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Explaining Differences in Repatriation Experiences: The Discovery of Coupled and Decoupled Systems

We report the results of a four-year, multiphase study on the overseas assignment at General Motors Corporation (GM). Our objective is to explain variation in the repatriation experiences of International Service Personnel (ISPs). While our principal focus is the documentation of an inductive discovery process facilitated through interviews with a wide variety of GM employees, we also present a preliminary test of an explanatory hypothesis. The hypothesis states that variation in repatriation experiences is related directly to variation in the structure and ideology of organizational units that send and receive ISPs. Units with direct linkages between GM's domestic and overseas operations (coupled systems) are associated with a pro-international ideology and positive ISP repatriation experiences. Units with no administrative or operational linkages between the domestic and overseas arenas (decoupled systems) are associated with an anti-international ideology and negative ISP repatriation experiences. Our findings suggest that the structural and ideological properties of organizational units affect both repatriation from overseas assignments and ISP career paths.

THE EMERGENCE OF A GLOBAL ECONOMIC SYSTEM has forced large numbers of American corporations to devote greater attention to issues associated with the international personnel assignment. The overseas assignment is the primary means by which many major corporations provide managerial and technical support to develop, maintain, and expand operations abroad. As ever-larger numbers of Americans serve temporary tours of duty abroad, their employing organizations have faced mounting concerns related to various stages of the overseas assignment process (including the stages of recruitment and selection, overseas adaptation, and repatriation). Some of the most serious concerns relate to the final stage of international duty—repatriation to the home unit (i.e., the process during which personnel return to their domestic unit following a temporary assignment overseas).

The repatriation process has been fraught with difficulties for both the individual employee and the corporation. For the individual employee, repatriation is accompanied by "reverse culture shock," including loss of social status at work and at home (Howard 1980; Kendall 1981; Kepler et al. 1983) and various career-related problems, such as obsolescence of technical skills, lack of a specific return assignment, and absence of promotions (Adler 1981; Howard 1980; Kendall 1981; Kepler et al. 1983). Similarly, corporations with international operations face the difficult task of integrating the returning employee into the domestic work environment and learning how to benefit from the em-

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ployee's newly acquired knowledge and skills (Mendenhall, Dunbar, and Oddou 1987; Rogers 1984).

Despite the seriousness of repatriation issues, the literature on repatriation is largely anecdotal and/or provides descriptive information from only a few cases. There has been no effort to examine repatriation systematically, or to offer hypotheses that might account for the observed difficulties. In particular, we note three key questions that the literature does not address.

First, it has not been possible to determine whether or not repatriation problems might be linked to other stages of the overseas experience, such as recruitment and selection, or overseas adaptation. With few exceptions, such as Kepler et al. (1983), the existing studies tend to be confined to one or two stages of the overseas experience; they do not attempt to identify patterns between or across all three stages. Second, the literature has not addressed the issue of variation in repatriation experiences. We know from our earlier work (Briody and Baba 1989) that not all repatriation experiences are difficult or problematic. However, the literature neither considers what factors might account for this observed variation nor examines the relationship between repatriation experiences and employee career paths (i.e., the trajectory of sequential employment positions held by an individual from some designated starting point). Finally, the literature does not attempt to apply our growing knowledge about the overseas assignment to a deeper understanding of ideology and behavior in such complex organizations as multinational corporations.

This article reports the results of a four-year study on the overseas assignment at General Motors Corporation (GM). The study was primarily inductive and problem-driven. At the beginning of the study, we were aware generally that GM and other major corporations faced an array of potential problems in the international personnel arena. However, we were not aware of the severity of the problems surrounding repatriation to GM's domestic operations, nor did we hold any predictive model suggesting major causal forces at work in the generation of such problems. Rather, we began our study as organizational naturalists, hunting down the most serious problems and their causal forces through a dense thicket of interrelated organizational issues and concerns. This article is an effort to capture and make explicit our nonlinear, iterative discovery process. The discussion is organized to retrace the path that led us gradually to the formulation of a robust explanatory framework from which we were able to draw inferences about both repatriation variation and organizational behavior.

