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RESEARCH PAPER

Non-traditional international assignments, knowledge and innovation: an exploratory study of women's experiences

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For many multinational corporations (MNCs), sustainable competitive advantage resides in an MNC's ability to innovate; that is, to create new knowledge, integrate it with an existing knowledge base and exploit the resulting knowledge bundles across national borders. Traditionally, a key mechanism by which knowledge is transferred across borders and recombined works through expatriate assignments. There is, however, a growing trend towards alternative forms of international assignments, such as flexpatriates, commuters, frequent flyers and self-initiated expatriates. We ask how the use of such non-traditional international assignments affects knowledge creation and transfer in MNCs and hence innovation, which we construe as both idea generation and implementation. Our exploratory study draws on the experiences of five women living in Spain who undertook various forms of international assignment in MNCs with differing administrative heritages, working in consultancy and engineering fields. Our findings point to variations in the type and quality of knowledge generated across different forms of international assignments, and draw attention to the socially embedded, informal interactions underpinning much knowledge transfer and recombination. Our findings are also suggestive of a gendered element to knowledge creation and transfer, and how these activities may be perceived by the senior management of MNCs. Our concluding conjecture is that within each form of international assignment, women's contributions to the innovative efforts of MNCs may have somewhat less to do with formal management practices, and may even, at times, be in spite of them.

Introduction

As major global competitors achieve parity in the scale of operations and their international market positions, the ability to link and leverage knowledge is increasingly the factor that differentiates the winners from the losers and survivors. (Bartlett and Ghoshal, 1998, p.14)

When faced with growing and intense competition, the most important strength of multinational corporations (MNCs) rarely lies in stand-alone human, financial or physical resources. Rather, sustainable competitive advantage resides in an MNC's ability to innovate – that is, to create new knowledge, integrate it with an existing knowledge base and exploit the resulting knowledge bundles across national borders

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Accepting editor: Stuart Macdonald

(Porter, 1990; Bartlett and Ghoshal, 1998; Michailova and Mustaffa, 2012; Verbeke, 2013). Thus, innovation in MNCs involves both new technologies and new ways of doing things. Much innovation is incremental – even mundane – and based on a path-dependent accumulation of small insights and their application, rather than radical technological breakthroughs. Indeed, innovations are about not only new ideas, but also the implementation of these ideas, and their continual refinement through practice (Kastelle and Steen, 2011; Rainford, 2011). Hence, what is taken for granted in one organisational unit of an MNC may be an innovation when the requisite knowledge is transferred and applied in another unit or context. All innovations involve some recombination of knowledge. A key mechanism by which knowledge can be transferred across borders and recombined is through international assignments (IAs) of MNC employees.

The traditional international assignment involves expatriation, with the employee and possibly family relocating for periods longer than a year (Tahvanainen *et al.*, 2005), and ordinarily extending to between three and five years (Collings *et al.*, 2007). The extent to which expatriates are used is, in part, related to the MNC's administrative heritage – or key routines around knowledge creation and transfer developed since inception (Verbeke, 2013). There is, however, a growing trend towards alternative forms of IA, such as flexpatriates, commuters, frequent flyers and self-initiated expatriates (e.g. Welch *et al.*, 2003; Mayerhofer *et al.*, 2004a, 2004b; Collings *et al.*, 2007; Mayerhofer *et al.*, 2012). These non-traditional IAs are thought to overcome many of the impediments MNCs increasingly face in using traditional expatriate assignments, including high costs and staffing shortages. While a growing body of academic research examines how non-traditional IAs may help overcome these problems, less attention has been given to the implications these non-traditional IAs may hold for knowledge creation and transfer within MNCs. Hence, we ask: how does the use of non-traditional international assignments affect knowledge creation and transfer in MNCs. What are the implications for innovation?

