by Bell et al. (2019). All participants agreed to be recorded. During the interviews, we strived to be attentive to the reactions and needs of the respondents to make sure that they remained comfortable throughout the conversation. If there were topics or questions that could possibly be perceived as sensitive or private, we assured them that they did not have to answer should they not want to. In order to explore the repatriate experience from the eyes of the respondents, we encouraged them to talk about aspects they considered important. We were delighted to find that the respondents were all very generous and transparent in their accounts and provided a lot of very interesting insights. We informed each participant that should they wish to add or revoke any statements after the interview, they were welcome to contact us again. The results are presented in Chapter 4. All quotations are given without mentioning names, gender, company or countries in order to preserve individual anonymity. Certain quotes that have been considered particularly sensitive are given without reference to the specific respondent in order to ensure that it cannot be traced back to them.

In line with the guidelines provided by the Swedish Research Council (2017), we assure that this study does not make unauthorized use of the previous results of other researchers, does not have any commercial interests and does not fabricate or alter information.

4. Empirical findings and analysis

For the presentation and discussion of our empirical findings, we return to our conceptual model (Figure 2, p. 19). Based on the accounts provided by our respondents, we explore how the repatriate experience is influenced by changes in links, fit and sacrifice as well as by organizational support during expatriation and repatriation. Finally, we debate what implications the repatriate experience has on future organizational commitment.

The chapter is divided into three main parts:

- The transformation of job embeddedness during international assignments
- Organizational support to rebuild job embeddedness
- Repatriates' organizational commitment post-repatriation

4.1 The transformation of job embeddedness during international assignments

4.1.1 Perceived sacrifices when leaving for expatriation

Empirical findings

The respondents of this study described the reasons for going on an expatriate assignment in similar ways. It was primarily seen as an opportunity for personal and professional development, and many explained that working abroad had long been a goal. Commonly, international experience was considered a prerequisite to reach senior positions in their career development. For expatriates bringing family members, a common view was to regard the expatriate assignment as a great adventure for the family, rather than as a tool for career advancement. The majority of the respondents did not see any direct impediments to accepting an assignment abroad, but the most common obstacles mentioned were timing and family situation. When leaving for expatriation, the greatest perceived sacrifice was to leave family and friends in Sweden. No one mentioned loss of career opportunities, colleagues or interesting projects back home as an obstacle to leave. Many expressed considerable gratitude towards the company for providing the opportunity to go abroad.

Discussion

The prevalent tendency for our sample was that the respondents had a positive attitude towards the company pre-expatriation. Each participant was considered to have a relatively high job embeddedness before leaving. Theory suggests that a high job embeddedness would result in greater perceived sacrifices if deciding to leave the home organization and community

(Mitchell et al., 2001). However, a clear trend in our empirical findings was that the perceived sacrifices connected to expatriation were deemed negligible or non-existent. Expatriation would not lead to a permanent new settlement, and the impact of potential sacrifices was mitigated through this knowledge. The expatriate assignment was expected to provide future benefits in terms of positive new experiences and/or opportunity for future career development. Accordingly, the aggregated anticipated advantages were considered to outbalance the potential sacrifices, which constitutes a decisive factor for making the decision to leave (Ampofo et al., 2017).

Professional objectives and life situations influenced the decision to leave. As noted, the perceived value of different benefits differs depending on individual goals, preferences and life situation (Zhang et al., 2012). The main feeling of sacrifice was related to leaving friends and family in the home community behind. These relationships constitute strong links that were expected to continue to endure regardless of physical distance. As stated by Mitchell et al. (2001), sacrifice is connected to the fragility of links, and since these links will not be broken easily, the estimated risk of losing them during expatriation was small.

4.1.2 Changes in organizational links

Empirical findings

Although all companies had open recruitments by default, personal networks played an important part in securing the expatriate assignments and many respondents expressed that they had been directly offered the positions. During expatriation, the respondents primarily focused on their assigned role and the network in the host country. As new organizational relationships were established, they felt less need for communication with the home organization. Some expatriates automatically stayed involved with the home organization through their occupied role, while others had very little contact. Several emphasized the importance of staying connected if this did not come naturally through the occupied role. When asked whether they stayed in contact during expatriation, two persons responded:

“Yes and no, you missed the whole chatting in the corridors. It does quite a lot. Consequently, you’re more dependent on the official information chain. If a manager doesn't prioritize going through the official information chain, you miss out on a whole lot. In the organized way of working you were involved, but you missed the other stuff.” - Respondent 2

“You could say it faded a bit over time. When you arrived you were very engaged in keeping in touch with everyone and sending information to the ones back home. But the more time that passes, the more you get disconnected and you also start to disconnect yourself to some extent. So there’s a risk with these satellite offices, that you lose contact and become disconnected. It becomes two different offices instead of a large joint group with a common strategy and plan. There were probably not that many from HQ that contacted me or us that much, instead it was more on our own initiative that we reported things. So the communication was pretty much one-way.” - Respondent 20

The importance of attaining one's network during expatriation was explicitly emphasized. A dominant view was that it is the expatriate's own responsibility to have an active role in this, especially when repatriation starts to approach. The profuse majority of positions landed after expatriation were in one way or another influenced by personal networks. Those who easily succeeded in finding a new job back home expressed that they were lucky to have had managers who valued them and helped them to find new positions:

“So if there’s something you should personally bring with you it is; build networks all the time and make sure to keep the networks alive. Because it’s thanks to my network that I pretty quickly got a new job.” - Respondent 26

“One thing that I learned before I took off as an expat... you had seen expats returning home, but no one knew who they were. It's like entering the company as a newly employed, so one thing that I deliberately did, every time I went on a business trip back home, I made sure to grab a coffee with someone, made sure that people didn't forget about me, and kept my network. That was partly the key to me getting that job when I came home, because everyone knew who I was.” - Respondent 28

Others encountered problems when trying to find a new job back home and believed that this was a consequence of not maintaining the network while abroad.

“So the network is critical. Nothing is served. You need to be careful in maintaining your network while you’re away. I didn’t during my stay in [country]. That time around I missed it completely, I just let it go. My manager back home retired. I didn't even know which part of the organization I belonged to. I thought that this would resolve itself, but I got a brutal awakening.

It won't get solved if you don't push for it hard. It will be an uphill battle if you don't maintain your network.” - Respondent 29

Several mentioned that the organizational network back home changed, mainly due to reorganizations or because people left or got promoted. Some of these changes did not become evident until repatriation and often resulted in feelings of uncertainty.

“I mean, think of it as if you're lining up twenty people, and someone says; ‘pick two of them’. Well, then you'll pick those two that you can trust, you know what they're capable of. Before you left, you were one of those two, but then when you return, the person who decides isn't the same person anymore. And then, those years that you've done abroad don't really matter anymore. So I absolutely believe that these networks diminish over time, of course. More or less anyways. But of course, you could get lucky, depending on how active you are in your networking. At work, things change quite a lot.” - Respondent 16

The majority however did not experience returning home to the organizational network as particularly difficult. One respondent expressed it as follows:

“Returning back to [the company] was not a problem. Indeed, it's international. And when you return you've acquired a certain status, because you have an experience that many strive towards or want to accomplish. While with those who have similar experiences, you have a common point of contact.” - Respondent 25

Discussion

Theory suggests that the social network is a valuable asset for learning (Bonache & Zárraga-Oberty, 2008) and increasing psychological well-being (Wang & Kanungo, 2004; Claus et al., 2015). During international assignments, expatriates become inclined to build new networks and relationships where they are (Hall & Kahn, 2001). This was also the tendency for our sample. As the respondents expanded their organizational network abroad, less focus was given to the one back home. As suggested by Kimber (2019), the expatriates many times encountered difficulties in maintaining links to home, as a natural effect of focusing on their assignment and building a network abroad. While links to the host organization were established, links to the home organization decreased or weakened. Accordingly, the respondents shifted their commitment from home to host country.

As also found by Bossard & Peterson (2005), group dynamics changed over time which resulted in various degrees of uncertainty for the repatriates upon return. Commonly, the former organizational context had been dissolved or the group compositions had changed, in line with previous findings (e.g. Black et al., 1992; Oddou et al., 2013; O'Sullivan, 2013). Missing out on the daily informal interactions with colleagues affected the group dynamics upon return. Oddou et al. (2013) state that it takes time to become an insider in a group again upon repatriation. We found that the repatriates had to work to rebuild trust, especially those who returned to a new organization with a completely new composition of people. However, the recreation of links to colleagues and managers was in general not considered a major problem. In fact, international experience many times facilitated for the repatriates to create new links to colleagues who had international experience themselves. The feeling of recognition and fellowship generated a new dimension and strength to the links.

Shen and Hall (2009) highlight the importance of nurturing the network at home, while simultaneously broadening the network abroad. In our study, the gravity of the network in relation to career opportunities upon repatriation could not have been emphasized enough. However, the significance was not always obvious to the employees until repatriation. Indeed, those who kept this in mind during expatriation and managed to maintain their links to home, also more frequently received satisfactory positions upon return. According to Zhang et al. (2012), employees that are more densely entangled are more likely to engage and care about the organization's performance which may have contributed to their career development as well. On the contrary, when links to home diminished during expatriation, it was more challenging to secure a position upon return, supporting the importance of networks for promotion opportunities (Shen & Hall, 2009). This was further evident as the same repatriates experienced different degrees of challenges related to career development depending on to what degree they maintained their network during different assignments.

The individual effort to attain links to home was not the exclusive factor in explaining satisfactory career development upon repatriation. In accordance with repatriation literature (e.g. Feldman & Tompson, 1993; Macdonald & Arthur, 2005), structural changes in the organizations generated readjustment difficulties. Due to reorganizations and people changing positions, links were sometimes cut short despite individual effort. Consequently, job opportunities through informal relationships became restrained. A loss or weakening of links

to managers was commonly seen as a decisive factor for not receiving a satisfying position upon repatriation, which resulted in feelings of neglect. In those situations where changes in the group composition led to a loss or weakening of links to other colleagues, but not impacted career development, it did not affect the repatriates negatively to the same extent. Adapting to new social codes and norms due to changed compositions of colleagues was in general not considered difficult, as opposed to the suggestion by Black et al. (1992).