One of the most significant outcomes of our discovery process was the formulation of a grounded hypothesis (Glaser and Strauss 1965, 1967) regarding variation in repatriation experiences. The hypothesis states that variation in repatriation experiences (i.e., difficulty versus ease of repatriation) is related directly to variation in the structure and ideology of organizational units that send and receive International Service Personnel (ISPs). This hypothesis grew out of our discovery of two fundamentally different types of organizational structures within GM (reported separately in Briody and Baba 1992) which may be described briefly as follows:

- the *coupled system*—a single structural unit integrating GM domestic and international subunits, and
- the *decoupled system*—a single structural unit containing *either* domestic or international subunits, but not both.

During the course of our research we found that each of these structural types was associated with distinctive managerial ideologies pertaining to the overseas assignment. Coupled systems were associated with a pro-international ideology, while decoupled systems were marked by the opposite. The hypothesis suggests that repatriation difficulties are experienced primarily when ISPs return to a decoupled system. On the other hand, no difficulties are experienced when ISPs are assigned from and/or repatriate to a coupled system. We suggest that the line of reasoning developed here can be applied fruitfully to explain repatriation difficulties in larger samples of data.

Our initial theoretical framework was broadly materialist. We believed that formal organizations such as GM would display a "universal pattern" of internal elements (Harris 1988; Wissler 1923), including (1) a technoeconomic subsystem serving as the organization's base and linked to an industrial niche and larger world economic order; (2) a sociostructural subsystem organizing human and material resources to capture inputs and produce organizational outputs; and (3) an ideational subsystem containing the ideas, beliefs, and values that provide meaning, justification, and behavioral guidance for organizational members. We expected formal organizations to evolve over time as changing environmental conditions and demands stimulated adjustments in the technoeconomic base, thereby forcing further adjustments in other organizational subsystems. In the case of GM, we conceptualized the external environment largely in terms of economic (e.g., international market) and political (e.g., government regulatory) forces that would affect the production, distribution, sales, and service of motor vehicles and component products, both in the United States and abroad. Our initial theoretical biases suggested that changes in organizations would be triggered largely by external environmental phenomena, and that sociostructural and ideational subsystems would form an integrated internal complex that would change in (perhaps delayed) concert with the technoeconomic base.

Although this essentially materialist conception of organizations proved useful in understanding and explaining the reasons for observed changes taking place within GM structures and ideologies (Briody and Baba 1992), we found that a strictly materialist paradigm was not conceptually rich or complex enough to describe or explain the internal dynamics of sociostructural and ideological change. The limitations of traditional materialist approaches in conceptualizing social phenomena forced us gradually to modify and expand our initial theoretical perspective.¹

Data and Methods

The data are based largely on semistructured interviews with 15 former ISPs and 15 of their household members, together with 45 ISP program administrators and other GM managers whose staff members had overseas experience—a total of 75 interviews. Our analysis also was informed by extensive archival data, including company documents and magazines. The International Personnel Administration Staff assisted us by providing information and contacts, and by giving us some guidance in interpreting the data. Our interviewees spent on average 90 minutes responding to our questions. These individuals were not selected randomly. Instead, we worked through informal contacts within the corporation to obtain their names.²

When reporting on the overseas assignment and specific repatriation experiences, we cite data from the initial 15 exploratory interviews that we conducted with former ISPs about their overseas experiences between 1961 and 1986 (see Briody and Baba 1989 for a complete discussion of the sample characteristics of the ISPs, their households, and their assignments abroad). Because GM does not maintain a master list of all ISPs (and their household members) who ever participated in the overseas program, nor documentation of their sociodemographic, career, or familial characteristics, it was not possible to compare the representativeness of our 15 ISPs with a historical ISP sample. In general, however, the sample of these 15 ISPs was broadly representative of the 1986 ISP population from the United States ($N = 311$) with respect to gender, age, overseas location, and most job function categories.³

When reporting on possible explanations related to variation in repatriation experiences and changes in the ISP program over time, we cite data not only from the 15 ISPs but also from the program administrators and other GM managers. We also have no way of knowing how representative these program administrators and managers were of those ever affiliated with the overseas assignment. All of our interview data should be viewed primarily as input into the hypothesis-generation process, and not as a complete data

base for purposes of statistical testing. A full test of the hypothesis would require additional work-history interviews and a considerably larger sample size.

