



**KNOWLEDGE SHARING THROUGH INPATRIATE
ASSIGNMENTS IN MULTINATIONAL
COMPANIES: A SOCIAL CAPITAL PERSPECTIVE**

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ABSTRACT

The inpatriation of foreign nationals to the corporate headquarters (HQ) of multinational companies (MNCs) is considered to be an effective way to master challenges arising from the increased global scope of MNC activities. Inpatriates fulfil an important boundary spanning role since they possess knowledge of both the HQ and the local subsidiary context. During their assignment to the HQ, inpatriates therefore act both as knowledge senders and receivers: While they are expected to share their local contextual knowledge with HQ staff, they are, at the same time, socialized into the HQ organizational culture and learn firm-specific routines and behaviours that enable them to take on future management tasks within the organization. Given the importance of knowledge diffusion through inpatriate assignments, there is surprisingly little research focusing on how this knowledge transfer occurs. This work addresses this gap by developing a conceptual framework to examine the processes and determinants of knowledge transfers between inpatriates and HQ staff as well as the implications for inpatriates' organizational careers. Adopting a social capital perspective, the central assumption being advanced in this context is that knowledge sharing is contingent upon inpatriates' structure and content of network ties with HQ staff.

INTRODUCTION

In the past, western multinational companies (MNCs) have primarily used expatriates, parent-country nationals (PCNs) who are assigned to a foreign subsidiary for a limited period of time, to ensure effective control and coordination across their global operations and offset the lack of management skills among the local workforce (Bonache & Brewster, 2001; Harzing, 2001; Edström & Galbraith, 1977). Yet, growing market opportunities in developing and emerging economies have contributed to a shift concerning the major assignment destinations. The resultant need to send PCNs to countries with greater cultural distance to their home nation entails additional adjustment problems during the assignment. Moreover, by expanding their activities with regard to culturally and institutionally more distant countries, MNCs face amplified challenges of obtaining adequate local and contextual knowledge to successfully operate in these markets (Harvey et al., 1999).

As a result, international assignments are increasingly regarded as a vital means for enhancing knowledge diffusion within MNCs (Kamoche, 1997; Bonache & Brewster, 2001; Hocking et al., 2004). It is widely recognized that most of the knowledge transferred between MNC units is tacit rather than explicit. Since tacit knowledge cannot be codified but is observable only through direct application, employees need to be transferred between organizational units for knowledge to be diffused (Polanyi, 1966; Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000; Bonache et al., 2001).

In this regard, the inpatriation of foreign nationals to the corporate headquarters (HQ) on a semi-permanent to permanent basis is considered to be an effective way to master challenges arising from the increased global scope of MNC activities (Harvey et al., 2000). It is argued that inpatriates fulfil an important boundary spanning role since they possess knowledge of both the HQ and the local subsidiary context (Thomas, 1994; Harvey et al., 1999). Recent research indeed suggests that European and U.S. MNCs will increase their share of inpatriates in the future (Oddou et al., 2001).

Given the salience of knowledge diffusion through international staffing in general and inpatriation in particular, there is little research focusing on the processes, motivators and determinants of how knowledge is translated between individuals and organizational units on an international scale (Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000). Moreover, researchers acknowledge the fact that a major share of knowledge transfer occurs after the actual assignment has terminated (e.g. Berthoin Antal, 2001). However, the individual's willingness to share knowledge does not only depend on characteristics of the actual assignment but may be contingent upon available repatriation practices and career opportunities within the organization (Welch, 2003). Despite this apparent linkage between knowledge sharing and organizational careers, there is a paucity of research that considers career management issues with regard to international transfers, thereby ignoring their respective long-term outcomes (Welch, 2003; Feldman & Thomas, 1992; Bonache et al., 2001). This is even more surprising given the high costs that are associated with international assignments (Harvey et al., 1999). Building on these arguments, this work addresses two main research questions:

1. *Which processes and determinants influence knowledge diffusion between inpatriate employees and HQ staff and thus the generation of organizationally valuable knowledge through inpatriate assignments?*
2. *What are the resulting implications of knowledge diffusion for the career of inpatriate employees within the organization?*

Along these lines, the purpose of this work is threefold: First, the paper expands the international assignment perspective by explicitly concentrating on inpatriates. Whereas previous research in the field of expatriation has mainly focused on PCNs of western, particularly North American MNCs (Clark et al., 1999), little is known on how individuals from other countries-of-origin deal with international job transitions. However, the investigation of foreign nationals who are assigned to the HQ explicitly emphasizes the role of individuals' national or cultural origin. Reversing the direction of previous research, this work focuses on differences in transferees' cultural backgrounds while limiting the analysis to a single culture of assignment.

Second, this research seeks to contribute to our understanding in the domain of international assignments by embedding it into a theoretical context, thereby addressing the lack of theory development in this field. Indeed, it has been contended that expatriation-related research is mainly descriptive and atheoretical in nature (Thomas, 1998; De Cieri & Dowling, 1999). Adopting a social capital perspective (Coleman, 1988; Adler & Kwon, 2002), the paper develops a conceptual framework which intends to shed light on the mechanisms that impact on intra-MNC knowledge flows through inpatriate assignments. The central assumption set out is that knowledge diffusion is contingent upon inpatriates' structure and content of interaction ties with HQ staff.