As argued by Mitchell et al. (2001), the vastness of the loss or weakening of links and what effect this has on employees vary. This was also true for our repatriates, as the weakening or loss of links reduced their perceived level of job embeddedness but to different degrees. In particular, links that could contribute to career progress had a great effect on the repatriate experience. In line with Shen and Hall (2009), the length of the international assignments clearly affected the durability of links. For those who had been away for relatively few years, the transformation of organizational links was not as extensive which eased readjustment. With strong embeddedness pre-expatriation, the tendency to rebuild links upon repatriation was high. As noted by Holtom and Inderrieden (2006), a high job embeddedness will tend to moderate negative reactions to changes in the environment and stimulate motivation to adapt.

4.1.3 Changes in community links

Empirical findings

The respondents expanded their network during expatriation to attain sources of support and social stimulation. The social circles during expatriation depended on personal preferences. Commonly, respondents were drawn to other expatriates as they were in a similar situation and shared a common understanding.

“In the expat community, we were super active. In this little community we were all the same. They didn't have their friends from home. We were in the same situation. So it was a blast. Every Friday, every Saturday, someone threw a barbecue or a party. So socially very active. It was actually really a lot of fun.” - Respondent 23

Some actively decided to live outside of expat communities or participate in activities to connect with locals more easily. Depending on host culture, language and safety aspects, it was more or less easy to socialize with locals. Those who brought their family were often able to make new acquaintances through their children's school and activities.

“The activities facilitated getting in with the locals. 100%, It’s always easier to find a niche when you’re in a subculture. I knew of other colleagues who thought that part was more difficult. They found it challenging to meet people outside of the office. But in our case, with all these activities, it was a walk in the park.” - Respondent 6

Upon repatriation, one of the most difficult aspects of coming home was that the personal social network often had changed. People previously close no longer were and many friends had moved on in their lives. For those who experienced this as difficult, the common denominator was that none of them had really thought of this as a potential consequence of going on an expatriate assignment. Usually, it did not become evident until repatriation and therefore it came as a shock. Here is a selection of quotes describing this:

“Sure you still have your old friends, but many of the superficial contacts disappear when you’re away. Your old friends are still there. But the more superficial ones, they move on. It can be pretty heartbreaking. You come home and don’t hear from people with whom you socialized before. I think you underestimate that. You don’t consider that... that it takes a long time and that you would experience it so difficult. My usual circle of friends is no longer the same.” - Respondent 15

“It was probably more challenging to come back than to go abroad. It was sad to leave the life you had built there. It was the end of that life. A more definite closure. You were no longer a part of the social circle back home. You were no longer in the minds of friends. You had to remind them that you existed again.” - Respondent 2

The perceived difficulty of returning to the former social life varied. Some of the respondents stated that the social network back home diminished while their international network grew bigger, indicating that they had rather expanded their social network through the means of their expatriation. Others meant that they sifted among their friends in conjunction with expatriation and repatriation. Several had fallen out with friends during their time abroad but pointed to this as a natural step and that it probably would have happened anyways as people grow apart.

“We still had a few of our friends, you could say that, very few. That’s actually a really good question. There were some friends we believed we were much closer with. We were thinking,

now we're going back to Sweden, how fun it will be to hang out! And then we noticed that no, we're not hanging out. We're actually hanging out more with new people.” - Respondent 27

Other respondents did not experience any major differences in the social network back home, stating there were no problems connecting with friends and family again. A common explanation for this view was; *“the friends you have, you still have when you come back”*. Several had friends who had been away on expatriate assignments themselves and their time abroad became a common denominator in their relationship. Another common feeling was that friends back home were rarely interested in hearing about their experiences. However, this was expressed by all with great modesty and there was a general understanding for why. Still, there were quite a few that were surprised over the lack of interest.

“There’s not one person ever who asks you to share your story about your time abroad. That never happens. People are in general not interested. I don't think it’s malice but it’s just that it’s such a different world and different time. I believe there are many people who come home, having experienced a bunch of amazing things, and they perceive it as weird that no one asks them about it, at least the first time. That’s a lesson you learn. If you go abroad for the first time, you should be aware that no one will care about what you’ve done.” - Respondent 26

“Well, you have to be careful. That part is difficult. You’ve been away for 700 days, so you have at least 700 stories to tell about various strange things you’ve been through. It’s easy to end up ceaselessly talking about your exciting life. And people think it’s great fun. But I believe that somewhere... It’s easy to keep on talking. It’s not as appreciated the tenth time you tell one of those stories. - Respondent 15

A common view was that inviting friends and family over while abroad was advantageous for continued relationships. This is exemplified by the following quotation:

“Maybe that was the trickiest part. We had been in constant contact with our friends back home. But one should be aware that people ask: ‘How have you been?’. ‘Good’. Then the questions stop. It’s one thing that’s very important, that you invite your friends over when you’re away. Those friends who came to visit you, they’re the ones who are interested. I mean it’s okay, it’s not a bad thing, it’s just that it was something that you weren’t prepared for, the total lack of interest for other countries.” - Respondent 29

Discussion

It was evident that the newly acquired circles of friends during expatriation were significant for the expatriate's happiness and feeling of belonging. As noted, social links are essential for psychological well-being (Wang and Kanungo, 2004; Claus et al., 2015) and life satisfaction (Ampofo et al., 2017). The strongest links naturally developed where there was a common ground, for example through children's schools or by engaging in various activities, as argued by Mitchell et al. (2001). The greatest tendency among our sample was that links to the host community expanded while links to the home community weakened. Accordingly, the respondents became more embedded in the host community during expatriation while their embeddedness in the home community decreased.

Although the greatest tendency was to focus on the social network in the host country, there was a parallel inclination to nurture relationships back home. As expatriates are at risk of becoming “out of sight, out of mind” (Benson & Pattie, 2008; O’Sullivan, 2013), due to time difference and lack of face-to-face interaction (Shen & Kram, 2011; Boros et al., 2017), the respondents had to take an active role. Inviting friends over and making sure to meet up with friends and family during home visits, was positively related to maintaining links. Those who had been on several assignments learned through experience. If links to home were not nurtured during expatriation, the loss of links many times came as a shock during repatriation. As research has shown, changes do not usually become evident until repatriation (O’Sullivan, 2013; Aldossari & Robertson, 2018). Lost community links had a clear negative impact on the repatriate experience as this resulted in emotional distress.

As noted earlier, strong links endured geographical relocation. However, few had observed a risk of losing the more fragile links which generated an unpleasant surprise upon return. When the former social network diminished or transformed, it led to a feeling of loss which was intensified since the sacrifice had not been expected pre-expatriation. This result is consistent with previous findings, namely that changed group dynamics can generate uncertainty and anxiety during repatriation (Black et al., 1992; Bossard & Peterson, 2005; Oddou et al., 2013).

4.1.4 Changes in organizational fit

Empirical findings

Respondents usually felt that they adapted well to the new cultural environment. Those who brought family expressed that it was easier for the expat to adjust compared to the accompanying family. The feeling of security and familiarity in the organization was the common denominator for explaining this and the company was referred to as a rooting point during expatriation. This was particularly evident for those who had been on several expatriate assignments. Usually, there was a clear organizational culture at the international subunits, where the corporate core values were distinct. When asked about cultural adjustment, one respondent said:

“Easy adjustment for me compared to the rest of the family. Yes, I have a new job, new colleagues, new responsibilities. A lot is new in that way, but I mean in practice I have the same computer as I had in Sweden, network connection works the same, same work tools, same email. You feel very much at home because the [company] framing is the same, you live in this [company] universe at work. In that way it's pretty simple. No cultural clashes in that way and over there you're a cultural carrier. Maybe it's even easier because you're Swedish, since [company's] organizational culture is pretty much Swedish.” - Respondent 16

The majority of respondents had managerial positions during expatriation. Many of them felt they needed to adjust their leadership style to fit the new culture. In most countries, the business climate was perceived as more hierarchical compared to Sweden. The descriptions of cultural adjustment during expatriation could be described as follows:

“Pretty hierarchical, slightly different managers and I experienced it as more political. At customer meetings you could be totally scolded. You were pretty shaky after those meetings. Afterwards we went for lunch together and suddenly they were super nice. I didn't understand anything. [...] When it came to work, it could be war, fight, screaming, and then privately they were super nice. So then you had to learn to keep those apart. [...].. I got to learn some curses in the local language that I could use, so then I gained more respect. You learn your ways to get into the meeting culture.” - Respondent 29

The respondents were prepared for cultural differences. Even so, some experienced challenges adapting, either because they did not recognize the organizational culture or because they experienced that the cultures collided. Consequently, they had to work actively in order to shape the organizational culture. Some experienced that core values had been lost and that they were not shared between the host and home organization:

“It was extremely difficult to arrive there and not recognize the company or the culture. You could say it was almost a double culture shock, with both the country culture and organizational culture.” - Respondent 13

It is palpable that most of the respondents have grown personally from their international assignments. They have gained an increased understanding of different cultures and acquired new perspectives of doing business. Many pointed out an increased stress tolerance, a boost in self-confidence, an increased need to experience new things and meet new people as well as a broader perspective on Swedish organizational culture and the Swedish way of doing business. These personal changes were perceived to become especially evident during repatriation as the newly acquired perspectives made them see things differently. Certain behaviors and attitudes that had once been custom suddenly appeared strange and not in alignment with the repatriates’ new way of thinking. The following quotes describe how expatriation was perceived to affect the respondents’ personal development:

“I never get stressed about anything. And that has to do with the fact that it’s not the end of the world. Things will work out. And I think that has to do with international experience.”
- Respondent 25

“Indeed, the feeling for business and to become enriched with a new understanding of business. It’s not possible to get that feeling from sitting at the head office. You can’t read yourself to that knowledge. [...] I absolutely think that I’ve changed. I can probably better judge what is important and what is not for those out there. And I try to convey that, maybe not always in the most delicate way. We at HQ tend to create our own truths. Sometimes we work for ourselves rather than for the market areas. And perhaps I see more of that now. I understand more. Also, you have to be pretty resolute out there, and maybe I brought that home with me too.”
- Respondent 7

Several respondents expressed that they adapted their management style post-expatriation:

“.. to do those years as early as I did, you grow at express speed. You learn lots and lots about Swedes, about yourself, about your leadership. I’ve lived in countries where leaders are expected to be highly expert, directorial and executive. How should I put it... we Swedes think that we are probably right in the middle of everything, in our self-awareness, but really, we’re the extreme. So what I had to learn abroad was a tougher management style. I’ve become much tougher, which also works well in Sweden.” - Respondent 25

“I guess what I bring with me is that we have many around us who are in a similar position as I was. It’s not very easy to adapt to Swedish culture. [...] Swedes are good at going straight to business. But I actively thought about taking a moment for small talk, talking about family and so on. I try to consider that we all have different needs and backgrounds.” - Respondent 16

Discussion

Previous research has shown that expatriation tends to trigger personal development and exploration (e.g. Black et al., 1992; Shen & Hall, 2009; Shaffer et al., 2012), which is evident for our sample. Expatriation further promotes changes in the perceived identity according to the sociocultural environment (e.g. Kohonen, 2005; Osman-Gani & Hyder, 2008). However, as expatriates, several considered themselves to be culture carriers in the organization and that it was part of their assignment to spread the corporate values. This, together with the fact that many had managerial roles during expatriation were given as arguments for why they consciously decided to not adjust completely but rather maintain certain core principles. Nonetheless, the foreign organizational environment still influenced the expatriates to adopt new behaviors, mindsets and leadership styles. This later affected their repatriate experience, since they, in accordance with Kimber (2019), realized upon return that their newly acquired personal traits not seldom contradicted the norms of the home organization. Consequently, their perceived organizational fit had often changed to a greater or lesser extent during expatriation.