Selection for and Participation in an Overseas Assignment

Factors Involved in Selection

In examining the selection phase of the overseas assignment, we obtained our first clues suggesting that employee career paths might be an important factor linked with repatriation difficulties. While the ISPs and ISP program administrators stated that relevant selection factors included rank or classification level, areas of expertise, and personal interest in overseas living, we discovered that a fourth factor was related to the career paths of employees who became ISPs. GM domestic managers frequently recommended a certain type of employee for overseas work: namely, those who had reached a "plateau" or "dead end" in their domestic careers, or those expendable to the domestic unit. Then, once an ISP accepted an overseas assignment, his domestic position was filled by some other GM employee.⁴ Thus, the overseas assignment provided an opportunity for the home unit to "get rid of" certain employees. The fact that some managers used overseas assignments to "unload" employees suggested to us that domestic managers may not always have placed a high value on the abilities of ISP candidates. Furthermore, we suspected that domestic managers also may not have valued the overseas assignment itself, even though such assignments often were perceived by employees as the sole means of furthering their careers. This proposition played an important role in our conceptualization of managers' ideologies surrounding the overseas assignment.

Job-Related Learning

Much of the data we gathered about the participation phase of the overseas assignment—the time during which the ISPs were abroad—focused on the kinds of learning they acquired. The ISPs provided us with several examples of their job-related learning overseas. Several mentioned their job content (i.e., the breadth of knowledge and exposure they acquired from an operations perspective); other studies have documented this phenomenon as well (Adler 1981; Howard 1980). Other ISPs mentioned picking up a greater familiarity with international issues or ethnic and/or national cultural dimensions of their overseas learning experiences. Most of these comments centered on the realization that there were differences among ethnic and/or national cultures in how work was conducted. Based on these data, we wondered to what extent the ISPs' acquisition of new knowledge and skills would be used by the GM domestic organization following repatriation. It seemed to us that processes and procedures operating in the overseas environment would have the potential to benefit U.S. operations, an idea that also became important as we formulated our understanding of managerial ideologies overseas and at home.

Repatriation

Having been sensitized to some of the work-related issues surrounding selection for and participation in an overseas assignment, we began to examine the third stage of the international process—repatriation. Our interviews with the ISPs and ISP program administrators revealed variation both in ease of repatriation to a domestic position and in beliefs about the effect of an overseas assignment on employee career paths. Several of our interviewees provided their own explanations for the difficulties associated with repatriation.

Return Placement

Although overseas assignments place ISPs in specific positions abroad, there is usually no provision for return to a prespecified position once an international tour of duty is

completed. Some ISPs readily find return domestic positions or accept successive overseas assignments, but others may be placed in temporary positions or special assignments until a more permanent assignment materializes. In our sample, the 15 ISPs were involved in 18 overseas stays.⁵ Of the 18 total return placements, 6 of the ISPs returned to the United States with no specific position placements, with hopes of possibilities that never materialized, or with position offers that were unacceptable to them. In the remaining 12 return placements, domestic job offers were forthcoming either immediately before the overseas assignment was completed or shortly after return. However, even in many of these latter cases, the ISPs' comments suggested that the circumstances surrounding return placement usually were not planned sufficiently in advance.

The lead role in placing the returning ISP in a domestic assignment or in a new overseas assignment has been assumed either by a particular GM unit or the ISP himself. For example, when the former GM Overseas Operations (GMOO) Division was responsible for the selection, overseas stay, and repatriation of all personnel for overseas operations (discussed later), the returning ISP usually remained an employee of GMOO for his entire career. In such cases, return placement was entirely the responsibility of this unit. Soon after the dissolution of GMOO in the late 1970s, the ISP's domestic home unit was charged with finding an appropriate return assignment. This policy formalized return placement procedures but did not solve the organizational problems incurred when the ISP had to be "fit back in" to some domestic unit. As an example of a problematic repatriation, one ISP in the area of finance was shown a typed list of names by a manager who "looked after the finance guys." This manager remarked, "All of these people want to come back. Where will I put you?"

When no particular unit planned in advance for an ISP's return, the responsibility for return placement fell to the ISP. One ISP stated, "I didn't know that you were supposed to scramble for a place to return to. Had I known, I would have paid more attention to where I was going to come back to rather than to my job in (country X)." Another stated that he had been trying to get back to the United States, but he "had no friends in either Finance or in the PAD (Personnel) Staff then." This individual found his domestic job through his overseas boss, who heard about an opening in the Detroit office.

ISPs elaborated on some of the difficulties associated with return placement. Some pointed out that there came a point in many of the ISP experiences when it was "time to get reacquainted with GM at home" or important "to get home before everyone forgot about you." One ISP considered himself "an unknown commodity to the managers and regional managers" at his newly reorganized home unit. Another ISP described the hiring network in a similar way.