Our study is exploratory and focuses on the experiences of five women living in Spain who undertook international assignments in MNCs. The women are of different nationalities, including parent country and third-country nationals, and worked in consulting or engineering fields. Their experiences represent both traditional and alternative forms of international assignments. We do not attempt direct comparison of the experiences of women with those of men, but instead seek to add to the literature on international assignments, currently dominated by the experiences of men. This is not surprising: while the number of women undertaking IAs is growing, a study by Brookfield Global Relocation Services (2012) estimates that only 20% of all IAs are undertaken by women. By adding women's voices to the conversation, we bring new insights that may lend themselves to naturalistic generalisations that draw on the readers' prior experience (Stake, 1978), and open new – or enrich existing – avenues of inquiry.

Below, we provide brief reviews of the nature and purpose of non-traditional international assignments, and the nature and role of knowledge creation, transfer and recombinations in MNCs. We then describe how we conducted our study, followed by accounts of the women's experiences. In reconstructing their stories, we focus on the relationship between the type of IA undertaken, and knowledge transfers and innovation. Here, we interweave description, interpretation, theorisation and conjecture, linking the value of the knowledge transfers and recombination to the administrative heritage of the MNCs in which the women are employed. We also

draw out a collective story – or shared experiences – where gender comes to the fore. As an exploratory study, our findings are suggestive rather than conclusive, pointing to how things might be, rather than definitive statements of how they are.

Types of international assignments

A traditional expatriate assignment involves the relocation of an employee – and his or her family – for between 12 months and five years (Tahvanainen *et al.*, 2005; Collings *et al.*, 2007). It typically involves a change of address and time enough to need some semi-permanent adjustment to local conditions (de Cieri and McGaughey, 1998, p.631). MNCs send employees overseas for different reasons, such as developing individual or organisational capabilities; filling positions and bridging managerial or technical skill gaps abroad; transferring, acquiring and using knowledge; building global relationships and common corporate identity; and controlling and coordinating subsidiaries (de Cieri and McGaughey, 1998; Haines *et al.,* 2008; Nery-Kjerfve and McLean, 2012). It is typically recommended that these professional and organisational objectives are determined before the assignment, being a key factor in shaping the type of international assignment.

Based on a sample of 900 firms, PriceWaterhouseCoopers (2010) predicts an increase in IAs of 50% by 2020, mainly because of the evolution of country-based companies into global multinationals. However, traditional IAs are becoming less attractive to MNCs. Reasons include the high costs of expatriation of employees and families; direct and indirect cost of expatriate failure that may arise through, for example, difficulties families have adapting (Mayerhofer *et al.*, 2004b); difficulties with performance evaluation in IAs; the shortage of staff willing to engage in IAs (in part because of the rise in dual career couples); and the impact of such events as terrorism. These factors all make the recruitment and retention of expatriates increasingly problematic (Collings *et al.*, 2007; Mayerhofer *et al*., 2010). With international assignments remaining crucial for MNCs and even growing in importance, it is predicted that there will be a greater use of shorter forms of IAs and a reduction in the traditional forms. Short assignments are often considered a prerequisite for promotions and leadership roles, and are already used by many large MNCs. Table 1 briefly describes an array of IAs.

The move towards alternative types of IAs has been facilitated by changes in business and technology, such as organisational networks and more flexible coordination of global units (Mayerhofer *et al*., 2010); developments in transport connections that reduce the time and cost of travelling; and improvements in broadband data connection that enable better coordination (Mayerhofer *et al.*, 2012). IAs that do not involve relocation avoid many of the costs and difficulties of traditional assignments. Alternative forms are useful in volatile and some developing countries because of the reluctance of expatriates to relocate to these areas (Welch and Worm, 2006). Alternative IAs also have the potential to enhance the work–life balance of international assignees (Fischlmayr and Kollinger, 2010), although Meyskens *et al.* (2009) observe that no form of IA gives an optimal solution.

Who undertakes IAs is also changing. Since the mid-1990s, there have been skill shortages and women have been encouraged to undertake IAs (Shortland, 2011), but their participation has grown slowly. Adler (1984), in a study of more than 13,000 expatriates of US and Canadian firms, found that less than 3% of the expatriates were women. According to the Global Relocation Survey (2012) of 123 firms

Table 1. Types of international assignments.