The fact that all respondents originated from MNCs with Swedish headquarters and corporate cultures influenced by Swedish culture, appears to have alleviated the natural culture shock during expatriation. The familiar setting of the organization created a sense of predictability and security, which increased the perceived organizational fit when faced with the otherwise unfamiliar environment. This was particularly evident for those who brought family, as they

could see that adjustment and culture shock were much more demanding for the accompanying family members. The need for adjustment during expatriation subsequently affected the repatriate experience since it generated a smoother transition for those who had experienced a familiar organizational culture while abroad. Accordingly, the reverse culture shock mentioned in prior research (e.g. Nery-Kjerfve & Mclean, 2012; Ho et al., 2016) was mitigated, as they had not had contradicting values inflicted upon them to the same extent and thereby not went through changes in fit as extensively. In contrast, when the culture of subunits differed significantly from that of HQ, adjustment challenges increased.

According to Sussman (2002), cultural identity can be explained as to what extent an individual identifies with the home or the host country. Repatriates who changed their cultural identity to a greater extent experienced a certain degree of incompatibility during repatriation. This was especially evident for those who felt that the organizational culture of the host organization suited their personality and values better than that of the home organization. This displays how some individuals tend to change their cultural identity during expatriation (Sussman, 2002; Hyder & Lövblad, 2007). The repatriates often strived to preserve and apply their newly acquired behaviors and perspectives and spread other ways of thinking to the home organization through their way of working. A discrepancy in fit can lead to decreased life satisfaction according to the findings by Ampofo et al. (2017), but this was not the prevalent case here. The divergence in norms and standards of behavior rather motivated the returning employees to disseminate other mindsets and conduct. Expatriation increased their organizational commitment to the host organizations as their host embeddedness increased and many felt a continued responsibility during repatriation to ensure that the interests of the subunits were not neglected by HQ.

As stated by Oddou et al. (2013), expatriation enables a platform for learning and building experience that stimulate personal growth. Our findings show that the experiences of expatriation stimulated procurement of wider perspectives and tacit knowledge. Especially repatriates who had been on multiple assignments, but returned to Sweden in between, became accustomed and adept at adjusting to new environments, including the home organization. Many repatriates strengthened their loyalty and perceived fit as they felt that they had received a valuable, more complete, picture of the company's international contributions and values. Consequently, job embeddedness strengthened when they were confirmed that corporate values were compatible with their own personal values as suggested by theory (e.g. Mitchell et al.,

2001; Ng & Feldman, 2007). However, repatriates who had been on longer or multiple assignments without interruptions often had greater challenges with readjustment as their former job embeddedness had weakened more. This is in line with the findings by Shen and Hall (2009), who found that the length of expatriation is a decisive factor for repatriates' degree of job embeddedness upon return.

4.1.5 Changes in community fit

Empirical findings

Many respondents felt that the first few months of expatriation were colored by an infatuation phase, filled with excitement, exploration and joy. As they explored the new environment, they found aspects of the host community that they appreciated and that suited their personality. Many expressed that the host community culture entailed a greater spontaneity and openness. Nature, climate and entertainment activities were often considered more appealing than in the home country. A few exceptions described the host culture as enervating and had difficulties feeling at home. It was evident from the interviews that those who were highly appreciative of the host environment found repatriation more challenging. The discrepancy in norms and behaviors between home and host community became particularly evident upon return. Here is a selection of quotes describing this:

“The difficult thing was to come home and face ‘the Swedish’. When we went abroad, we said that now it’s we who are the guests, but upon return we were not. So that was strange. We thought it was quite fun to be different in [country], but when you come home and realize that you’re different here, it’s not as fun. (...) Now I must accept something that’s inferior, even though there’s a better solution there’s nothing I can do about it. Those things are hard to accept in your own home country. When home starts to feel different, it’s a tough feeling.”

- Respondent 17

“You get a different perspective. I think Swedes are pretty boring in general. (...) There’s no flexibility here whatsoever. Everything is planned. Now, we only socialize with other expats, they’re much more spontaneous.” - Respondent 27

The feeling of returning home varied a lot between the respondents. Some did not see it as problematic at all, but rather felt that it was quite easy to slip back into daily routines. Those

who had kept their housing in Sweden during expatriation considered this a great advantage for readjustment, one of whom stated:

“You leave one life behind, enter into another. I still had my apartment in [home city] so I had a fixed point. That was an assurance, to know what you return home to. So there was no stress for me. I came home, unpacked and was able to go to the office again on Monday. The furniture arrived later but I had what I needed.” - Respondent 10

Others felt that coming home was a difficult transition. The following quotes describe the feelings of returning home for three different repatriates.

“Actually, it was about as turbulent as going to [host country]. You’re used to the heat, you’re used to the society [...] It probably takes as long to readjust back home as it does when you’re away.” - Respondent 15

*“Well, you return home and end up in a slightly more mundane everyday life, because after all, it is. The whole scenery for experiences when you’re abroad is so huge and you get so much out of it and it’s good in every way. Those odd things that you’ve had the opportunity to do because you’ve been abroad... you can miss that, since it won’t be happening again.”
- Respondent 22*

“It took a long time, I can say that. On one level it went fast – I had my apartment and was happy to be home again. It was nice to come home, I was out and about a lot. But it took almost a year or maybe longer before I felt that I was Swedish again. Really strange feeling, but I felt like an outsider for a long time. I’ve reflected on that, it took a long time.” - Respondent 13

Discussion

The change in community fit during expatriation happened naturally over time as the expatriates got settled in the new socio-cultural environment and developed new behaviors and perspectives more in line with the host community. Those who mainly associated with other expatriates increased their embeddedness in the expat community and adopted spontaneous, international and flexible mindsets as their social context continuously changed. Those who settled in a more domestic setting and associated with locals to a higher degree adjusted more according to the host country culture which increased their fit with the local community. A

common pattern that supports previous literature on job embeddedness (e.g. Mitchell et al., 2001; Kiazad et al., 2015), was that expatriates who engaged in activities in their leisure time strengthened their host community embeddedness. This subsequently impacted their repatriate experience as it became more difficult and sad to leave. The same applied when individual preferences were particularly compatible with entertainment activities, ways to socialize in the community and the weather climate (ibid.). Accordingly, a greater perceived community fit during expatriation generated feelings of distress during repatriation due to comparison.

Personal development during expatriation often resulted in a greater perceived fit with the community in the host country. Again, pointing to a shift in cultural identity (Sussman, 2002), where the expatriates develop attitudes and traits based on their new life circumstances and start to identify more with the host culture. As also found by Ampofo et al. (2017), a greater perceived fit increased the psychological well-being and contentment during the expatriate assignment. However, the effect during repatriation was often something else. If the culture, values, activities and environment of the host community constituted a better match to the repatriates' individual preferences and traits, repatriation was experienced as more challenging and readjustment was perceived to take a long time. Those who still preferred the features of the home community, and thus had not changed cultural identity, readjusted easily and had a more positive repatriate experience. It was clear that those who kept their housing in Sweden had a fixed point to return to that consolidated their home community attachment.

According to Macdonald and Arthur (2005), repatriates sometimes experience changes as external, without realizing that it is actually themselves who have changed. Our findings display that the repatriates of our study experienced the home community differently upon return, but they viewed this as a result of them developing a broader frame of reference. The reverse culture-shock upon return, frequently mentioned in previous repatriation research (e.g. Sánchez-Vidal et al., 2007; Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012), became more prominent if the repatriates had gone through a more revolutionary personal change during expatriation. As noted by Kimber (2019), certain behaviors and values did no longer fit with the home environment. Sussman (2002) found that employees who regularly take on expatriate assignments tend to adopt a global mindset that facilitates readjustment. Based on our findings, this was true for employees who returned home in between assignments. These respondents generated a global and flexible mindset that moderated the experience of reverse-culture shock. On the contrary, employees who accepted multiple assignments without returning home and

thus postponed their repatriation often experienced more readjustment difficulties, supporting the findings by Greer and Stiles (2016).

4.1.6 Perceived sacrifices in repatriation

Empirical findings

The material benefits received during expatriation, such as high salary, baby-sitters, housekeeping, paid school tuition etc. were highly appreciated. Depending on which country an official was stationed in, certain benefits such as housing in gated communities and a personal driver were fundamental for mobility and/or safety. None expected the same benefits upon repatriation and thus the loss of these benefits was not considered severe. The most difficult aspect of leaving the host country was instead the quality of life and the relationships built. Some also found it regrettable to leave certain work-related relationships or projects that they had started but not yet had time to complete in full. Respondents who felt it was a simple matter to leave often expressed that they “felt done”, or that homesickness or a heavy workload spurred the decision and facilitated the transition. Several stated that leaving the host country was easy because they knew all along that the stay was temporary and that this mental preparation helped. Others found it difficult to leave simply because it was a more definite ending, unlike when they left Sweden, to which they always knew they would return.