The main question that managers with hiring power are asking is, "What have you done for me?" If you have been overseas, you haven't done anything for them since you haven't worked under them. If they get your name and someone else's name they know, they will hire the one they know. No one has a commitment to you [the returning ISP]. Here is where the system falls down. There is a paper commitment [that your home office will take you back], but no real commitment. A hiring manager will take someone they know over you.

In addition, the time and circumstances associated with obtaining a return placement varied. While most return placements were handled either just prior to or just following return, 4 of the 18 took more than a few months. Indeed, 2 of the 18 return placements were quite protracted—taking 12 months and 14 months respectively.

Return Job Satisfaction and Career Enhancement

Our next step in understanding the difficulties associated with domestic job placement following an overseas assignment involved a more systematic review of our interviewees' comments. From our initial interviews with 15 ISPs, we constructed two different ratings to provide a foundation for understanding the relationship between the overseas experience and an individual's career. First, we asked all ISPs in our sample a series of open-ended questions focusing on *job satisfaction* with their current work. Such questions in-

cluded a description of the process by which the ISPs obtained their first jobs upon return to the United States, the types of jobs they held, expectations they had about their return employment, and the extent to which these jobs reflected their new knowledge and skills. The responses concerning job satisfaction could be categorized easily into either positive or negative ratings.⁶ A positive job satisfaction rating indicated that the current positions met employee expectations, given the expertise of those individuals. A negative rating indicated that these repatriated ISPs generally were dissatisfied with their current employment because their jobs did not make adequate use of their skills and/or were not interesting to them.

We also attempted to assess whether the ISPs attributed at least part of their current professional standing to the overseas assignment. Thus, we asked them about their perceptions of the relationship between career progression and the overseas assignment. Specifically, we wanted to know if their career had been enhanced by going abroad. From these questions we developed a separate *career enhancement* rating (positive, negative, or mixed) for each ISP. A positive rating indicated a positive evaluation of the relationship between overseas work and career enhancement (such as, "The ISP assignment enhanced my career"). A negative rating indicated that the ISPs did not feel that the overseas assignment benefited their careers (such as, "My career was not enhanced by going abroad"). A mixed rating indicated that the employees were uncertain regarding the relationship in question or gave contradictory messages regarding its evaluation (such as, "That's a tough question," "I'm not certain," or "I liked it but I wouldn't recommend overseas work to my friends").

Ten of the fifteen ISPs were satisfied with their current positions at GM. These individuals indicated that their current work utilized their skills and experience in appropriate ways and was interesting and rewarding to them. By contrast, five ISPs were dissatisfied with their current work. These individuals generally felt that their current jobs were not what they expected to be doing after their return to the United States and that the talents and skills they gained abroad were not being utilized adequately. Some of the negative evaluations taken from the interviews offer more detail.

My current job represents only one use of my talents, and not necessarily a good use [of those talents]. . . . The responsibilities that ISPs are given upon return are far fewer than when they are abroad—they shrink. The International Personnel Administration gives too optimistic a view of what GM wants from the ISP. They say, "You were picked because of your good career with GM. You will be promoted. You will be brought back after a certain period of time. You will come back with a wide range of talents." This may all be true but no one has prepared for your return. Out of sight, out of mind. Once the home office has a replacement for you, it is hard to get you back. This is not made clear to you. The home office is different from when you left it. People have moved on. The current International Personnel Administration Staff is not equipped to help you plan your career path. However, they should be doing this.

In the long run, I probably have not done as well career-wise [than if I had stayed in the United States]. Before going [overseas], I was considered to have high potential in the finance area, but once I left it was difficult to get back into their progression. . . . Once you are in the overseas business, you fall off any career path domestically. Unless you go out as a managing director—[one GM manager] was one in Opel⁷—you don't have much chance. If you go to a small operation which has no impact on GM at all or its profits, your career is not enhanced. If I had gone to Opel and done well there, my career might have been enhanced due to my visibility.

These comments indicate that some ISPs perceived that their international experiences detracted from their career development. These individuals seemed to believe that they would have fared better had they remained in the United States. Not surprisingly, all five of the individuals who expressed dissatisfaction about their current positions felt that the overseas assignments did not enhance their careers. Furthermore, of the fifteen ISPs, only three who evaluated their current jobs favorably perceived a direct relationship between career enhancement and their international experiences. Eight other ISPs indicated that overseas work did not advance their professional development. The remaining four had

mixed reactions (i.e., they were unsure of the effect). Statements from returning ISPs who were satisfied with their jobs helped to explain why perceptions regarding the value of overseas work may have been negative or mixed.