Finally, by including career-related assignment outcomes within the scope of the investigation, this work supplements the more functionally oriented perspective of previous research (Bonache et al., 2001) and integrates different strands into a strategic view of international staff movements.

In doing so, this work is among the first attempts to apply the concept of social capital to the field of international assignments and their role for facilitating knowledge flows within MNCs. The perspective adopted here differs from the extant limited research on knowledge diffusion through international staff movements by explicitly examining the process of how knowledge flows between assignees and host country staff occur.

The paper is divided into three sections: First is a review of relevant literature in the field of inpatriate assignments and intra-MNC knowledge flows. The subsequent section sets out the work's theoretical underpinnings, presenting the concept of social capital as a fruitful lens to examine the identified research questions. Finally, the theoretical arguments are integrated into a conceptual framework of knowledge sharing through inpatriate assignments and propositions related to the model are derived.

INPATRIATE ASSIGNMENTS AND INTRA-MNC KNOWLEDGE FLOWS

International transfers occur in a multi-directional manner between different organizational units (Welch, 2003). Yet, there has been a major shift concerning the composition of international staff at MNCs (Barnett & Toyne, 1991; Oddou et al., 2001). While MNCs have previously concentrated on sending PCNs to foreign subsidiaries, they are now increasingly using inpatriates as substitutes and complements to traditional expatriates: First, growing business opportunities in developing and emerging economies have resulted in an enhanced multicultural nature of their global operations. At the same time, the greater cultural distance along with poor business infrastructure associated with these assignment destinations pose additional adjustment problems for expatriates and thus result in higher expatriate refusal and failure rates. Also, growing dual-career problems for expatriates and a misfit in their cost/performance record render this staffing option more and more debatable (Harvey et al., 1999).

More importantly, by extending their operations to developing and emerging economies, MNCs encounter unprecedented social, cultural, institutional and economic gaps that exacerbate market entry and the successful management of local business activities. In this regard, inpatriates provide the adequate social and contextual knowledge to bridge this gap and facilitate the context-specific adaptation of business strategies. Besides, they serve as an important boundary spanning mechanism which links the HQ to its subsidiaries and enhances bidirectional knowledge flows (Harvey et al., 1999; Harvey et al., 2000): Given their intimate understanding of both the HQ and the subsidiary context, inpatriates are capable of crossing extant intra-organizational, cultural and communication boundaries in order to disseminate information (Thomas, 1994). Simultaneously, by socializing inpatriates into the HQ's organizational culture, the MNC establishes a more informal and subtle control mechanism towards its subsidiaries (Edström & Galbraith, 1977; Harvey et al. 1999).

The corporate motive for using inpatriates is thus twofold: First, it is assumed that inpatriates provide the required breadth of socially networked skills in order to successfully diffuse contextual knowledge between MNC units and facilitate a global yet locally responsive approach to MNC management (Harvey et al., 2001; Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1998). Consequently, this knowledge transfer is expected to occur from the individual to the organizational level. In addition, inpatriation is motivated by developmental purposes in terms of providing inpatriate assignees with corporate socialization and firm-specific training in order to prepare them for future management tasks within the organization (Harvey et al., 2000; Bonache et al., 2001). This second motive also contains issues of knowledge transfer but rather concentrates on the transfusion from the firm to the individual.

Despite their similarities, expatriates and inpatriates differ along two main dimensions. First, expatriates carry with them the status and influence that is associated with their role as HQ representatives. Coming from a foreign unit, inpatriates are, on the contrary, unlikely to encounter the same level of credibility and respect (Harvey et al., 1999). Second, Barnett and Toyne (1991) delineate increased adjustment challenges for inpatriates in comparison to expatriate assignees. They note that inpatriates are not only confronted with the necessity to respond to acculturation pressures due to a change in the assignment culture but also need to be socialized into the MNC's organizational culture. The ability to deal with these dual adjustment needs is expected to impact on inpatriates' career progression.

Finally, it is worth noting that the use of inpatriate employees increases the cultural diversity and multicultural staff composition at MNCs. More specifically, a higher share of employees with diverse cultural backgrounds will be collaborating directly as inpatriates are, for instance, temporarily integrated into the HQ's cross-functional or management teams. Simultaneously, international assignments become accessible for a wider and more culturally diverse pool of MNC staff, which makes it salient to consider the impact of assignees' culture-of-origin on international transfers (Harvey et al., 1999). Recent evidence indeed suggests that culture is not only a direct determinant of assignment outcomes such as interaction adjustment but also exerts a moderating effect by influencing other antecedents (Waxin, 2004).

Existing research in the field of inpatriation is still limited (Bonache et al., 2001). While first attempts have been made to develop a conceptual foundation by applying the resource-based view of the firm, agency theory and expectancy theory to global staffing in general and inpatriation in particular (Harvey et al., 2001; Harvey et al., 2000), a paucity in theory development remains to adequately embed corporate inpatriation decisions. Besides, empirical research in the field of international assignments tends not to differentiate between expatriates and inpatriates (e.g. Tung, 1998; Florkowski & Fogel, 1999) and thus neglects

idiosyncrasies of the in-patriate group. There are only a few empirical studies to date that explicitly treat in-patriation-related issues (e.g. Harvey & Miceli, 1999; Oddou et al., 2001).