Several assignments became abruptly interrupted and terminated in advance due to job opportunities, reorganizations, or for more recent assignments, the covid-19 pandemic. It appears that in those cases where the expatriate was not mentally set to return, it was usually a difficult transition to come home. Often, there was not enough time to apply for a new job or that the timing did not fit new openings. Those who needed to return home during the covid-19 pandemic expressed that it was tough not to get a proper ending and be able to say goodbye to colleagues and friends in person. Still, the transition was facilitated because the state restrictions were less strict in Sweden compared to the host countries. Clearly, it was easier to return home when the repatriates had secured positions or personally wanted to go home, as opposed to when they were forced to return due to external circumstances. One person who got the contract terminated by the home organization said:

“Three months before I was expected to come home, I found out I was going home. They acted in a way that I thought was a bit clumsy. The new organization was introduced, and I realized that there was no job for me there. The contract was terminated and the authorities in [host

country] spit me out. You have a mutual agreement with the company in which you have six months' notice on a contract like this, so actually I had to go three months earlier because I could not sit there and stare at the ceiling. But then I had to sit at home in Sweden and stare at the ceiling. And naturally that is very frustrating.” - Respondent 24

Another person was asked to leave quickly due to a new position in Sweden:

“I had incredible fun and would have loved to stay a bit longer. Fascinating place. It was really hard to leave. Because here, maybe for the first time in my life, I had a plan. I would put things in motion and then reap the benefits. But unfortunately it was chopped off a year and a half from my plan, so that wasn't fun. [...] There had been a discussion about leaving, but I said that no, I had to finish things. But then it had an abrupt end. The boss called and said that; 'now it's time to come home'. And I was like... 'naah, I don't know about that' (laughs), no... so it was just to do as you're told.” - Respondent 28

A third person decided to terminate the contract because members of the family wanted to return home:

“I wanted to complete the work I had promised my boss I would and there were certain things left to do. Also, there wasn't really any position available for me back home [...] So I wasn't very pleased to be back. Really, it took a while before I was completely... I mean mentally, since I didn't want to go home. So that played quite a big part in this scenario. I'll willingly admit that.” - Respondent 18

In a few cases, the respondents were confident that they had secured a position with the home organization, only to have it pulled from under their feet right before the journey home:

“The reorganization was underway, and in it I had a place. That's what was intended, not only by me but also by the boss. And that triggered everything, homecoming and so on. But then when it didn't turn out that way, it felt a bit empty. Because then the moving load and everything was planned and suddenly, I didn't know where I was going. There was no obvious plan for me. Where do I go then? It wasn't a pleasant feeling at all. Partly because I had enjoyed myself so much. I could have imagined staying longer where I was. But then I felt quite alone. And you're far away, so it's more difficult to make new contacts and see where to go. And a

reorganization to boot. It wasn't like I could return to something old either. Because the old was gone. Everything was rearranged.” - Respondent 3

The expectations of career development upon repatriation varied between respondents, ranging from the possibility of not getting a position at all, to that you would get promoted or at least get offered an equivalent position. Although many faced difficulties, the majority of the respondents described the positions they finally received upon repatriation as acceptable or at a higher level compared to what they had before expatriation. Those who felt that they got a lower position or where the process of finding a new role was considered turbulent felt considerable disappointment and frustration. However, many believed that their international experience has had a positive influence on their career development long term, while acknowledging that it may not generate dream positions straight away:

“It is, naturally... but for many it will be an anticlimax, because you probably won't get it immediately when you return home. Rather it can take one, two, maybe three years. I've been offered the opportunities I have due to my international experience. It has benefited me.”

- Respondent 12

Discussion

Upon repatriation, the employees experienced to varying degrees that they would have to give up benefits. The feeling of sacrifice was mitigated for those who either wished to come home or had a specific job opportunity to look forward to. Those who were forced to leave or left under turbulent circumstances experienced a more intense feeling of sacrifice. As also noted by multiple prior researchers (e.g. Black et al., 1992; Hyder & Lövblad, 2007; Kierner & Suutari, 2018; Sanchez-Vidal et al., 2018), the repatriates' expectations had a great impact on the experience of repatriation and a higher degree of uncertainty generated negative feelings of anxiety and stress. The original job embeddedness concept explains voluntary turnover and a lot of perceived sacrifices will detain an employee from leaving (Mitchell et al., 2001). When expatriation was terminated abruptly, the employees were uprooted involuntarily from their entanglement, generating a high degree of sacrifice. As supported by Ampofo et al. (2017), a high degree of sacrifice was shown to reduce life satisfaction during repatriation. Thus, abrupt endings significantly impaired the experience of repatriation.

Sacrifices are current or anticipated benefits that will be forfeited when leaving a community or organization (e.g. Mitchell et al., 2001; Zhang et al., 2012; Ampofo et al., 2017). The perceived magnitude of sacrifices will differ depending on personal goals, preferences and life situation. During expatriation, the respondents had access to considerable material benefits. Surprisingly, few considered it painful to leave these behind. Instead, it was the quality of life during expatriation, with a more social, free and stimulating leisure time that was commonly described as a sacrifice. This freedom was enabled by the practical and material benefits, but when the benefits were forfeited, it was experienced as a psychological cost rather than a material cost. The fact that sacrifices in repatriation are more permanent than sacrifices in expatriation enhanced the feeling. It was especially prominent for those who had largely shifted their commitment to the host organization and community. That repatriation is perceived as more demanding than expatriation is consistent with prior repatriation literature (Chiang et al., 2018; Kimber, 2019).

Consistent with previous empirical evidence (Bossard & Peterson, 2005; Macdonald & Arthur, 2005), most respondents had leadership positions during expatriation but were not promised continued career advancement upon repatriation. Even so, many received positions at either higher or equivalent organizational level upon return. The view that expatriation impedes career development mentioned in previous studies (e.g. Bolino, 2007; Benson & Pattie, 2008; Ren et al., 2013) was not shared by our repatriates, yet they emphasized that the benefits are visible long term rather than short term. Although many returned to satisfactory positions, the feeling of sacrificing interesting projects, know-how, relationships and/or influence was common. Accordingly, a certain feeling of sacrifice was experienced by all repatriates, but those who returned to lower-level positions experienced sacrifice to a higher degree. Especially those who had expected a certain position but been disappointed experienced a particularly vast sacrifice through the loss of an anticipated benefit. It was clear however that, no matter career outcome, it was more difficult to leave the host country during repatriation, than it was to leave the home country for expatriation. Expatriation was further considered to be connected to greater anticipated advantages than repatriation.

Ampofo et al. (2017) suggests that employees' perceived fit with their organization and community is the single most important predictor for life satisfaction. However, we have found that all three sub-dimensions of job embeddedness have the possibility to significantly impact the repatriates' contentment with life circumstances. Above all, the most important predictors

that affected the repatriate experience were whether the respondent perceived that the company valued them upon return, how the social network in the community had changed and if the repatriates had changed their perceived fit. Reiche et al. (2011) found that perceived links and fit are positively related to perceived sacrifices. Based on our findings, we can further see tendencies for links to contribute to a better perceived fit, as the cultural dynamics of relationships have the potential to influence personal attitudes, behaviors and values.

4.2 Organizational support to rebuild job embeddedness

Empirical findings

The majority of the respondents found the support from the home organization to be satisfactory before as well as during expatriation. Among other things, support entailed preparatory language and cultural training, administrative support with documentation and help to find housing and schools. Especially officials who had been stationed in developing countries were very pleased with the support from the home organization.

“It felt well prepared. Many new things to consider but we were aware of the support available. All the insurances were in place, we had a contact person, we knew where we would live and that we would have a personal driver. Everything was simply set.” - Respondent 8

Regarding repatriation, the perception of organizational support varied considerably. It was emphasized that support for repatriation was significantly less than for expatriation. Nevertheless, the respondents were generally satisfied with the practical support, such as relocation of furniture and administration connected to emigration. The responsibility of administrative tasks related to re-immigration to Sweden lay on the individual repatriate. None of the companies offered a formal mentorship function during either expatriation or repatriation. Many times, the expatriates acquired an informal mentor or contact person, such as a manager or predecessor. Few expressed that they had missed a formal mentor since a predecessor was considered to be a great person to turn to for guidance and networking. When asked if the company should offer more support to help repatriates get reintegrated at home, one person answered:

“No, I don't think that's really needed actually. In our case, we still had our house, so it wasn't much of an issue. I don't think it's necessary because you know how everything works at home.

I think people should be more self-sufficient. What I believe is important is that you get a position that feels exciting and that the company values that you've been out. It's important to feel that you're seen once you come home. Appreciated. After all, you've left Sweden for the sake of the company and because you believe it will create value.” - Respondent 9

Others felt they had been deserted by the company upon return and that more support would have been necessary. Especially repatriates who had been abroad for a longer period experienced major shortcomings in company support. For some respondents who had been away for many years, the life and family situation had changed a lot. Accordingly, when they returned to Sweden, they faced situations they never experienced before and it almost felt like moving to another new country. In addition, several repatriates who had been away for a shorter period also experienced insufficient support. When asked if support was provided during repatriation, one respondent who had been abroad comparatively many years stated:

“No, nothing. Nothing. Absolutely nothing. I received help with housing for three months here in Sweden. [...] And we had no furniture, we had nothing. We had no accommodation in Sweden. Many people keep their home in Sweden, but we didn't. So that meant we had nothing to move to.” - Respondent X

To the same question, another person answered:

“The difference was that when you departed there were a lot of checkpoints, that everything was on track and that everything worked smoothly. While home on the other hand, you're expected to take care of those parts yourself. Here, I experienced that I myself had to push a lot to make things happen, partly to understand what it was I needed to get to grips with. Indeed, I've never been in that situation before, so to understand what is important when you return home.” - Respondent 8

By far the most distinctive factor that affected the experience of repatriation and the feeling of perceived organizational support upon return was whether or not you got a position that you felt satisfied with. None of the companies had formal career development plans for repatriates and many received temporary roles upon return. As repatriation approached, the employees started to look for new job opportunities through their networks. For many of them, it was resolved relatively early, and they had time before departure to prepare for the new position.