Type of assignment	Definition
Traditional	Relocation of an employee – and his or her family – for a period of time that is deemed to require a change of address and some semi-permanent adjustment to local conditions (de Cieri and McGaughey, 1998, p.631). Duration varies: for example, for more than one year (Mayerhofer *et al.*, 2004b), for between 12 and 36 months (Tahvanainen *et al.*, 2005), or three–five years (Collings *et al.*, 2007, p.199).
Short term	This IA lasts between one month and one year and is frequently motivated by trouble-shooting, problem solving and other technical issues (Meyskens *et al.*, 2009). The family generally does not relocate (Tahvanainen *et al.*, 2005).
Commuter	A worker travels overseas on a weekly or bi-weekly basis to the same host country and the family do not relocate (Mayerhofer *et al.*, 2004a; Collings *et al.*, 2007), with most of the work completed in the host county (Mayerhofer *et al.*, 2012).
Frequent flyer	An employee who conducts several business trips, but does not relocate (Mayerhofer *et al.,* 2004a, 2004b).It involves frequent trips (between a few days up to a week), regular communication with the home unit, and the family stays at home (Mayerhofer *et al.*, 2012). Work is done both in the home country and abroad and can include work assignments in a variety of countries.
Flexpatriate	Short term, unaccompanied and business travel assignments by people who are still in the job at home office, but have a workload in other countries. Their place of residence does not change. The characteristics of a flexpatriate assignment include: (1) frequent alteration between different locations of work, including different national and regional cultures; (2) a flexible schedule of time and/ or time zones, an unclear separation between leisure and work time, and few daily routines; (3) changing social relations and contacts with co-workers, and connecting and disconnecting relations with family and friends (Mayerhofer *et al*., 2004a, 2004b, 2010).
Rotational	Occurs when the employee spends, successively, a short period of time working overseas, followed by a period at home (Collings *et al.*, 2007).
Contractual	Used when an international project requires specific skills. The employee is sent overseas for up to 6 or 12 months (Collings *et al.*, 2007).
Virtual	Only one member (the virtual assignee) is geographically distant, and he or she is physically located in the home unit, that may or may not be the company headquarters (Welch *et al.*, 2003). A virtual team differs in that more than one member is geographically distant. These assignees may have other roles in the country where they are staying. Members of the team work through information and communication technologies (Collings *et al.*, 2007).
Permanent international transferee	Conduct multiple IAs – with or without returning briefly to the home country – and the boundaries between home, host and third country are less clear (Mayerhofer *et al.*, 2012).

(*Continued*)

Table 1. (*Continued*).

Type of assignment	Definition
Self-initiated	People who, of their own volition, seek and find work overseas. They are gainfully employed in a position outside their home country, and were not sent there by an employer (Fee and Karsaklian, 2013, pp.90–91). This reflects highly proactive behaviour by the individual taking control of his/her own career and operating with a high degree of personal agency, but often with imprecise personal developmental (Mayerhofer *et al.*, 2012, p. 302).

located worldwide, almost three decades later only 20% of international assignees are women (Brookfield Global Relocation Services, 2012). Studies of women in IAs have focussed on explaining their low participation and poor adjustment (Linehan and Scullion, 2002; Tharenou, 2010; Shortland, 2011) rather than on considering the contribution women can make to innovation and knowledge recombination in MNCs through international assignments.

Knowledge creation, transfer and recombination in MNCs

The MNC has been conceptualised as a 'bundle of knowledge' because of its ability to transfer and exploit knowledge more effectively and efficiently at the intra-corporate level than through external mechanisms (Gupta and Govindarajan, 2000, p.473). Useful knowledge comprises a whole bevy of bits of information (Macdonald, 1998) fitted together in a complex pattern of configuration, not unlike a jigsaw puzzle (Lamberton, 1998).