The Strategic Role of Staff Movements for Knowledge Flows within MNCs

Recently, there has been an increased interest in a knowledge-based perspective on MNC management and international staffing, highlighting the strategic nature of international assignments within the scope of global business activities (Hocking et al., 2004).

Building on the notion that an MNC can be conceptualized as a differentiated network of globally dispersed units (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1998), these organizations face challenges of transferring knowledge that is created in different cultural and institutional contexts to other parts of the interrelated network.

This reasoning has inspired scholars to investigate intra-MNC knowledge flows. Here, empirical studies examined the role of organizational determinants for effective knowledge transfer (Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000), investigated factors that impact on the speed of knowledge diffusion (Zander & Kogut, 1995) or explored the effect of different levels and sources of knowledge as well as structural MNC characteristics on successful transfer of different types of knowledge (Foss & Pedersen, 2002).

Meanwhile, researchers have also extended their focus from this mainly organization-level analysis towards the individual organizational member, thereby acknowledging the fact that knowledge primarily resides in individuals (Nonaka, 1994). Minbaeva and colleagues (2003), for example, empirically ground the need of both employees' ability and motivation as facilitators of intra-MNC knowledge diffusion. It is further argued that the systematic intra-organizational transfer of members from one network to another is a crucial means for enhancing intra-firm knowledge diffusion and translating the organizational application of this know-how into a competitive advantage (Argote & Ingram, 2000). Along these lines, scholars increasingly highlight the role that international assignees play as cross-cultural and informational boundary spanners (Thomas, 1994). Recent empirical evidence (Bonache & Brewster, 2001; Hocking et al., 2004) supports the notion that international transfers serve as a vital means for knowledge diffusion within MNCs.

It is interesting to note that although the bidirectional transfer of know-how is considered to be the primary motive for in-patriating foreign nationals into the HQ organization, no study has yet explicitly treated this aspect. Also, while previous research has addressed the crucial issue of knowledge flows within MNCs in general and through international assignments in particular, little is known on how knowledge transfer essentially occurs on the individual level. However, researchers have contended that the success of knowledge transfer through staff movements is not automatic but rather depends on social processes. Empirical evidence suggests that individuals being assigned to new contexts often become minorities within this new setting which affects their social influence (Gruenfeld et al., 2000). Also, Gupta and Govindarajan (2000) note that due to the tacit nature of knowledge (Polanyi, 1966), knowledge transfer does not necessarily occur effectively and efficiently.

This reasoning highlights the need to examine the processes and determinants that facilitate knowledge diffusion more thoroughly. By adopting a social capital perspective, the next section explores the role, structure and content of interactions among organizational members as a prerequisite for knowledge to be successfully diffused through in-patriate assignments.

THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL CAPITAL

The application and diffusion of knowledge always occurs in the light of specific physical contexts as well as mental models of individual counterparts. Accordingly, knowledge can be characterized as being inherently social and contextual in nature (Barner-Rasmussen, 2003). Consequently, the process of sharing knowledge between individuals is contingent upon social interaction and exchange. This suggests placing a major focus on individual interrelations in the context of examining processes and determinants of knowledge diffusion.

The structure and content of individuals' networks is captured in the literature by the term 'social capital' (Raider & Burt, 1996). Social capital theory is based on Bourdieu's sociology that identifies different forms of capital as being convertible into one another (Bourdieu, 1986). Due to more recent extensions and adaptations of these early ideas (e.g. Burt, 1992; 1997; Coleman, 1988; 1990; Putnam, 1995), the concept of social capital has received increased attention, not only in different social science disciplines but also in the field of organization studies (Adler & Kwon, 2002). More specifically, social capital has, among others, been found to affect career success (Burt, 1992) and CEO compensation (Belliveau et al., 1996; Burt, 1997) and has recently also been applied as a theoretical perspective in the field of multinational management and intra-MNC knowledge flows (Hitt et al., 2002; Kostova & Roth, 2003).

The growing popularity has led to a plethora of definitions being offered. Major differences prevail with regard to the form of ties that are addressed (Adler & Kwon, 2002). A first group of definitions focuses on the interconnections an individual maintains with others and thus concentrates on external linkages or the 'bridging' form of social capital. Conversely, the 'bonding' perspective which refers to internal ties deals with the pattern of relations among individuals within a collectivity. However, as Adler and Kwon (2002) argue, this distinction is artificial since both linkages are interdependent and rather contingent upon the level of analysis. This reasoning also applies to the present work. The interaction ties which in-patriates maintain with HQ staff and which are a crucial precondition for knowledge flows to occur are external to the individual assignee but internal to the firm as a whole.