For others, however, it was more challenging and many experienced it as stressful before they had obtained a job that felt acceptable. A few exceptions were appointed to their next roles. Considerable reorganizations were common and frequent in the large MNCs of this study. This facilitated the job search for some and made it more difficult for others:

"For me, it was a great time to move home after [country]. I applied for a job early, due to a large reorganization I was able to get a good job." - Respondent 12

"There were such major reorganizations, so all those who were my bosses and those I worked with before were no longer there. So there was nothing. And I'm actually a bit disappointed in how the company handled all this. Very little help to come back." - Respondent 23

Further, abrupt endings to assignments usually aggravated the possibilities of finding a new role since the aspect of timing was essential. In several cases there were no suitable positions available, the process of finding a new job was uncertain or tangled, or expected positions were given to someone else. This generated feelings of anxiety, frustration, stress and/or abandonment. Here is a selection of quotes illustrating common sentiments about this issue:

"It became like a void. A person like me, I don't like having nothing to do, rather I like having things to do and I didn't have that then. So that was probably the first time in my life I got really stressed." - Respondent 24

"After [country X] I had my next job served on a silver platter. But when I returned home from [country Y], my former organization didn't even exist anymore. So when I showed up it was like; 'oh, are you here now? We're about to shut everything down'. Nobody had thought of that, so then I actually lost my job. I was laid off but got rehired after a couple of months. So it worked out smoothly in the end, but it was really a huge crash-landing to arrive home and realize that what you're supposed to do no longer existed." - Respondent 26

"Didn't get any help at all when I got home. There was a large reorganization so then I had to apply for jobs on my own. I thought this job might be my next step. Then I arrived in Sweden and they had given the job to someone else, it no longer existed. So I received the offer but when I got home that offer was gone. So then I had nothing." - Respondent 13

Another issue that was pointed out was the feeling of resistance and inflexibility from the HR departments. It was expressed that HR staff often perceived repatriates as spoiled and that there was little understanding of the repatriates' situation. It was stated that as long as they remained within the set framework of what the HR department could help with, things worked out. However, if they deviated from the set routines, there was no understanding at all. This generated feelings of frustration and enhanced the feeling that you were on your own in repatriation.

During the interviews, the respondents were asked if there were any measures that the companies could have taken to facilitate the repatriation process. By far the most common answer was to implement a long-term career development plan for repatriates. It was stated that the most important aspect for a successful repatriation was to get a position that matched the repatriate profile and expectations. Although many agreed that the main responsibility should lie with the repatriate, a wish for more proactive company support in this matter was emphasized. The following quotes illustrate the repatriates' views on possible improvements of the process:

“This whole planning situation... there should be a place for you when you get home. It would actually work. I mean I knew a year in advance that I was going home. It should be possible. I'm not going to just pop up out of nowhere, they knew I was coming home. You should get more help to get a position upon return. I had a record, they knew who I was.” - Respondent 11

“Well, something I think they could have done better, and that applies for almost every time, is to be more proactive, like ‘now you're coming home, let's sit down and discuss different jobs and so on’. Currently, the responsibility lies with the individual to a great extent and perhaps that's not that strange. But if you're far away, it's after all a bit messier compared to if you're home and able to meet up with people. So that's something I think they could improve - how to ensure that the people sent out can land on their feet back home in a slightly more prepared way.” - Respondent 26

“Well... there I guess I can say that you can't just sit back and expect someone else to work with your career planning. You yourself must be in the driver's seat. It has to be my choice and I have to take responsibility. [...] I think it's pretty fair actually. Then, perhaps the support

could be strengthened. How we work with it. If the question comes up, how do we work with that? Instead of doing it ad hoc, like; 'damn, now this person is coming home, what the hell are we going to do with him/her?'. There should be some type of idea when the issue comes up." - Respondent 18

Another point of improvement that was frequently uttered by the respondents, was to better make use of expatriates' acquired knowledge. The perceived lack of interest from the company to attain and learn from their experiences was a common feeling amongst the respondents and many were surprised by this fact. Based on the interviews, the exploitation of repatriate knowledge in the companies seems to be contingent on people rather than formal processes. When asked if the company aspired to utilize the knowledge acquired during expatriation, some of the respondents answered:

"No, I was really surprised. I've given it as feedback to HR; Why is there no one who interviews you when you return? What have you learned? What do you think we can do better? What should be managed better? And I said this, why aren't you using the knowledge that I bring back? I mean of course, otherwise we won't use 'lessons learned'. I heard this was a common feeling amongst people who've been abroad. We don't make use of that experience."

- Respondent 5

"No, I don't think so, I must say. There's no plan. That's something I think can be improved. I've gained great experience, a great network. [...] I've built up great links. The organization looks the same in Sweden, so they could have done the same things in Sweden as we did over there, but there's no plan to use the knowledge and that's something you've learned. I mean, how can we build on that and not only for my personal development. There are no such plans. I think that's unfortunate. They could have used me in a much better way." - Respondent 14

"It's a bit strange that they don't want to extract the expat-knowledge, neither when they leave nor when they return. [...] I mean how many hundreds or thousands of expats has the company had abroad over the years? You have access to an incredible pool of knowledge for how you could make the most possible out of these experiences. If there's something in the process that could be improved and so on." - Respondent 19

“That’s probably a challenge for companies - to pick up the enthusiasm and the knowledge and the broad perspective that you bring back. It’s often the case that you simply get back to the same excel sheet and just keep going.” - Respondent 20

4.2.1 Discussion of organizational support for repatriation

From our empirical findings, it is clear that formal support functions from the companies upon repatriation were deficient, if not non-existing. The support available was usually informal and dependent on individuals. This is in line with what previous research says about repatriates frequently reporting inadequate or non-existent repatriation support from their employers (Bossard & Peterson, 2005; Osman-Gani & Hyder, 2008; Greer & Stiles, 2016). Support prior to expatriation was considered sufficient and well-planned, whereas the support during repatriation was managed more ad hoc and opportunistically, as also seen in previous studies (Baruch et al., 2002; Howe-Walsh & Torka, 2017).

4.2.1.1 Discussion of organizational support to strengthen links

The organizational support to help employees maintain links in the corporate web during international assignments were trivial. Due to the lack of formal repatriation support, the support during repatriation became highly dependent on individual managers and the repatriates’ surrounding network. Repatriates who had people in the home organization who had cared about and ensured that the employee maintained a household name in the home organization during expatriation had an easier re-adjustment during repatriation. Those who felt that they still had a vast network of links experienced less worry during repatriation even if the process was uncertain. The positive effects of maintaining visibility during international assignments are in line with the findings by Osman-Gani and Hyder (2008). A prominent tendency was that repatriates who, through their occupation, automatically stayed involved in the operations and decision-making forums of the home organization entertained and fostered organizational links to a higher degree. As noted in previous research (Bambacas & Kulik, 2013; Kiazad et al., 2015), links can be strengthened if the company provides forums and opportunities for interaction. In these cases, the employees had opportunities for interaction through their occupations, but no formal measures were taken by the companies with the purpose to provide this.

The repatriate experience can be positively affected by the use of mentors in expatriation and repatriation (e.g. Crocitto et al., 2005; Wu et al., 2014). A common tendency among the

repatriates was to create informal mentors as formal mentors were not provided. These relationships were to some degree able to compensate for the lack of formal support. Like a traditional mentorship function (Crocitto et al., 2005; Holtom & Inderrieden, 2006), these links provided support and stability for the repatriates and promoted intra-firm knowledge transfer. They further contributed to making the repatriate feel valued and seen upon return and facilitated for the repatriates to extend their organizational network. Due to the lack of formal practice, this support was fragmented and dependent on individual inventiveness rather than company support. Few expressed that they had wanted a formal mentor, but the positive effects on career development and psychological well-being for those who had acquired an informal mentor was evident. Accordingly, a formal mentorship function could have provided considerable advantages for re-building links and facilitating repatriation.

Further evident was that communication and information during as well as after expatriation were deficient. Large reorganizations led to repatriates losing links and few formal measures were taken by the companies to counteract this. The repatriates were often referred to the official information flows during expatriation as well as repatriation. Previous literature has argued for the utilization of diverse forms of communication and checkpoints to promote repatriate re-adjustment (Hyder & Lövblad, 2007; O'Sullivan, 2013) By sticking to one form of communication, the companies miss out on the opportunity to entangle the employees more deeply and thereby promote organizational commitment and involvement upon return (Zhang et al., 2012). The lack of flexibility and understanding for the repatriates' situation increased the feeling of exclusion and alienation. Those who had beneficial former relationships received help from their network when challenges with repatriation arose, while those who did not were left on their own. Accordingly, repatriation was often managed haphazardly and with little formal planning, as also noted by Howe-Walsh and Torka (2017).

4.2.1.2 Discussion of organizational support to strengthen fit

By tailoring future positions to the employee's personal objectives and skills, the company can shape the employee's attitudes and behavior into a better perceived fit (Bambacas & Kulik, 2013; Kiazad et al., 2015). For those who received career support upon repatriation, it was significant for their feeling of satisfaction and attitude towards the company. However, career planning for repatriates was highly unusual. For repatriates who ended up in an unsatisfying role, inadequate to their newly acquired skills or below their qualification level, it often resulted in a reduced feeling of meaning at work, as suggested by Ampofo et al. (2017). For others it

further led to turnover intentions, in alignment with previous research (Osman-Gani & Hyder, 2008 Kraimer et al., 2012). Accordingly, organizational support in terms of career planning had a significant impact on the re-creation of fit.

Uncertain and turbulent career processes upon repatriation impaired motivation and often reduced the repatriates' intentions to stay within the company. Research suggests that companies should start to engage expatriates in career planning sessions prior to repatriation to prompt a sense of security and help the expatriate to manage the expectations of future position, job tasks and responsibilities upon repatriation (Lazarova & Caliguri, 2001; Oddou et al., 2013). This directly contradicts the main tendency from our findings, namely that the responsibility of career planning lay entirely with the repatriates. Some had been encouraged to look for jobs early. This enabled these expatriates to negotiate post-expatriation job assignments and strengthened the individual's sense of career self-efficacy and promoted a better perceived fit upon return, as suggested by Bambacas and Kulik (2013). As noted in previous research, support with career development, although rare, enabled future positions that better fitted the newly acquired capabilities (Bossard & Peterson, 2005; Yeaton & Hall, 2008) and signaled to the repatriates that their contributions during expatriation were valued (Kraimer et al., 2009; Bailey & Dragoni, 2013).

An important element for keeping visibility within the home organization and reducing the risk of reverse culture shock upon return, is to be engaged in continuous communication with management during expatriation (Aldossari & Robertson, 2018). Since communication and information lacked, it often resulted in feelings of isolation and not belonging which consequently generated a reduced perceived fit upon return. However, despite shortcomings in continuous communication and information, it was not always critical for ensuring a good fit upon return. As Swedish organizational culture prevailed in the international subunits, it enabled the respondents to move between different subunits and still feel at home. Consequently, the familiarity in the organizational cultures reduced difficulties in readjusting fit upon return. Accordingly, the most essential factor for promoting a high level of perceived fit was that the repatriates felt that they were well-treated upon return as argued by Hyder and Lövblad (2007) and received opportunities for professional development as partly suggested by Ampofo et al. (2017).