I was the first one of my staff to take an international assignment. I took it knowing that I was getting out of the mainstream. But this didn't bother me because I wanted the experience of living abroad and I was close enough to retirement so that if things didn't work out, it wouldn't really matter. If I had been more ambitious I would have stayed in the U.S. I might be the number two man on my staff rather than the number six man. Some of the younger guys on my staff have moved beyond me. It is possible that if an individual takes an overseas assignment as part of some other staff, it will enhance his career. But this doesn't seem to have been the case with me.

Statements like this one suggest that returning ISPs, even those who were satisfied with their current positions, were aware of certain risks associated with overseas work. Some of the most significant risks included: losing contact with a former network of colleagues and supervisors, "falling off the career path" in a given professional area, and returning to find that younger colleagues had been promoted to positions over those held by the returning ISPs. Several ISPs indicated that they would not recommend overseas work to aggressively career-minded individuals unless such individuals were placed in important, high-visibility positions overseas, and/or they were certain in advance of the effect of the move on their careers. ISPs and program administrators frequently used the phrase "pegged to move" to describe those few ISPs whose career paths seemed to be assured or preplanned.

Specific Hypotheses Concerning Variation in Repatriation Experiences

Specific Native and Researcher-Generated Hypotheses

Throughout the first phase of data collection, our understanding of the extent and types of difficulties associated with repatriation was aided largely by the often spontaneous generation of specific hypotheses by our ISP and managerial interviewees. We frequently found that their explanations for repatriation difficulties were embedded in responses to questions pertaining to job satisfaction and career enhancement. Six such *native hypotheses* are listed below (see Briody and Baba 1989 for a more complete discussion):

1. *Specialists versus Generalists.* ISPs who engage in specialist positions or who perform specialized tasks overseas are less likely to "fall off the career path" and are more likely to experience ease of repatriation than those associated with generalist positions.

2. *Size and Structure of the Overseas Operation.* ISPs assigned to work on corporate staffs⁸ or in large GM subsidiaries⁹ structured like GM's domestic operations are more likely to experience ease of repatriation, since the corporate atmosphere is similar. An assignment to small GM subsidiaries or joint-venture operations reflects a qualitatively different experience for ISPs.

3. *Length of Stay Abroad.* The longer an ISP remains abroad, the more likely he will be a victim of the "out of sight, out of mind" syndrome and the less likely he will experience ease of repatriation.

4. *Maintenance of Contact with the Domestic Organization.* ISPs who maintain contact with some domestic unit or domestically based colleagues while overseas are more likely to experience ease of repatriation.

4. *Classification as a High Potential Employee.* ISPs classified as high potential employees prior to the overseas assignment (a designation assigned to individuals based on their potential to achieve top GM management positions) are continually visible to GM corporate executives and thus experience greater ease of repatriation than other ISPs.

6. *Type of Home Unit.* ISPs originating from and returning to GM component divisions¹⁰ (which are located both in the United States and overseas) are more likely to repatriate easily than those originating from and returning to GM car divisions¹¹ (whose operations are located only in the United States).

The underlying premise of these hypotheses seems to be that work experience which parallels that of the domestic mainstream is most valuable to the corporation and receives the most favorable treatment with respect to career advancement. This rather ethnocentric, general "native hypothesis" shares certain conceptual similarities with the core-periphery model that has grown out of discussions on development and underdevelopment (i.e., the developed core is primary, while the underdeveloped periphery is secondary). Indeed, such a core-periphery bias proved to be central to the anti-internationalist ideology of certain domestic managers who had no experience with or responsibility for any overseas operations, and who placed a positive value only on work related to domestic needs and interests. It is interesting to note that Hypothesis 6 did not embed the premise of the highly valued mainstream domestic experience, thus running counter to the other native hypotheses. This hypothesis ultimately proved to be significant in explaining variation in ISP repatriation experiences.

In addition to the six native hypotheses proposed by those we interviewed, we suggested three others:

7. *Year of Return.* ISPs returning to the United States as part of a large returning cohort are less likely to experience ease of repatriation because GM might not be able to accommodate all of these return placements satisfactorily.