The notion of social capital highlights the fact that social interactions are not only elements of social structures but can be considered as an individual's resources for conducting social affairs and exchange (Coleman, 1990; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Consequently, social capital encompasses not only the network itself but also the assets that can be activated through the interaction ties (Burt, 1992). Considering the aforementioned features of social capital, the following working definition will be used in accordance with Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998, 243), understanding social capital

“as the sum of actual or potential resources embedded within, available through, and derived from the network of relationships possessed by an individual or social unit.”

Putnam (1995) has characterized social capital as a multidimensional concept and, therefore, called for a specification of inherent facets. Along these lines, Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) identify three interrelated and overlapping but distinct dimensions, namely structural, relational and cognitive. The structural dimension refers to the overall, impersonal configuration of interconnections between individuals or units and entails the presence of network ties between actors, the structure of these ties in terms of density, connectivity or hierarchy and the existence of networks created for one purpose that may be used for another¹. Conversely, the relational dimension is concerned with personal assets that have been

¹ Coleman (1988) uses the term 'appropriable organization'.

embedded in these linkages through a series of interactions and contains concepts such as trust and trustworthiness, norms and sanctions, obligations and expectations as well as identity and identification. The cognitive dimension treats facets that offer a common source of representation and understanding such as shared codes and shared narratives.

The explicit consideration of relational and cognitive aspects is considered to be an important contribution of the social capital concept to the research in intra-MNC knowledge flows since these facets have been largely subsumed under the structural connections investigated in previous MNC studies (Barner-Rasmussen, 2003).

Scholars have also argued that social capital is particularly important concerning individuals who are located at social boundaries or assume boundary-spanning positions because these roles require interaction with people from different social contexts (Raider & Burt, 1996). Besides, in addition to information benefits and increased influence and control, social capital is considered to facilitate solidarity.² Here, it is posited that strong social norms and beliefs in combination with a high degree of actors' interconnectedness within the network foster compliance with local rules and reduce formal control requirements (Adler & Kwon, 2002). This idea has important implications with regard to international staff transfers that are often subject to dual levels of organizational commitment and identification (Gregersen & Black, 1992; Reade, 2001). Together, these arguments stress the perspective's conceptual value in the scope of international transfers in general and inpatriate assignments in particular.

Social Capital and Its Potential to Enhance Intellectual Capital

Building on Bourdieu's (1986) notion that different forms of capital are convertible into one another, social capital has to be embedded in a larger context. In this regard, researchers highlight social capital as being a crucial resource for accessing, exploiting and leveraging individual and collective knowledge, thereby stressing its strategic value for organizations (Coleman, 1988; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Raider & Burt, 1996). More specifically, it is argued that social capital affects the development of intellectual capital which Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) understand as the individual and collective knowledge and knowing capacity of a social entity. With this definition, they aggregate the concepts of human and organizational capital and primarily distinguish between knowledge repositories which are rooted in different levels of a collectivity and knowledge flows between these repositories initiated through social capital. Building on these ideas, in the remainder of this work intellectual capital shall be understood as the aggregate of the human and organizational capital base.

Along these lines, Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) discuss various mechanisms through which social capital enhances the development of intellectual capital. They argue that social capital influences the essential pre-requisites for new intellectual capital to be created through the combination and exchange of existing intellectual capital. These conditions include access to relevant parties to make the combination or exchange, anticipation of value, motivation and combination capability and are affected in different ways by the three social capital dimensions.

Adopting the three-dimensional specification of the social capital concept, Tsai and Ghoshal (1998) offer the first empirical application to the MNC context. Based on a sample of 15 business units within a large

² These benefits also entail potentially negative externalities (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Leana & Van Buren, 1999).

MNC, they operationalize the structural dimension as 'social interaction', the relational dimension as 'trust' and the cognitive facet as 'shared vision'. The results provide evidence that intra-MNC resource exchange and combination which are considered as a direct predictor of value creation increase with social capital levels.

Another, more recent study by Barner-Rasmussen (2003) that has applied the three-dimensional distinction of social capital set out by Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) examines inter-unit knowledge sharing at MNCs with a particular focus on the role of language, identity and feedback-seeking behaviour. Using a multi-method data collection, the study demonstrates that shared identity treated as one form of relational social capital and natural language skills enhance the accumulation of inter-unit social capital and that high levels of inter-unit social capital facilitate inter-unit knowledge sharing conceptualized as managers' feedback-seeking behaviour. Moreover, while relational social capital was found to be the most significant determinant of individual knowledge sharing, cognitive social capital conceptualized as shared vision was the most significant predictor of unit-level knowledge sharing.

A study by Nebus (2004) addresses the problem of how individuals locate necessary knowledge within large MNCs. Adopting a quantitative survey design, the author examines determinants of individuals' knowledge search behaviour within and across boundaries. The results show that an individual's perception of the potential contact's willingness to share knowledge predicts a person's motivation for contacting a specific actor and crossing a border in order to initiate this contact. More importantly, the study indicates that the social relationship between seeker and contact affects this perception and thus can be regarded as the main driver for the choice of contact. This highlights the role of informal networks for knowledge search.

Finally, an organization-level empirical study in the field of innovation management demonstrates how a firm makes use of its network position to gain knowledge of extant technological solutions in different industries and applies the solutions for product development in fields where they are not known (Hargadon & Sutton, 1997).