4.2.1.3 Discussion of organizational support to mitigate sacrifice from expatriation

The feeling of sacrifice was more prominent during repatriation than it was during expatriation. The loss of benefits has been shown to have a strong impact on well-being (Brotheridge & Lee, 2002; Gorgievski & Hobfoll, 2008). Consequently, in order to promote a positive repatriate experience and strengthen repatriate job embeddedness, the benefits sacrificed need to be replaced (Ampofo et al., 2017). Since repatriates are valued recruitments for competing firms (Suutari & Brewster, 2003), it is beneficial for repatriate retention if the company is able to compensate the benefits lost with new firm-specific benefits (Bambacas & Kulik, 2013; Kiazad et al., 2015). A clear pattern was that repatriates who were offered new benefits, in terms of leader positions, possibilities to use acquired knowledge or compelling projects, deemed repatriation less challenging and were more satisfied with the perceived organizational support. When benefits were not compensated, it generated feelings of neglect and discontent. For instance, lack of career planning caused frustration and disappointment with the employer, in alignment with Suutari and Brewster (2003).

Research highlights that expectations of the repatriation process are essential for the repatriate experience (e.g. Bailey & Dragoni, 2013) and that the repatriation process should be planned and communicated prior to homecoming in order to ensure a smooth transition, (Baruch et al., 2002; Howe-Walsh & Torka, 2017). By communicating what the employee can expect in repatriation, the companies have been able to decrease uncertainty to some extent. For instance, most repatriates were aware that they could not expect a promotion upon return. This way, the companies have reduced the risk of repatriates experiencing a sacrifice of an anticipated advantage to a certain degree. Consequently, the repatriation process exceeded expectations for those who received a promotion upon return, whereas those who did not get a promotion were often prepared for it in advance. However, in many cases, repatriation was abrupt and not properly communicated which generated especially tough perceived sacrifices. This points to deficiencies and improvement opportunities for the companies' communication.

A point of improvement for organizational support that was commonly expressed during the interviews, was to implement a formal process for extracting the knowledge of repatriates. If companies would encourage repatriates to use and share their acquired knowledge, networks and capabilities, they would decrease the risk of these being perceived as forfeited benefits during repatriation (Kraimer et al., 2009; Ampofo et al., 2017). Further, it would signal to repatriates that international experience is valued by the organization which is beneficial for

repatriate retention (Lazarova & Caliguri, 2001; Oddou et al., 2013). Accordingly, the companies should prioritize more follow-ups focusing on professional development during repatriation to foster the construction of job resources, as supported by Tian et al. (2016) and Ampofo et al. (2017). By encouraging repatriates to foster firm-specific competencies it generates a perceived sunk cost upon resignation that will counteract potential turnover intentions (Bambacas & Kulik, 2013). As noted by Sánchez-Vidal et al. (2007) and Greer and Stiles (2016), certain organizational support practices are appreciated whereas other measures may not be necessary. From our empirical findings, we see that mentorship and help with administrative matters were not considered critical, while measures that signal that the company values and appreciates the employee's skills and competencies, such as career support and knowledge utilization were deemed utterly important for repatriate satisfaction.

4.3 Repatriates' organizational commitment post-repatriation

Empirical findings

The dominant trend for our repatriates was that they strengthened their relationship with the company after their time abroad. However, there were also those who felt that the relationship had deteriorated or remained the same. When asked if and how the relationship with the company had changed after their international assignment/s, some of the answers were as follows:

“100%. You want to work for a company that shares your values. And I experienced that in [country]. And this made me feel an incredible loyalty and pride for [company], for what we do. We create huge value for people around the world. I mean, it's pretty awesome. And I don't think that I would have felt that if it wasn't for the stay in [country]. So absolutely, I feel a sense of pride for [company] that I didn't feel before. And it was probably very much thanks to both my experiences abroad but also the organizational culture I experienced in [country].”

- Respondent 6

“Positive, very positive. Because this is what I've always wanted to do. I was supposed to stay at this company for five years. That was my plan, but now it has been so many years and it's thanks to the fact that I've gotten these opportunities. I've had fun both at home and abroad. It has probably occurred... that I've considered applying for something outside the company, but I've always landed here.” - Respondent 26

“I would say that. It’s different phases of course, but you get a stronger and stronger connection to the company by doing this. Again, I return to the importance of networks. I mean, you build up this great network. Now I have Facebook friends in all parts of the world via work. It’s great fun personally, and professionally it’s an enormous advantage (...) You build strong ties and for some reason, because of this, things get easier. Stronger ties with the company make it harder to leave. If you leave, you cut the ties. It becomes sort of like a divorce.” - Respondent 29

Even though a great majority of the respondents have encountered difficulties and uncertainties during repatriation in one way or another, almost all the respondents in this study still remain with the company that sent them on expatriate assignments. Several expressed that the company’s core values correspond to their personal values, and many emphasized a great sense of gratitude towards the company for providing the opportunity.

“I’ll put it like this, if I hadn’t been this super loyal person and loved my colleagues and the company this much, I would have given up and left a long time ago. This time I barely even made it home before I received a really great offer from outside the organization, and so I said no. And I ask myself, ‘Why do I say no?’ And sometimes I see that I’m stupidly loyal. But I love this company, and it’s a love of a lifetime.” - Respondent 11

When asked if the relationship to the company was the same after repatriation, one person who felt that the relationship had weakened said:

“Not quite, not now anyways. Before I left and while I was away, I had a very strong feeling of loyalty towards the company. But now I feel as if... no... repatriation became a bit of a disappointment, I think so. I’m still very glad and I have a lot to thank the company for, but to be really honest and answer your question, then I probably feel a reduced level of loyalty to the company.” - Respondent 20

Another person viewed the company differently after repatriation. When asked whether the relationship with the company had strengthened after repatriation, this person responded:

“When I started at [company] we were like a great big family, you could feel the family atmosphere, very nice to work there. However, it has become pretty harsh and rough the last

couple of years [...] I probably would have said yes to that question, the relationship would have grown stronger, if [company] had taken care of the return better. I know a lot of people who've been treated very badly. That's the way it is. Because if you come back, and no one knows what you've done over there, it's very difficult. It's hard to define. But if you go externally, you get a job immediately, it's really easy.” - Respondent X

A third person expressed that international experience makes you much more prone to change and consequently it gets easier to take the step to change employer:

“Changing things in life becomes less dramatic, because you've already gone through a pretty great change yourself. There are rather many expats who quit their job after repatriation, and I understand them. Companies need to take better care of people so that they don't feel that they're put on hold. That there isn't a job available or that you feel inadequate because you haven't received support. I don't think that companies should be the ones to solve everything, because that doesn't work since things happen so quickly. But the threshold to change company after an experience like this is lower afterwards. And I was actually about to leave once, during the second year after my return. I think that's a challenge for companies - how can they make sure that all these needs are met, so that they will be able to hold on to these people.” - Respondent 18

The majority of our sample consists of repatriates that have decided to stay with their employers post-repatriation. Only two respondents decided to resign. The common denominators influencing their decisions were that they both perceived the repatriation support to be unsatisfactory, they did not receive roles upon return that fitted their profile, and they did not feel appreciated or valued by the company.

Discussion

The concept of job embeddedness entails various dimensions that influence employees' organizational commitment (Mitchell et al., 2001; Shen & Hall, 2009). A higher level of job embeddedness, i.e. stronger links, fit and sacrifice, leads to more intense organizational commitment. From this perspective, the loss of links and fit together with the perceived sacrifices seen in our findings would reduce the repatriates' organizational commitment upon repatriation. Indeed, Mitchell et al. (2001) argue that a physical move will decrease employees' level of job embeddedness. Further, Shen and Hall (2009) found that the more expatriates

experience changes in identity, social networks, competencies and skills, the lower the job embeddedness at home will become. However, the greatest tendency in our study was that the repatriates had, despite changes, strengthened their commitment upon return, which contradicts these theoretical suggestions.

The repatriate experience proved to be a decisive factor for organizational commitment post-repatriation. Those who experienced stronger commitment were mainly more satisfied with their career development and organizational support during repatriation. Further, their organizational fit had often increased due to an improved fit between personal and corporate values. Embeddedness pre-repatriation also had a significant impact as those with a higher embeddedness were more prone to rebuild their embeddedness by adjusting to challenges and changes in the organization, as noted by Zhang et al. (2012). A high job embeddedness will moderate negative reactions to changes in the environment and employees with a high embeddedness will put more effort into readapting since they want to protect the perceived valuable benefits connected to the job (Holtom & Inderrieden, 2006). Some experienced repatriation as very challenging and that the organizational support was deficient but still remained highly committed post-repatriation since they shared the organizational values and thus had a strong organizational fit.

A smaller but significant proportion felt that their organizational commitment had decreased post-repatriation. A clear tendency was that these repatriates experienced difficulties in repatriation and were dissatisfied with the organizational support. Earlier theory has shown that organizational support in repatriation is essential to enhance the feeling of obligation towards a company (Yeaton & Hall, 2008; Pattie et al., 2010). Organizational support further indicates that the company supports and values you (Lazarova and Caligiuri, 2001). As seen in our findings, organizational support was regularly deficient. Indeed, the most essential factor for decreased organizational commitment was that repatriates did not feel appreciated by the company. Several repatriates were shown interest by other companies upon return and could easily have switched employers during repatriation. However, due to prior benefits, such as a long history with the company, a comprehensive network, favorable administrative heritage or because they received new benefits in terms of interesting intra-firm career opportunities, they decided to stay. Accordingly, although many have decreased their organizational commitment post repatriation the majority still remain with the companies, indicating that they still have a relatively high level of job embeddedness.

Ng and Feldman (2007) argue for a separation between organizational embeddedness and occupational embeddedness. A clear discovery in our findings was that displeasure with the received position upon repatriation had a considerable impact on the repatriate experience. Employees become embedded in their occupations when there is a good match between the job requirements and individual skills and capabilities (Lee et al., 2004; Bambacas & Kulik, 2013). Those who ended up in a role they did not perceive to fit with their capabilities and career ambitions experienced feelings of frustration, disappointment and emptiness. However, in line with the findings by Ng and Feldman (2007) and Kiazad et al. (2015), most were still committed to the organization and thus stayed to explore intra-firm career opportunities. Consequently, the negative career development impacted primarily their occupational embeddedness, but not necessarily their organizational embeddedness. If the organizational support in finding a suitable role was perceived deficient, the organizational embeddedness also weakened.