> Knowledge is a fluid mix of framed experience, values, contextual information, and expert insight that provides a framework for evaluating and incorporating new experiences and information. It originates and is applied in the minds of knowers. In organisations, it often becomes embedded not only in documents or repositories but also in organisational routines, processes, practices, and norms … [It is] obtained from individuals, groups, or organisational routines either through structured media or through person-to-person contact. (Davenport and Prusak, 1998, p.5)

The above definition of knowledge captures a variety of dimensions or attributes commonly used to classify knowledge. First is the tacit and explicit nature of knowledge. Tacit knowledge is more difficult to articulate and thus pass on to others. It is 'what we know, but we cannot explain', whereas explicit knowledge 'can be codified and embedded in formal rules, tools and processes' (De Long and Fahey, 2000, p.114). Second is the location at which knowledge may reside and be created: at the individual level (i.e. what people know and know how to do); organisational level (i.e. in firm systems, processes, tools and routines); and at the inter-organisational (external) level, acquired from – or shared with – external partners, such as important customers, suppliers or competitors (Hedlund, 1994; De Long and Fahey, 2000; Sveiby, 2001). Knowledge can also take different forms: technical, procedural and social knowledge. Technical knowledge is understood as knowledge regarding concepts, facts and events, such as customer preferences; procedural is knowledge about processes or skills, such as those used

in developing a prototype (Moorman and Miner, 1997; Alic 2008); while social knowledge is the fruit of relationships between individuals or groups (De Long and Fahey, 2000). Finally, a distinction is often made between location-bound knowledge, such as market-specific knowledge that even if transferred across borders cannot readily be applied to create value, and non-location bounded knowledge, such as general knowledge about similarities of a production system that is more easily exploited across borders (Johanson and Vahlne, 1977; McGaughey, 2002; Verbeke, 2013). While an MNC can transfer, deploy and exploit general knowledge successfully (Verbeke, 2013), it faces greater difficulties with market-specific knowledge because this is unique to a particular location.

Hence, an important consideration for MNCs is the transferability of knowledge (Santosh and Krishnaveni, 2012), although not all MNCs seek the same degree and type of knowledge transfer and recombination. The 'administrative heritage' of an MNC captures the key routines around knowledge creation and transfer developed by the MNC since inception, and can be used to distinguish four MNC archetypes (Verbeke, 2013): centralised exporter, international projector, multi-centred MNC and international coordinator. The centralised exporter archetype embodies key knowledge and routines into the final products at the home country, which are then exported. The role of expatriates in transferring knowledge across borders is, thus, very limited. The international projector is an MNC with success in the home country that transfers its core knowledge or 'recipes' to its units overseas, with subsidiaries becoming 'clones of the home operations' (Verbeke, 2013, p.18). Accordingly, expatriates in international projector MNCs take on a central role in transferring knowledge from the parent unit to the host country unit. While some knowledge recombination must occur in the host market, it is minimal. In multi-centred MNCs, subsidiaries in each location build up their own location-bound knowledge assets. Expatriates transfer the MNC's core values and routines, and play a key role in the communication between headquarters and subsidiary. However, significant new knowledge recombination occurs in the host country as innovations are context-specific. Finally, the international coordinator's strength lies in its ability to connect efficiently its different units though flexible logistics, while remaining centrally managed and tightly controlled. Ultimately, in international coordinator MNCs, expatriates 'are the most important: they are instrumental to creating effective international value chains, linking economic activities across borders' (Verbeke, 2013, p.314).

Highlighting the importance of expatriates transferring knowledge, Verbeke (2013, p.315) states that 'experienced expatriates constitute a non-location-bound [firm-specific advantage] in their own right'. The paradox facing international human resource managers is that, despite the increasing value of experienced talent, internationally mobile talent is more difficult to attract, motivate and retain (Meyskens *et al.*, 2009). The growth of alternative forms of IAs may alleviate some of this tension, in part because they may be more 'friendly' to work–life balance (Fischlmayr and Kollinger, 2010) and accommodate career disruptions arising from, for example, childbearing (Shortland, 2011). Our conjecture is that different forms of IAs will have different consequences for the effectiveness of knowledge transfer in MNCs, and that this will be affected by the MNC archetype, as characterised by their knowledge transfer and recombination strategy. How these non-traditional international

assignments may facilitate knowledge recombination in MNCs remains poorly understood, and is the focus of this exploratory study.