Although social capital has been shown to serve as a crucial pre-requisite for new intellectual capital building, the creation and application of new knowledge also depends on what Cohen and Levinthal (1990) call 'absorptive capacity', i.e. "the ability to recognize the value of new information, assimilate it, and apply it to commercial ends" (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990: 128) which is subject to existing knowledge. Building on learning theory, these scholars argue that the knowledge an individual or social entity has accumulated over the past enables them to identify and make use of new related information.

Overall, it has become clear that social capital is a crucial means for creating and leveraging knowledge. Its potential to not only promote human capital but also collectively owned organizational capital entails the notion that social capital resides in and is beneficial to different levels of social exchange.

Individual and Organizational Social Capital

Social capital has been defined as the structure and content of network and interaction ties. As argued earlier, this view has led researchers to investigate different forms of ties between network actors. While a first group has focused on external ties, i.e. the relations an individual maintains with other individuals, a second group has conceptualized social capital as the structure of relations among individuals within a social entity.

The former perspective entails the implicit assumption that social capital is a private good that mainly benefits the actor who possesses it. In comparison, the latter view considers social capital as being a public good that resides at the level of a collectivity and is available and beneficial to all members of a social entity (Leana & Van Buren, 1999; Kostova & Roth, 2003). Yet, it has been stated earlier that these facets are not conflicting but rather interdependent. Indeed, given the fact that social capital is a resource that is “owned jointly by the parties to a relationship” (Burt, 1992: 9), the perspectives and interests of both the organization as a whole and its individual members have to be considered to fully understand social capital (Leana & Van Buren, 1999; Kostova & Roth, 2003).

Building on these ideas, Leana and Van Buren introduce the term organizational social capital as an attribute of the collective to describe “a resource reflecting the character of social relations within the firm” (Leana & Van Buren, 1999: 538). More specifically, they argue that the translation of individual into organizational social capital is crucial for an organization to reap the benefits that develop through social interaction and exchange of its employees.

This distinction further specifies the relationship between social capital and intellectual capital. Building on the private goods approach, individual social capital outcomes are primarily person-centred and thus refer to an effect on the human capital base. In contrast, the collective nature of organizational social capital has the potential to influence the organizational capital base by integrating, recombining and leveraging individual knowledge with the ultimate aim of initiating collective action.

The previous discussion shifts the focus towards the question of how the translation of individual into organizationally valuable social capital occurs and how this can be facilitated and sustained. In general, the level of an organization’s social capital is shaped by the individual social capital of its organizational members and is influenced by their ability and willingness to share personal ties, knowledge and experiences with other members (Kostova & Roth, 2003; Leana & Van Buren, 1999). The ability to share personal ties and knowledge is contingent upon opportunity³, i.e. the accessibility of respective respondents or contacts (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998), but also upon individual competencies of the sender (Adler & Kwon, 2002).

An additional determinant of translating individual into organizational social capital is the level of trust inherent in an organization since it determines the extent to which individuals associate and interact with each other (Leana & Van Buren, 1999). Trust has been treated from different perspectives in social capital research (Adler & Kwon, 2002). As set out earlier, it can be conceptualized as being part of the relational dimension of social capital. However, it is not only a determinant of individual social capital but also serves as a motivational source for organizational social capital building.

The idea of motivation is central to social capital building since “the mere fact of a tie implies little about the likelihood that social capital effects will materialize” (Adler & Kwon, 2002: 25). In this respect, Leana and Van Buren (1999) emphasize the importance of a long-term orientation towards the employment relationship since social capital develops slowly but can be damaged quickly through, for example, trust-breaking behaviour. Consequently, stability-enhancing HR practices such as training and development as well as career planning have to be adopted as an important means to foster the creation and maintenance of organizational social capital. Along similar lines, scholars have emphasized the need to design incentive

³ Adler and Kwon (2002) treat opportunity and ability as two distinct sources of social capital.

systems that motivate individuals to engage in the creation of organizational social capital and foster intra-MNC knowledge diffusion (Kostova & Roth, 2003; Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000).

Career Outcomes of Social Capital

A final important characteristic of social capital refers to its potential of influencing career advancement and job search. Here, existing literature suggests that social network ties can be mobilized in order to scan a wider range of career and job opportunities as well as circumvent formal job search and application processes (Burt, 1992; Raider & Burt, 1996).

This argumentation implicitly assumes social capital to exert a direct impact on career attainment since it is the breadth of one's social network that entails the scope for future job contacts. Also, this view primarily concentrates on the level of the individual career while neglecting career-related implications for the employing organization. Yet, there is a second, more indirect channel through which social capital affects career outcomes which is associated with the concept's role in sharing tacit knowledge and thus enhancing intellectual capital.

The underlying relationship between social capital and career attainment becomes clear when examining recent developments in the career concept more closely. Bird (2001) conceptualizes a career not only in terms of structural characteristics such as the hierarchical positions reached but also views the knowledge accumulated throughout a person's professional life as a major constituting element and thus regards careers as repositories of knowledge. This extension of the traditional career concept highlights the distinct character of careers across different individuals and contexts. In fact, the content of a person's career is contingent upon particular skills, expertise and contact ties, that is, the individual social and human capital developed through contextual work experiences.