Job embeddedness theory stipulates that organizational commitment is dependent on employees' level of organizational embeddedness and community embeddedness (Mitchell et al., 2001). It is suggested that lagging components within any of these dimensions will reduce employees' organizational commitment. Our findings show that international assignments will tend to decrease repatriates' level of community embeddedness upon return. Links risk to weaken or disappear due to the difficulty of maintaining them over time while abroad. The perceived level of fit risks to be lower upon return due to personal change. Our findings clearly show that a reduced level of community embeddedness generates a more difficult repatriate experience. Repatriates with decreased community embeddedness experienced reduced life satisfaction, in line with Ampofo et al. (2017). However, a lower community embeddedness did not necessarily result in decreased organizational commitment. This contradicts the original theory by Mitchell et al. (2001) but supports the criticism directed by Crossley et al. (2007) who argued that organizational explanatory factors were better attuned to explain organizational commitment. Accordingly, based on our findings, community factors were highly important for the repatriate experience but did not affect repatriates' organizational commitment. Neither did it generate turnover intentions, as opposed to what has been suggested by Kiazad et al. (2015). What we did find, however, was that lower community embeddedness could affect repatriates' work motivation short-term, which partly supports the findings by Ng and Feldman (2014).

5. Conclusion

5.1 Findings

Repatriates are a valuable resource for international companies to attain competitive advantage. Because of poorly managed repatriation processes, turnover intentions among repatriates continue to be high. With the intention to provide valuable insights that can enable international companies to better promote repatriate readjustment, motivation and commitment, we adopted an individual perspective and explored the repatriate experience and its effect on organizational commitment. The study applies job embeddedness and repatriation theory to personal accounts of repatriates from Swedish MNCs. By the means of our conceptual model, revisited below, we enable a deeper understanding of the different factors that bind repatriates to their employers and how these affect the repatriate experience.

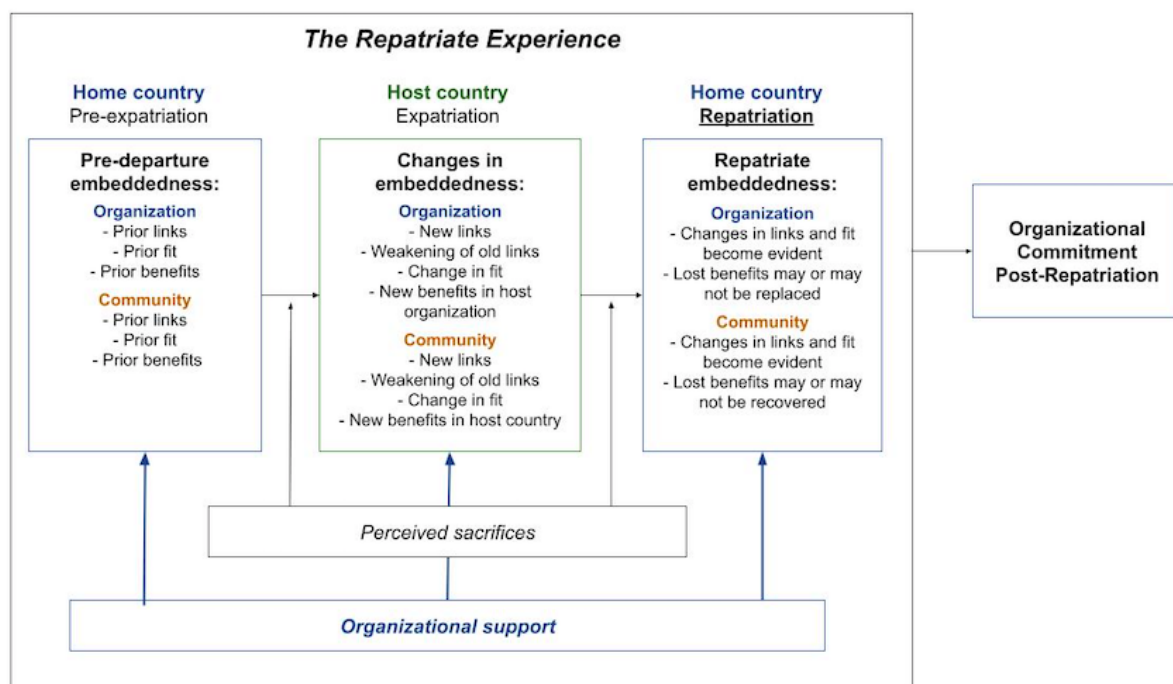


Figure 2: Conceptual model. Compiled by the authors

The model illustrates the interrelated sub-dimensions of job embeddedness that influence the repatriate experience, and at length future organizational commitment. By conducting a qualitative study based on thirty interviews, we accessed the repatriates' own perceptions and feelings about the repatriation process, which enabled us to answer our research questions.

Our first research question concerned how changes in links, fit and sacrifice during international assignments affect the repatriate experience. Our findings show that the repatriate experience was influenced by changes in the sub-dimensions of job embeddedness and the organizational support offered by the companies. Due to geographical distance, a shift in commitment and structural changes in the home organization, expatriation enfeebled links in the home country. Loss of organizational links led to feelings of uncertainty and difficulties in securing a position upon repatriation. Organizational support to facilitate the endurance of work-related networks was scarce, fragmented and dependent on individual managers. This increased the importance for repatriates to actively nurture their own network. Loss of community links became especially evident during repatriation and led to reduced life satisfaction upon return. It was further evident that expatriation enabled employees to construct new links and thereby expand their international network which had positive effects on the repatriate experience.

During expatriation, the employees adjusted to the foreign cultural environment in different degrees which resulted in personal change and for some a new cultural identity. Changed cultural identity led to decreased perceived organizational fit upon return and generated feelings of incompatibility. This in turn resulted in either turnover intentions or motivation to influence the organizational culture by spreading new perspectives. A coherent corporate culture cross-borders counteracted a change of cultural identity which decreased the risk of culture shock and promoted a better organizational fit upon repatriation. Expatriation could also strengthen the perceived fit as many employees acquired wider perspectives of the companies' international contributions which prompted a sense of shared values. Although organizational support with career development was unusual for our sample, its potential to enable a better perceived fit between individual competencies and job requirements was clear. Repatriates who ended up in a role that did not match their skills and preferences experienced repatriation especially difficult. Reduced community fit led to feelings of alienation and a prolonged readjustment phase.

Perceived sacrifices occur at least twice during international assignments. When leaving for expatriation, benefits related to the home environment are surrendered. However, since these sacrifices are not permanent, the effect was lenient. The perceived benefits with expatriation were deemed to outweigh potential sacrifices. On the contrary, lost benefits from expatriation

and lost anticipated advantages in repatriation led to more intense feelings of sacrifice. This supports previous repatriation research suggesting that repatriation often is considered more challenging than expatriation. Our findings show that if the forfeited benefits were replaced with new benefits during repatriation, the perceived psychological cost was mitigated. New benefits could include satisfactory career opportunities or interesting projects. However, the most critical aspect of organizational support was related to whether or not the employees felt well-treated, appreciated and valued upon return. For repatriates who felt mistreated or neglected, the vastness of the sacrifices was more extensive.

We further sought the answer to how the repatriate experience influences repatriates' organizational commitment post-repatriation. As our conceptual model indicates, employees have a certain degree of organizational commitment, i.e. job embeddedness, before they leave for expatriation. The job embeddedness then transforms over the expatriation-repatriation cycle due to individual change and changes in the social and organizational context. Our findings show that depending on how embedded the employees still were upon repatriation, they were more or less prone to successfully readjust to the organizational environment in Sweden. Employees with a higher level of commitment were less likely to consider leaving the company even if repatriation turned out to be challenging. Job embeddedness theory asserts that the loss of links, reduced fit and forfeited benefits will generate lower organizational commitment. Our study however shows that the repatriates most commonly strengthened their commitment despite weakened sub-dimensions.

The repatriate experience had a decisive impact on organizational commitment post-repatriation. Although expatriation led to weakening of links and fit and generated perceived sacrifices, it also added to new benefits such as opportunities for personal and professional development, creation of new links, more aligned values and firm-specific knowledge. Depending on individual preferences, changes in the different sub-dimensions had various gravity for organizational commitment. If the aggregated sum of the changes in organizational links, organizational fit and sacrifice together with perceived organizational support led to a positive repatriate experience, we see that organizational commitment increased. Highly committed repatriates experienced that they were pleased with the organizational support during repatriation and/or were satisfied with their subsequent career development. Repatriates with weakened commitment experienced repatriation as difficult, were dissatisfied with organizational support and did not feel appreciated by the company upon return. A common

feeling amongst these respondents was that if the company had managed repatriation better, their commitment would have increased. This clearly illustrates the importance of perceived organizational support in repatriation for future organizational commitment.

A clear pattern was that all employees with a weakened organizational commitment had a negative repatriate experience. However, a negative repatriate experience did not necessarily lead to reduced organizational commitment. There were those who found repatriation challenging but remained strongly committed. In these cases, the repatriates were either highly embedded in the organization before repatriation, or the lagging components causing the negative experience were related to community aspects. Changes in community embeddedness had a considerable effect on the repatriate experience but did not affect organizational commitment. However, if a negative repatriate experience was related to lack of organizational support or a reduced perceived organizational fit, it had a negative effect on organizational commitment. Accordingly, in terms of repatriate commitment there is a need for conceptual separation between community and organizational embeddedness.

These findings contribute to the field of International Business by providing a deeper understanding of how international assignments influence employees' organizational commitment. With these insights, companies will be able to learn from the experiences of our repatriates and adapt their organizational support practices to promote repatriate embeddedness. In today's global business environment, retaining highly skilled employees with knowledge of international operations is essential for the multinational corporation as these are invaluable sources for intra-firm knowledge transfer, coordination, innovation and competitiveness (Buckley, 2009; Kostova et al., 2016). Consequently, companies' ability to nurture their human capital is essential, not least to compete in the race for global talent. As noted by Teece (2014), the coordination and orchestration of companies' resources are at least as significant as the identification of assets. If properly managed and exploited, the human capital of repatriates has the potential to create, capture and disseminate knowledge in the transnational network that is the multinational corporation, build signature processes and constitute a foundation for the development of dynamic capabilities.