8. *Country's Level of Development.* ISPs whose last assignment is in a developed nation are more likely to experience ease of repatriation because of stronger communication linkages with the United States.

9. *Similarity in Job Content.* ISPs whose last jobs overseas are the same or very similar to their first return positions are more likely to experience ease of repatriation.

Clearly, we were influenced by the implicit understandings in our respondents' explanations, prior to the construction of the three researcher-generated hypotheses. Hypotheses 8 and 9 also embed the premise that work assignments resembling those of the domestic mainstream are valued and rewarded. Hypothesis 7 was developed on the basis of and reflects our interest in demographics. Like Hypothesis 6, it is not related to the core-periphery concept. As we show later, Hypothesis 7 was significantly related to ease of repatriation for our sample, although it was not generally explanatory in our view.

Return Job Satisfaction as a Proxy Variable for Ease of Repatriation

Before describing our tests of the native and researcher-generated hypotheses, we digress briefly to discuss the use of return job satisfaction ratings as a proxy for ease of repatriation. Our initial interview schedule did not include an explicit question on ease or difficulty of repatriation, largely because we were not specifically aware of repatriation variation within GM at the start of the project. However, we did ask a series of questions related to job satisfaction and career enhancement. Several responses to these questions indicated that both job satisfaction and career enhancement were correlated closely with repatriation experiences. Positive ratings for job satisfaction and career enhancement were associated with ease of repatriation, while negative ratings were associated with repatriation difficulty.

We decided ultimately to use the job satisfaction ratings as a proxy for ease of repatriation in our tests of the specific hypotheses. We chose the job satisfaction ratings over the career enhancement ratings for the following reasons. First, unlike the career enhancement ratings, the job satisfaction ratings were based on a cumulative assessment of the ISPs' responses to several questions. As such, it was unlikely that we had misinterpreted the content or context of the ISPs' responses. Second, it was possible to classify the job satisfaction ratings into two discrete types—positive or negative—while career enhancement ratings included a third, ambiguous category labeled "mixed." We could have used a number of validated job satisfaction measures had we known in advance that repatriation would surface as a major problem. Such measures could be used in subsequent research.

Testing the Specific Hypotheses

Since several ISPs held more than one position abroad, we had to decide which of those international positions would be used to determine the value of the independent variables (such as specialists vs. generalists, and location in a developed vs. developing nation). To solve this problem, we reasoned that the last overseas position probably would have the greatest influence on the ISPs' most recent return domestic position. Thus, we determined the value of the independent variables based on the ISPs' last overseas assignment. The job satisfaction data discussed in the previous section refer to return positions that followed the last overseas assignment.

In the first phase of data collection and analysis, we were able to test only seven of the nine specific hypotheses. Hypotheses 5 and 6—Classification as a High Potential Employee and Type of Home Unit, respectively—could not be tested immediately because of a lack of relevant data in our initial sample; our sample included only one employee originating from a component division and insufficient data on high potential status. With respect to the seven testable hypotheses, we analyzed the relationship between the independent and dependent variables using a Fisher's exact test for small samples. The data are presented in Table 1.

Of the seven specific hypotheses tested, we found support for only one—Year of Return. The fifteen ISPs returned to the United States in the following years: one in 1972, one in 1977, four in 1981, four in 1983, three in 1984, and two in 1986. We found that ISPs returning in 1982–83 were more likely to be dissatisfied with their current jobs than those returning in other years. We predicted this result based on the fact that more ISPs overall returned in 1982–83 following the implementation of a shortened overseas assignment policy. We believed that large numbers of repatriating ISPs would result in more return placement difficulties. The relationship between ease of repatriation and year of return was statistically significant ($p \leq .01$) in a one-tailed Fisher's exact test. However, we were not convinced that Year of Return was the principal or only explanation for our dependent variable. We knew, both from the literature and from our informal discussions with GM employees, that many ISPs (other than those in our sample) experienced repatriation difficulties. Surely not all of these individuals could have returned home in 1982–83. Furthermore, no ISP, and only one program administrator, commented specifically on the problems associated with returning in 1982–83.

Since none of the remaining hypotheses that we were able to test was statistically significant, we wondered about the implications of our findings. The fact that our sample size was small may have contributed to the lack of statistical significance with all but one of the independent variables—Year of Return. Although we did not rule out the possibility of expanding our initial sample, we wanted to be certain that we had exhausted all of the explanatory potential contained in our native and researcher-generated hypotheses before embarking on such a time-consuming task.