Methods

We focus on the women's understanding of the purpose of their assignment, how they experience the international assignment, and their perceptions of the consequences for knowledge creation and transfer. We summarise the research method in Figure 1, which shows 'research-as-conducted' rather than 'research-as-reported', and hence captures its messy, non-linear characteristics (McGaughey, 2007). Figure 1 also illustrates a progressive focussing approach (Sinkovics and Alfoldi, 2012), used when existing theory or preliminary understanding and discovered reality do not necessarily match.

We used a social constructionist and narrative, interpretive approach to the inquiry (Task 2). We sought to understand (*verstehen*) the experiences of the participants from their own perspective (Tracy, 2013) and related how different types of IAs affect knowledge transfer and innovation in MNCs. The women telling us their stories facilitated this understanding (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). We identified potential participants through personal networks (Task 3). Using a criterion sampling
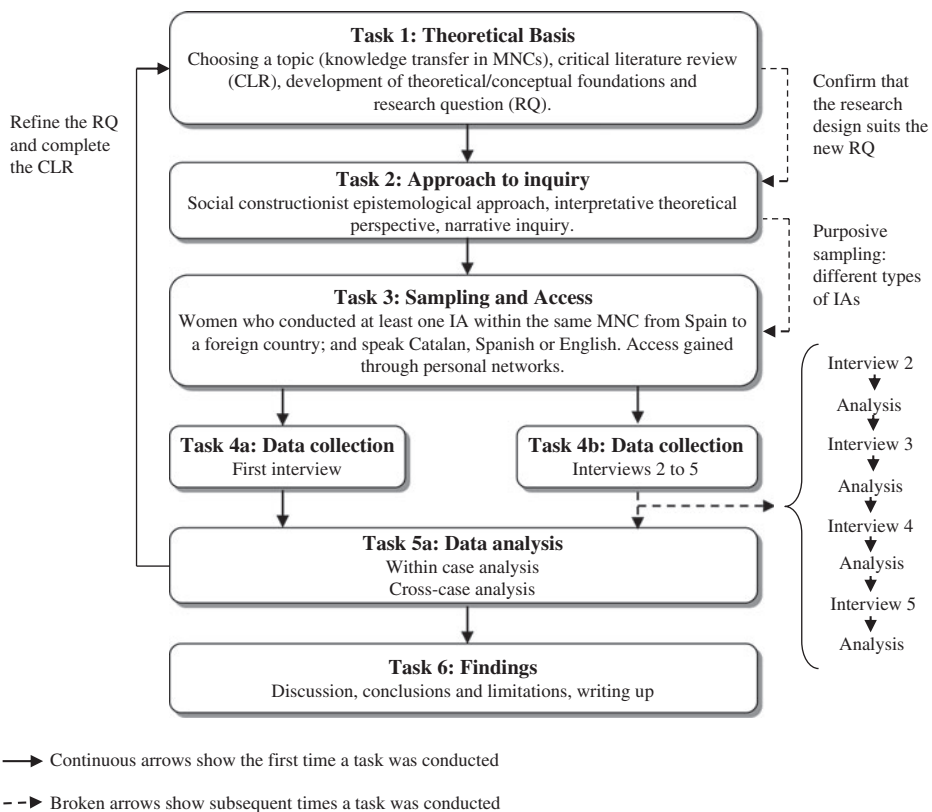

Figure 1. A progressive focussing approach.

strategy (Creswell, 2013), we selected women who undertook at least one IA from Spain to a foreign country, noting that the women are not necessarily Spanish. At first our study focussed on the experience of women in traditional IAs and its effect on knowledge transfer. However, in the first interview we found that the woman's experience was not characteristic of a traditional IA. So, we refined the sampling strategy to emphasise non-traditional IAs, and the focus of the research to understand how different types of IA are related to knowledge transfer in MNCs. This led to a further literature review to understand different forms of IAs (Task 1), in what McGaughey (2007) calls 'cycles of deliberation', and to refinement of our research question.