This understanding of careers also entails organizational implications. Building on the notion that organizations create knowledge through the amplification and internalization of knowledge held by organizational members (Nonaka, 1994), it becomes evident that an individual's career provides the relevant knowledge base for organizational capital to be accumulated. It follows that organizations need to shape their employees' work experiences in a systematic manner to extract relevant individual knowledge for organization-wide diffusion (Bird, 2001). They do so by establishing career paths that correspond to their knowledge needs and help to foster the creation of both organizational social capital and organizational intellectual capital.

A further consequence can be derived from the aforementioned aspects. Scholars have highlighted the challenge of aligning individual and organizational career expectations in order to retain and exploit individual knowledge within the organization on a long-term basis (Yan et al., 2002). While organizations will offer career paths according to their present and future knowledge requirements, individual career goals may be contingent upon a wide array of factors that reach beyond the organizational context. The current shift from organization-based careers to boundaryless careers, which are managed by the person as opposed to the organization and are characterized by a higher degree of inter-organizational mobility (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996), demonstrates that individual social and human capital are not easily contained within organizational boundaries. In this context, the development and open display of logic career paths is a key necessity for building and sustaining organizational social capital and thereby enhancing the creation of organizationally valuable knowledge (Bird, 2001).

SOCIAL CAPITAL AND ITS ROLE FOR KNOWLEDGE SHARING THROUGH INPATRIATION

Based on the previous argumentation, the following paragraphs will translate the theoretical argumentation to the field of inpatriate assignments.

The review of extant literature in the field of inpatriate assignments identified knowledge transfer between the inpatriate and the HQ to be the major strategic motive for inpatriation: While inpatriates are expected to share their local contextual knowledge with HQ staff in order to facilitate effective corporate activities in these local markets, they are, at the same time, socialized into the HQ organizational culture and learn firm-specific routines and behaviours that enable them to master future management tasks within the organization. As a result, inpatriates act both as knowledge senders and receivers.

The social capital perspective provides a valuable theoretical lens to address the question of how this knowledge transfer occurs. Understanding social capital as the structure and content of an individual's network and interaction ties, it has been demonstrated that it serves as a crucial prerequisite for knowledge sharing. Accordingly, the central assumption being advanced in the present context is that inpatriate employees' local contextual knowledge can only be transfused into the HQ and inpatriates can only develop a profound understanding of the firm's routines, if these transferees are able to develop individual social capital, i.e. social networks with HQ staff.

Inpatriates' Creation of Individual Social Capital

Adopting the conceptualization of social capital set out by Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) and further operationalized by Tsai and Ghoshal (1998), it is posited that inpatriates' creation of individual social capital will occur along three distinct but overlapping dimensions. From a structural perspective, their creation of individual social capital is contingent upon the quality and quantity of interaction ties at the HQ level. Structural characteristics of network ties include network size, density, diversity and frequency of contacts (Wang, 2002).

The relational dimension entails the resources that are embedded within these relationships. Trust and trustworthiness are regarded as main elements for the creation of relational social capital because they enhance the willingness to advance and deepen mutual interaction (Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998; Adler & Kwon, 2002). Similarly, Wang (2002) employs the construct of 'network closeness' which reflects mutual trust between two actors to describe the intensity and thus the relational aspect of a tie. While trust is generally thought of as being a trait of a relationship, trustworthiness is a characteristic of an individual engaged in this relationship (Barney & Hansen, 1994). Accordingly, it can be assumed that inpatriates will develop social capital if they perceive their HQ-centred contact persons, and are perceived by them, to be trustworthy. In this regard, perceived host ethnocentrism referring to a host unit's reluctance to accept foreign assignees is likely to inhibit the creation and maintenance of trust and trustworthiness (Florkowski & Fogel, 1999).

The cognitive dimension of social capital building emphasizes the importance of systems of shared meaning that foster a common understanding of collective aims (Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998). In the context of multinational management and international staff movements, researchers have highlighted the role of dual organizational identification and commitment to the local and the HQ organization (Gregersen & Black, 1992; Reade, 2001). Organizational identification refers to values and goals an individual shares with the

employing organization and hence reflects his or her psychological attachment (Dutton et al., 1994). It seems reasonable to assume that inpatriates who identify themselves with the HQ organization will build and sustain a higher degree of social capital with HQ-centred employees. This leads to the following proposition:

Proposition 1: The extent to which inpatriate employees create and maintain individual social capital with HQ staff will be contingent upon the structure of their respective interaction ties (structural dimension), the level of perceived trustworthiness of, and as judged by, local employees (relational dimension) and the level of identification with the HQ organization (cognitive dimension).

Antecedents to Inpatriates' Creation of Individual Social Capital

In addition, research findings suggest that inpatriates' language fluency exerts an important influence on the degree of communication between inpatriates and HQ staff. Existing language barriers are likely to restrict interaction between inpatriate and HQ managers and thus inhibit the process of knowledge diffusion (Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999; Barner-Rasmussen, 2003; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). While Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) embrace a wide definition of language that includes natural as well as professional and discursive languages and treat it as an aspect of the cognitive dimension of social capital, Barner-Rasmussen (2003) found natural language to affect all three dimensions of social capital. His results suggest that language fluency not only influences the perception of shared values but also enables the creation of interaction ties and initiates the building of trust.