At this point in the first phase of our research, we began to consider one of the two hypotheses for which we had insufficient data—Hypothesis 5, Classification as a High Potential Employee—as a possible explanation for ease of repatriation. We knew that two of our fifteen ISPs were considered "hi pots" and that another four—those who had "plateaued" in their careers—probably were not considered "hi pots." Even though there was no relationship between high potential status in our sample and repatriation variation, we noticed several references in our data to high-ranking GM managers who had taken overseas assignments, and presumably had experienced a successful career progression. If it were the case, however, that high potential ISPs experience ease of repatriation, then what about the ISPs who were not considered "hi pots"? After all, a substantial proportion of such ISPs reported positive repatriation experiences, and Hypothesis 5 clearly could not account for their satisfaction. Based on these considerations, we did not believe that the high potential employee hypothesis held significant promise for explaining variation in repatriation experiences.

Table 1
Descriptive career characteristics of the ISPs during their last overseas assignments.

| ISP Id. No. w/job satisfaction | Specialists vs. generalists | Size and structure ^a | Length of stay abroad (years) | Contact with domestic organization | Country's level of development | Year of return ^b | Similarity in job content |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------|--|--|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1 - | Generalist | JV | 3 | No | Developing | 1983 | No |
| 2 - | Generalist | Major sub | 9 | No | Developed | 1983 | No |
| 3 + | Specialist | Corp | 3 | Yes | Developed | 1981 | No |
| 4 - | Generalist | JV | 3 | No | Developing | 1983 | No |
| 5 + | Generalist | Corp | 11 | Yes | Developed | 1986 | Yes |
| 6 + | Generalist | Div | 8 | No | Developing | 1986 | No |
| 7 + | Specialist | Corp | 6 | Yes | Developed | 1984 | No |
| 8 + | Generalist | Sub | 2 | No | Developed | 1981 | No |
| 9 + | Generalist | Corp | 2 | Yes | Developed | 1981 | Yes |
| 10 + | Specialist | JV | 4 | Yes | Developed | 1981 | Yes |
| 11 - | Specialist | Corp | 6 | Yes | Developed | 1984 | Yes |
| 12 + | Specialist | Corp | 4 | No | Developed | 1972 | Yes |
| 13 + | Specialist | Sub | 16 | No | Developing | 1977 | Yes |
| 14 - | Generalist | JV | 2 | No | Developing | 1983 | No |
| 15 + | Generalist | Major sub | 3 | No | Developing | 1984 | No |

^aJV = joint venture; Major sub = major subsidiary; Corp = corporate staff; Div = division; Sub = small subsidiary.
^bp ≤ .01.

It was not until after we conducted interviews with GM managers that we began to consider more carefully the second hypothesis for which we had no data initially—Hypothesis 6, Type of Home Unit. In the next sections, we recount the second phase of data collection and analysis, a phase we initiated after our early hypothesis testing did not yield satisfactory results.

Managers' Explanations for Variation in Repatriation Experiences

Car and Component Divisions

In our initial phase of data collection, one of the ISP program administrators (and former ISP) with whom we worked closely proposed Hypothesis 6, Type of Home Unit. This hypothesis was the second of two specific hypotheses that we were unable to test. Since this administrator was keenly interested in our research, he became a key informant with whom we kept in touch throughout the entire project. During the period in which we were generating and testing specific hypotheses, he continued to emphasize his organizational explanation by contrasting the repatriation experiences of ISPs from the car and component divisions. He based his explanation on extensive professional knowledge of ISPs who returned or were about to return to the United States.

During the second phase of data collection, our key informant repeatedly pointed out to us that since GM maintains geographically and organizationally separate operating units for its domestic car divisions (such as Chevrolet Motor Division) and its overseas subsidiaries (such as Vauxhall Motors Ltd.), "there is no connection between the two [types of operations]." Therefore, he suggested, the domestic car divisions do not value returning ISPs, since such units have little need for knowledge and skills pertaining to the international operations. Similarly, these domestic units will "probably not recommend their best candidates [for overseas assignments] because they do not want to lose them." Instead, these domestic units probably will tend to send their expendable employees, a phenomenon we documented in our earlier work (Briody and Baba 1989, 1992). By contrast, the component divisions (such as Delco Remy Division) are organized in a way that links together domestic and overseas branches to form an integrated international structure. Consequently, the managers of component units have an incentive to learn more about international operations and to train employees to understand and manage such operations. For these reasons, component divisions will tend to send their best candidates overseas, plan for their return, and make good use of their newfound skills once they have rejoined the domestic operations.