Snowball sampling was employed to identify different types of IA (Creswell, 2013), resulting in five participants, each of whom was interviewed for at least an hour (Task 4a and 4b). Follow-up interviews were also conducted for clarification and elaboration, and supplemented by email correspondence and publicly available corporate documents and company information. Participant and company names have been modified for the sake of anonymity. Interviews were conducted in Catalan or Spanish at the choice of the interviewee. This could have produced problems in communication and in analysis of the answers (Marschan-Piekkari and Welch, 2004). However, all the women and the researcher conducting the interviews had been living and working in Spain for more than 10 years. Language differences did not prove problematic at the time of interview, but posed some challenges when translating from the language of interview to English. Translations to English were conducted by the interviewer, in consultation with a native English proof reader. Where meaning was ambiguous, clarification was sought from the woman interviewed. In accordance with Chidlow *et al.*'s (2014, p.562) observation that translation should be 'reframed as a process of intercultural interaction, rather than a lexical transfer of meaning', our aim was to capture intended meaning. Such translation is unlikely to be a lexical and grammatical equivalent of the source text. A traditional back-translation and equivalence methodology – typically used in more positivist inquiry – was not aligned with our social constructionist approach. In our study, the researcher/translator brings her own experience and understanding of the source and target cultures to provide the best translation for the target audience.

We followed an analytic induction approach, which consists of a sequence of steps moving between data collection and analysis (Tasks 4 and 5) (Willis, 2007). Following Wertz (2011), we started by analysing each woman's story, and then searched for patterns – or their absence – across stories. Hence, before conducting the next interview we analysed each one (within-case analysis) and compared them (cross-case analysis) (Task 5). Each interview was transcribed and assigned first-order codes according to individual and organisational objectives for the assignment, and how they changed; type of knowledge sought, transferred and recombined, according to existing typologies (e.g. tacit/explicit; market-specific/general; procedural/technical/social; individual/organisational/inter-organisational): and factors affecting knowledge flows. We used Burke's dramatistic pentad (see Tracy, 2013), comprising five elements – act (knowledge flow or recombination related to the IA), scene (context and event), agent (assignee or other actors), agency (mechanism of knowledge flow or use) and purpose (individual or organisational objective) – to interrogate the data, seeking to understand different scenarios and compare how knowledge is used in, and as a result of, different types of IAs.

In our sampling and analysis, we seek neither data saturation (i.e. bringing new participants continually into the study until the dataset is complete, with data replication or redundancy being an indicator of this) nor theoretical saturation (i.e. the point where no new insights are obtained and no new themes identified). Rather, as an exploratory study, we frame our findings as suggestive rather than conclusive – pointing to how things might be, rather than definitive statements of how they are, and opening up opportunities for interpretation, conjecture and new lines of inquiry. Table 2 presents an overview of the women, the nature of their international assignments and the MNC archetype that most closely approximates the firm for which they worked. Together, five of the nine types of assignment documented in Table 1 are represented in the women's experiences, and all four archetypes discussed above are present. Table 3 provides an overview of some of the different forms of knowledge (technical, procedural and social) gained across assignments.

Rather than disaggregating our findings and presenting data in tables or concepts in causal models with formal propositions, we interweave the stories of the women, our interpretations of them and our own theorisation and conjectures, enfolding the literature as appropriate. This better honours the women's experiences, and is more consistent with our own epistemological view that much knowledge is socially embedded. That is, knowledge is often (albeit not always) situation specific, embedded in practice, and often difficult to articulate (Werr, 2012). We use quotes extensively to enhance the verisimilitude, credibility and authenticity of our research – all of which are important criteria of quality in qualitative research (Tracy, 2013; Richardson and McKenna, 2014).