5.2 Theoretical implications

Previous repatriation research has often focused on why repatriates tend to leave their employers after international assignments. In this study, we apply job embeddedness theory to instead investigate why repatriates decide to stay. To our knowledge, this is merely the second study that combines conceptual theory on job embeddedness with repatriation literature. Our study thus advances contemporary theoretical knowledge by revealing how the repatriate experience is influenced by changes in organizational embeddedness and community embeddedness. We further criticize and expand the original job embeddedness concept by demonstrating that changes in community embeddedness have a limited impact on organizational commitment for repatriates. The repatriate experience will affect organizational commitment post-repatriation, but primarily due to changes in organizational embeddedness and deficient or satisfactory organizational support in repatriation. Furthermore, the original theory stipulates that sacrifice will be especially evident in conjunction with relocation. This indicates that an embedded employee pre-expatriation would experience sacrifices when leaving for expatriation. Based on our findings, we see that in terms of international assignments, perceived sacrifices when leaving the home country are mitigated due to the temporary essence of expatriation.

Our study further contributes to theory by illuminating the interconnected relationship between the individual experience of repatriation and job embeddedness. Through our conceptual model, we offer a framework for future research to test, adjust and expand. In their study of the relationship between life satisfaction and job embeddedness, Ampofo et al. (2017) found that perceived fit is the single most important predictor of life satisfaction. We extend this notion by arguing that all sub-dimensions of job embeddedness have the potential to impact employees' life satisfaction during repatriation. In particular, changes in community links and fit have a clear influence on contentment with life circumstances and psychological well-being during repatriation. We further see that the sub-dimensions of job embeddedness are interrelated and tend to influence one another, e.g. a comprehensive web of organizational links contribute to a better perceived fit and potential sacrifices.

Finally, the study provides significant empirical contributions to the comparatively neglected research field of repatriation. Primarily, prior repatriation studies have been based on American companies and repatriates, whereas we shed light on a relatively unexplored area by focusing

on the experiences of Swedish repatriates. We further provide a voice for female repatriates by having a relatively even distribution of male and female repatriates, which has rarely been the case in previous repatriation studies.

5.3 Practical implications

Our findings showed that organizational support in repatriation proved to be highly deficient, despite the emphasized significance of support in previous repatriation literature (e.g. Baruch et al., 2002; Birur & Muthiah, 2013). A common pattern was that those who felt a lower organizational commitment post-repatriation were dissatisfied with the organizational support. By not implementing support measures tailored to the different sub-dimensions of job embeddedness, links, fit and sacrifice, the companies of this study frequently missed out on the opportunity to promote a more positive repatriate experience and strengthen repatriates' organizational commitment. In order for companies to make the most out of repatriation and avoid unnecessary costs related to turnover, we provide suggestions for how companies can improve their management of repatriates.

The most significant factor for a positive repatriate experience was to feel acknowledged and appreciated by the company upon return. As repatriates perceive shortcomings in the organizational support differently, companies should increase flexibility and customize their support according to individual needs. Repatriates who were abroad for longer periods of time, whose life and family situation had changed a lot, usually felt an increased need for support related to administrative tasks, housing and children's schooling. Those who experienced great challenges with cultural differences during expatriation, should instead be offered emotional support through check-ups to promote psychological well-being during the readjustment phase. Hyder and Lövblad (2007) and Bailey and Dragoni (2013) suggest a series of organizational measures to maintain close contact with employees during expatriation and repatriation. In accordance with their propositions, we suggest continued communication over the expatriation/repatriation cycle to promote organizational links. This further helps employees maintain visibility, keeps them updated on events back home and helps them manage expectations of repatriation (ibid.). During repatriation, this could include reconciliation meetings to evaluate and manage potential readjustment challenges and sessions to extract repatriate knowledge that can help improve the repatriation process.

Career planning was essential for the repatriates to feel appreciated, motivated and valued upon return. It was also in this matter the respondents felt that the organizational support had its

greatest shortcomings. High turnover rates as a result of deficient career support have also frequently been reported in previous repatriation research (e.g. Macdonald & Arthur, 2005; Bolino, 2007). Therefore, we argue that it is in companies' interest to engage more in career planning for repatriates. This has the potential to increase repatriates' organizational commitment as professional objectives and mission can be tailored to both individual preferences and corporate goals, thus generating a better perceived fit. Further, a satisfactory position in repatriation will generate new benefits for the repatriate that would be sacrificed upon resignation. To facilitate career planning, companies could appoint a specific contact person or function that keeps the employee informed about changes in the organization during their time abroad and help them explore intra-firm career opportunities for repatriation. Additionally, companies should encourage their employees to nurture their network and relationships back home during expatriation and establish informal mentors in the home organization that can help them to find interesting positions upon return.

We further direct recommendations to future expatriates. Our intention is to give advice for professional development, help them manage expectations and create awareness of challenges that can arise in conjunction with repatriation. One should be prepared that changes in the organization and community upon repatriation can generate feelings of alienation and distress. As networks have shown to be essential for securing a satisfying position upon return, relationships with colleagues and managers back home should actively be nurtured. Expatriates should further keep themselves informed about what happens in the home organization, especially close to repatriation as this will help them manage their expectations. If considering accepting multiple assignments in a row, expatriates should be aware of the potential risk of postponed repatriation. They should also be aware that expatriation does not necessarily lead to career advancement short term, but rather that international experience has the potential to benefit your career long term.

5.4 Limitations & future research

This study provides a deeper understanding of the repatriate experience and its influence on subsequent organizational commitment. Nonetheless, all studies have potential limitations that may impact the results, and these should be acknowledged. We have based our findings on more than thirty hours of interviews with thirty different repatriates. The empirical data and sample size are considered abundant enough to provide profound insights into the complexities

of the repatriate experience. However, as the majority of our sample consists of repatriates that have decided to remain with their employers post-repatriation, the results may be positively biased compared to another sample. Consequently, future research could be enriched by comparative studies that include an evenly distributed sample of repatriates that have both stayed and resigned. Further, we decided to study the experiences of Swedish repatriates as this has not been the focus of previous repatriation research. The cultural aspect may influence the result and thus we recommend future researchers to investigate the impact of cultural aspects on the repatriate experience and organizational commitment. A comparative cross-cultural study of repatriates could potentially generate interesting results of how cultural backgrounds, norms and values shape personal interpretation of the repatriate experience and organizational commitment.

Another suggestion for future research is to conduct a longitudinal study of the repatriate experience and organizational commitment to better capture changes over time. Our interviews were conducted at specific points in time, which may have influenced the result. The memory is limited, and respondents may therefore misremember how they actually felt during expatriation and repatriation, especially if some time has passed. Finally, our sample entails a favorable distribution of male and female repatriates. Despite growing numbers of women in expatriate positions, previous repatriation studies have primarily focused on male repatriates. Consequently, this study thus adds considerable value to the research field by including perspectives from both male and female repatriates. Unfortunately, due to the imperative need to limit the scope of the study, the contrasts in perspectives according to gender have not been explored explicitly. This is our final suggestion for future research, to examine organizational commitment and repatriation from a gender perspective, as there may be interesting and significant differences in perceptions depending on gender.

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Appendix I - Interview guide

Introducing questions

1. *Who are you and what is your current role in the company?*
2. *When and where did you have your expatriate assignment/s?*
3. *How long did your expatriate assignment/s last?*
4. *Did you travel alone, or did you bring a partner or family?*
5. *For how long had you been employed by the company before expatriation?*
6. *When did you repatriate?*
 - a. *How long had you been employed prior to expatriation?*
 - b. *How long have you been home for?*
7. *Why did you go on expatriation? Did you receive an offer to go or was it something you applied for?*

Pre-departure embeddedness

8. *What were your feelings before going?*
9. *What attracted you with the expatriate assignment?*
10. *Were there any specific benefits at home that made you less inclined to leave?*
11. *How did you feel about your position before expatriation?*
12. *What information about the assignment did you get before departure?*
 - a. *Did you have specified objectives with expatriation?*
 - b. *Were you informed about how long expatriation would last?*
 - c. *Did you get information about what would happen after expatriation?*
13. *How did you perceive your relationship with the company?*
 - a. *How did you like it?*
 - b. *How were your relationships with managers, colleagues etc.?*
 - c. *How did you feel about corporate values and culture?*

Expatriation embeddedness

14. *How did it feel to come to a new country and a new workplace?*
15. *How did you experience cultural differences at work and in the country?*
 - a. *Anything that you particularly liked or disliked?*
16. *Did you receive any specific benefits as an expat? What were those?*
17. *What did the assignment entail?*
 - a. *What kind of responsibilities did you have?*
18. *What did your social life look like during expatriation?*
 - a. *How did you get to know new people in the host country and organization?*
 - b. *How much contact did you have with people back home?*
19. *What did your work-life balance look like?*
 - a. *Did you have time to build a social network outside of work?*
20. *How did you feel about the new culture and political landscape?*
 - a. *Was there anything you especially appreciated?*

- b. *Were there any challenges?*

Organizational support

21. *How did you experience support from the company during expatriation?*
 22. *Did you have access to a mentor?*
 a. *If so - how did you experience this?*
 b. *What did the mentorship entail?*
 23. *How and to what extent did you stay in contact with colleagues and the home country organization?*
 24. *How and to what extent were you informed about what was going on in the home company?*

Repatriation embeddedness

25. *How long before repatriation did you know that you were going home?*
 26. *How did it feel to return home?*
 a. *Was there anything that you looked forward to?*
 b. *What were the greatest challenges?*
 c. *Did you feel that you lost any advantages from expatriation? If so - what?*
 d. *Did you experience any reverse-culture shock?*
 27. *Do you experience any differences in your relationship towards the company after expatriation and repatriation?*
 a. *Do you feel more or less connected to the company?*
 28. *How did you experience the welcome by colleagues and managers?*
 29. *Did you experience any differences in culture, processes or structures?*
 30. *How did you experience returning to your personal life?*
 a. *What were the reactions from friends and relatives?*
 31. *Did you experience that you had changed during your time abroad?*
 a. *If so - was this something you realized during or after expatriation?*
 32. *To what extent did repatriation turn out like you expected or not expected?*

Organizational support

33. *Did you receive any organizational support during repatriation?*
 a. *If so - what?*
 b. *What did you experience as positive/negative?*
 c. *Was there any repatriation support that you missed?*
 34. *What kind of role/position did you get in repatriation?*
 a. *How did you feel about your new position?*
 b. *When and how were you informed about your new tasks and responsibilities?*
 c. *To what extent was the role connected to what you had learned during expatriation?*