Moreover, there is evidence that assignees' national background affects the formation of social networks. Manev and Stevenson (2001) demonstrate that expatriates are more likely to establish social networks with co-workers from similar cultural backgrounds across different MNC units than with colleagues from other countries-of-origin at the same unit. Wang and Kanungo (2004) found that international transferees from different countries-of-origin formed different types of social networks with host country staff. This variation was not only confined to structural network characteristics but also persisted in terms of network closeness which, as mentioned earlier, can be thought of as a relational aspect of networks. In formal terms:

Proposition 2: Nationality and the degree of language fluency will influence inpatriate employees' creation and maintenance of individual social capital with HQ staff.

Emergence of Organizational Social Capital

It has been argued that the translation of individual into organizational social capital is crucial for an organization to reap the benefits that develop through social interaction of its employees. Since MNCs inpatriate foreign nationals as a means of gaining local contextual knowledge, this entails the need to transfer the network ties inpatriates sustain with individuals at their home unit to colleague worker at the HQ in order to expand inter-unit contacts and opportunities for sharing knowledge. Also, through their assignment to the HQ inpatriates act as boundary spanners who take a focal role by connecting previously unconnected local networks at the HQ and the subsidiary, respectively (Kostova & Roth, 2003; Burt, 1992).

Since the transfer of individual into organizational social capital is far from being automatic, the focus was shifted to factors that motivate organizational members to act in ways that enhance organizational social

capital building. In this respect, Leana and Van Buren (1999) emphasize the need to apply stability-enhancing and long-term oriented employment practices as facilitators. The perceived deficiencies in terms of repatriation and career management systems as revealed by several empirical studies (Tung, 1998; Stahl et al., 2002) clearly undermine such a long-term approach. This perceived lack and the resultant risk of repatriate turnover are likely to hamper the maintenance of inter-unit network ties and thus organizational social capital in the long run. Furthermore, it may reduce inpatriates' motivation to translate their individual into organizational social capital in the first place as they might view their long-term employment relationship with the company to be violated and, as a result, embrace a rather transactional and short-term perspective towards their assignment (Welch, 2003). Therefore:

Proposition 3: The availability and open communication of adequate repatriation practices and career development programs motivate inpatriates to transfer their individual social capital into organizationally valuable and applicable social capital.

The Creation of New Intellectual Capital

MNCs' main motive for inpatriating foreign nationals is knowledge diffusion that is expected to occur in two directions. Through their interaction and network ties with HQ staff inpatriates learn the company's organizational routines and culture. In addition to this firm-specific knowledge acquisition (Harvey et al., 2000), an international assignment is considered to expand an individual's general knowledge base (Tung, 1998). Yet, inpatriates will only make use of this knowledge and enhance their human capital base if they possess absorptive capacity which is subject to prior related knowledge (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990). Intercultural training and previous international experience are examples for such related knowledge (Thomas, 1998).

Inpatriates' role as senders of local contextual knowledge unfolds through their creation of organizational social capital and thus indirectly affects the development of organizational capital. Similarly, the organizational capital base will only increase if the MNC possesses absorptive capacity. An organization's absorptive capacity depends on the absorptive capacity of its members (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990). Here, an MNC's life-cycle in terms of experience with inpatriate assignments (Milliman et al., 1991) as well as HQ staff's exposure to cross-cultural encounters (Vance et al., 1993) will facilitate knowledge creation. It follows:

Proposition 4a: The creation of individual social capital enhances an inpatriate's human capital base under the condition that he or she is able to absorb new information exchanged through individual network ties.

Proposition 4b: The creation of organizational social capital enhances an MNC's organizational capital base under the condition that its members are able to absorb new information exchanged through organizationally valuable network ties.