Women's stories of international assignments

Keiko – the trailing self-initiated expatriate

Keiko is a Japanese national, working in Barcelona, Spain for a large Japanese car manufacturer – Nihon Group. In 1989, she graduated in the United States and returned to Japan for four years, where she worked for a British firm. In 1992, Keiko went to Mexico to work for Nihon Group for four years, before again returning to Japan. Following her marriage to Shinichi (who also worked for Nihon Group), Keiko followed him to the United Kingdom in 1999, where he was expatriated from Japan to a subsidiary. Keiko followed Shinichi three more times in his career at Nihon Group: to Barcelona in 2001, when again she started to work in Nihon Group; to the United Kingdom in 2008; and back to Barcelona in 2010. At the time of our research, both Keiko and Shinichi were working for Nihon Group in Barcelona. While Keiko's husband was assigned to these overseas postings by the company, each of Keiko's transfers during her married life were considered to be voluntary.

Keiko's international assignments were not initiated by the MNC, but were self-initiated expatriations. Self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) are individuals who move to a country outside their own, and take up employment on local terms (McDonnell and Scullion, 2013). Rather than being transferred by the MNC from one subsidiary to another, the overseas relocation is initiated by the individual, and the expatriate is responsible for her own move and for securing a new position (Suutari and Brewster, 2000; Fee and Karsaklian, 2013). McDonnell and Scullion (2013) identify an array of SIE groups according to motivations for the international assignment. This ranges from 'career focussed SIEs', who view international experience as a key means of

Table 2. Interviewee and assignment characteristics.

	Marital status	No. of children	Company name	MNC archetype	Type of IA	Justification for types of IA
Sonia (Spanish)	Single/never married	None	Rail Engineering Services	International projector	Traditional	She relocated for two years in the US to start a new department, copying the one from Spain. After the IA, she returned and remained in Spain
Anna (Spanish)	Married	1	Nexus Consultants	Multi-centred MNC	Flexpatriate, short term and traditional	Three months in Brazil, three months in Morocco, one year in Kuwait. Short term trips continuously, unaccompanied. No change in place of residence, but work conducted in another country
			Dial Consultancy Barcelona Management Consultants (BMC)		Commuter	One year weekly (two nights) to Morocco, five months weekly to Manchester. She travelled overseas weekly, unaccompanied. Her place of residence did not change, but her work was conducted in another country
Maria (Brazilian)	Married	None	Nouveau Car Makers	International coordinator	Short term	Eight months in France. Single IA for less than a year, unaccompanied
			Nihon Car Manufacturer	International coordinator	Traditional and virtual	Two years in UK while managing the department from Barcelona. She relocated from Spain for two years to the UK to start a new department, using as a reference the operations in Spain. At the same time, she managed the department in Spain through a virtual assignment, and was the only member of the Barcelona team physically in another country. After the IA, she returned and remained in Spain
Gloria (Spanish)	Partner/*de facto* relationship	None	BMC	Multi-centred MNC	Short term and traditional IA / Flexpatriate	Six months in Morocco (returning to Barcelona each weekend), two years in Mexico (with home visits every three months), twice for a few months to Venezuela Short term trips continuously, unaccompanied. Her place of residence did not change, but work conducted in another country
Keiko (Japanese)	Married	2	Nihon Car Manufacturer	International coordinator	Trailing, self-initiated	Two years in the UK. She followed her husband who undertook a traditional IA assignment from Barcelona to the UK with Nihon Group

Table 3. Forms of knowledge acquired according to the types of IA.

Type of assignment	Type of knowledge transferred	
	Assignment-specific transfer	Transfers common in all
Traditional (Sonia; Maria, second)	Procedural (how) • Management skills • Subsidiary best practices	
Short term (Maria, first)	Procedural (how) • Subsidiary best practices	Procedural (how) • Expertise
Flexpatriate (Anna, first; Gloria)	Procedural (how) • How to conduct a project	Technical (what) • National culture and systems
Commuter (Anna, second)	Procedural (how) • Methodology of a particular project • Other firms' best practices • Local business knowledge Technical (what) • Project structure	Social (who) • Network connections
Self-initiated (Keiko)	Technical (what) • Terminology • Subsidiary operations	

enhancing career prospects, to 'trailing SIEs', where the SIE may be the spouse of a traditional expatriate, as was Keiko.

