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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