Assignment Outcomes

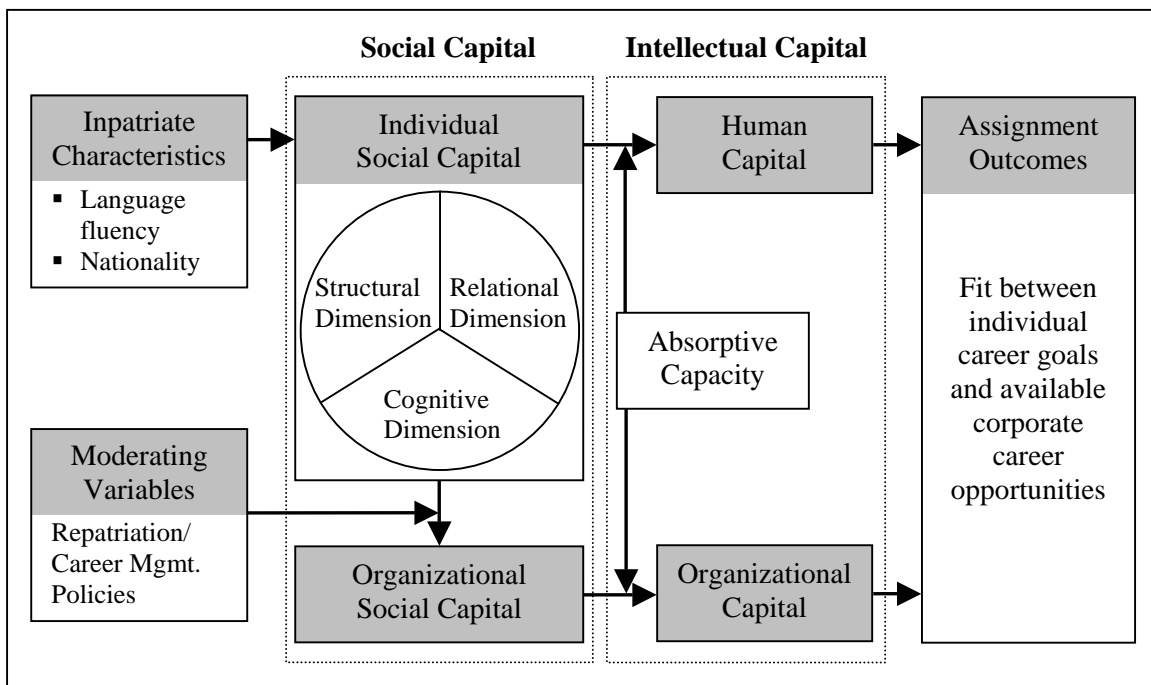
Finally, it has been claimed that social capital's potential in creating intellectual capital entails career-related outcomes. The notion that stability in the social structure is imperative to the maintenance of social capital (Coleman, 1990) and thus continuous knowledge transfer highlights the long-term perspective for organizations to fully benefit from their members' network ties. In the context of inpatriate assignments, the decision to retain an inpatriate and provide future career development depends on the assignee's

organizational value (Bonache & Brewster, 2001). This value ensues from the in-patriate's present career, understood as the accumulated individual social and human capital, and includes both his or her specific tacit, i.e. contextual knowledge as well as his or her inter-unit social capital that is beneficial in enabling continuous inter-unit knowledge flows (Kostova & Roth, 2003; Harvey et al. 2000).

In this regard, the provision of individual career opportunities can be regarded as a form of secondary benefits resulting from the creation of organizational social capital (Leana & Van Buren, 1999). However, the notion of boundaryless careers that are primarily driven by personal growth motives (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996) emphasizes the fact that employees may be unwilling to accept potential career opportunities if they do not fit with their underlying individual career goals. Consequently, it is posited that:

Proposition 5: A long-term employment relationship between an in-patriate and an MNC is subject to the organizational value of the in-patriate's accumulated individual social and human capital and the MNC's ability to provide career opportunities that reflect the in-patriate's career goals and expectations.

Figure I integrates the above-stated arguments into a conceptual framework.



CONCLUDING REMARKS

The presented conceptual framework adopts a strategic perspective on international assignment-related research. By concentrating on the underlying corporate motives for inpatriating foreign nationals to the HQ and the related outcome dimensions of intellectual capital creation and career attainment, this work supplements the more functionally oriented focus of previous research in the field of international staff transfers (Bonache et al., 2001).

Inpatriate assignments are considered to be a crucial means to enhance intra-MNC knowledge diffusion that is indispensable for effective MNC behaviour across different national contexts (Harvey et al., 1999; Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000). This notion stresses the need to apply an integrated perspective towards the assignment cycle and its long-term outcomes and examine the processes and determinants of this knowledge transfer. The central assumption which was set out is that knowledge flows through inpatriate assignments can only occur if these transferees are able to develop individual social capital, i.e. social networks with HQ staff. Applying the concept of social capital to the context of inpatriate assignments, this work thereby advances academic insight in a field that is regarded as being merely atheoretical in nature (Thomas, 1998; De Cieri & Dowling, 1999).

The operationalization of the proposed conceptual framework and the selection of an adequate research design involve various methodological challenges. The fact that social capital is rooted in social networks and social relations poses several measurement difficulties (Leana & Van Buren, 1999). This embeddedness results in the construct being latent which entails the need to find manifest empirical indicators that adequately reflect the underlying latent construct. Here, the conceptualization of social capital along three dimensions offers several measurable indicators (Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998).

Structural equation modelling appears to be an appropriate research technique as it permits the simultaneous examination of several hypothesized relationships and provides an assessment of fit between the hypothesized model and the observed data (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). This approach is not only used in psychology and the social sciences but has also been applied in expatriation-related research (Feldman & Bolino, 1999), cross-cultural research (Janssens et al., 1995) and in empirical applications of the social capital concept (Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998). Also, the conceptual framework focuses on both individual and organizational-level aspects. Accordingly, a respective empirical study needs to consider different levels of analysis which will entail the application of data conversion techniques (Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998).

With the presented conceptual framework, this work contributes to our understanding of the knowledge sharing process between individual organizational members across different MNC units, which has so far remained underdeveloped. Empirical research is needed to test the derived propositions and further refine the model.

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