Following our unsuccessful tests of the specific hypotheses, we decided to explore further the relationship between organizational structure and repatriation variation proposed by our key informant. Consequently, we conducted in-depth interviews with ten other GM managers who were also former ISPs but not part of the original sample. Because the time of these managers was limited, we did not gather any additional systematic data about their overseas experiences. In eight of these interviews, the managers suggested that ISPs leaving from, employed overseas in, and returning to the same component divisions were more likely to experience ease of repatriation than ISPs affiliated with the car divisions. One manager stated:

Once you leave the North American Car Group¹² to go and work for any overseas car operation, you drop out of the headcount of the North American Car Group and you are replaced by someone else. . . . On the other hand, while the components are all U.S.-based divisions, their headcount is all internationally based. . . . They can swap people back and forth. They have the advantage of putting people back in the domestic operations.

Another manager commented in a similar fashion:

Now since the component divisions run the overseas component plants, they must send their own ISPs. You could end up going to Alabama or France. While overseas you are still getting letters from your general manager. The relationships and communications continue to be pres-

ent because you haven't left Saginaw Division. By contrast, the car divisions [in the U.S.] could care less about GM España or Opel.

The statements of these managers not only corroborated our key informant's hypothesis, but also were useful in elaborating that hypothesis. In particular, the new data were useful in explaining how the career paths of ISPs differ in different types of units, such as car and component divisions, and how such career path differences relate to repatriation. When an ISP leaves a domestic component division (such as Delco Remy Division) for an overseas assignment in one of that component division's European offices, career continuity appears to be assured. The overseas assignment is viewed as one more learning experience contributing to that individual's overall development within an integrated career system. By contrast, when an ISP originates from a car division, such as Pontiac Motor Division, he must interrupt his career path to take an overseas assignment. Career disruption results because overseas positions are not part of the career system existing within a domestic car division. Overseas assignments bring a great deal of learning that often bears no relationship to the knowledge needs of the domestic operations. Thus, when the ISP returns to domestic duty, his overseas professional development often is considered superfluous to the career system in the domestic home unit. These returning ISPs may be stigmatized further by the domestic managers' tendency to select employees for overseas assignments who have reached a plateau or dead end in their careers. When such individuals return from overseas, domestic managers may continue to view them as expendable personnel.

Service Parts Operations

Two other managers that we interviewed, one of whom was a former ISP, identified another unit within GM associated with ease of repatriation—the Service Parts Operations (SPO) unit, which is responsible for warehousing, distribution, and parts sales. By the early 1980s, SPO sent ISPs overseas. By 1985, the ISPs were selected through a subunit known as SPO-International. These two managers stated that “the career path of an SPO employee is not strictly centered in Detroit. Taking an overseas assignment may be a usual part of the career path.” ISPs are recruited from the domestic units of SPO, including GM Parts and AC-Delco, as well as SPO Canada. Before going overseas, they often take assignments at the SPO-International office in Detroit to learn the administrative aspects of SPO's international business.

Upon return from their overseas assignments, the majority of these ISPs take domestic assignments within the larger SPO organization—particularly with SPO-International—so that their new skills can be put to use quickly. One of the managers remarked:

The ISP returns and is then interwoven into the organization. He will bring back something back to us [*sic*]. On the other hand, if Opel gets a guy to leave Oldsmobile for a three-year period, the situation is more problematic. Upon repatriation the guy returns to Olds having fulfilled a function overseas. Whether or not Olds uses the talents he picked up overseas—which he must have acquired—is questionable.

The SPO-International organization seems to exhibit some of the same structural characteristics as the component divisions, since a career path in SPO may span both the domestic and international spheres.

General Motors Overseas Operations

As we gathered these new interview data, we noticed that the GM managers' organizational explanations had a ring of familiarity to them, prompting us to revisit some of the interview data gathered during the first phase of research. In reviewing these earlier data, we realized that the type of organizational structure described for both the component divisions and SPO was similar to the organizational structure of GM's overseas operations (which began in the early decades of this century and was described by several of our first-phase interviewees). GM eventually created two overseas divisions—General