Keiko explained that her objective was to follow Shinichi, not advance her own professional career. This is not uncommon in Japanese MNCs. Compared with German, UK and US MNCs, parent-country nationals dominate expatriate staffing in Japanese MNCs (Tungli and Peiperl, 2009), and are typically – indeed, almost exclusively – male (Wong, 2001, 2005; Kayes and Yamazaki, 2007). Japanese employees have traditionally been expected to fulfil any role a company assigns, and are used as important instruments for coordination and control (Wong, 2005; Tungli and Peiperl, 2009; Pudelko and Tenzer, 2013). In a study of 136 German, Japanese, UK and US MNCs, Tungli and Peiperl (2009) find that being perceived as loyal to the company was an important selection criterion in Japanese MNCs, but – consistent with Keiko's experience – the willingness of the family to relocate was significantly less important among the Japanese respondents than among the German, UK and US respondents ($p < 0.001$).

Thus, expectations placed on Keiko conformed to traditional cultural norms of *ryoosai kenbo* – or good wives and wise mothers (Saint Arnault and Roles, 2012) – in her role of 'company wife', despite her own expatriate career within the same company prior to her marriage. The firm did not provide any assistance to Keiko as a trailing spouse in a dual career marriage. Further, no family support was provided for the move from Spain to the UK. This is not unusual. Typically, Nihon Group

provides only organisational support for the family in certain circumstances. If the relocation is from Japan to Europe, the MNC provides relocation support, whereas an intra-Europe transfer attracts no organisational support. As Keiko explained:

> Within Europe itself, human resources is not responsible for my work permit, is not responsible for house search, is not in charge of looking for babysitters and school for children. Therefore, I had to do everything by myself. And I could not rely much on my husband because his work is in the same company, but he is a director and has neither the time nor the availability to help in these things. The main reason for the move was my husband and I, as a mother, had to take care of this entire infrastructure. In addition to being concerned about my job, I had to worry about the family.

Prior to leaving Barcelona and following her husband to the UK in 2008, Keiko worked in the technical centre of Nihon Group, which develops product design. In the United Kingdom, she secured employment through her own initiative and worked in production control in a Nihon Group factory. This UK factory uses the design provided by the Barcelona technical centre to make the product. Thus, its management was interested in drawing on Keiko's prior experience in Barcelona with an earlier step in the value chain:

> … when I gave my resume to human resources in England, they looked to see where they could place me. Then they gave it to a department which saw my profile, and they were interested in having me, even temporarily.

Keiko's main task in the UK was to receive information from the design department and to transfer it to the production system. Keiko described her expertise as akin to being both 'the supplier and the user' and that 'having vision from both points made it much easier to do the job well'.

Although Keiko explained in our discussions that she 'had more to offer than she could learn' in her self-initiated international assignment, the experiences she described also suggested that an array of knowledge was acquired in the host country, ultimately to the benefit of the MNC upon her return to Barcelona, again following her husband. Self-initiated expatriates who want to be transferred within the same firm are often effectively able to transfer knowledge, with the firm benefitting from the creation of social networks (Richardson *et al.*, 2013). Keiko spoke of three different kinds of knowledge acquired: knowledge related to the needs of the factory ('I know the needs of both sides'); terminology ('the vocabulary that the factory and the engineers use may vary'); and the operations of the host country unit (Keiko received 'complete training about the operational system of the destination [host country unit]'). As summarised in Table 3, Keiko thus acquired both technical knowledge in understanding the needs of the factory and the terminology (Moorman and Miner, 1997; Black and Gregersen, 1999; Alic, 2008), and organisational knowledge in the form of understanding how the host unit operates (Hedlund, 1994; De Long and Fahey, 2000). In addition, Keiko built social networks across the organisation. Keiko explained that, while in the UK, Japanese people (parent country nationals, like her) or Spaniards also living in the United Kingdom preferred to talk with her rather than with host country nationals. Because of this, Keiko performed an important role in facilitating communication in the host country, although this was not a formal responsibility. People from Barcelona and or Japan also used her as a 'window' on the UK operations. Keiko thus developed and shared social knowledge

and, through her relationships with suppliers of different parts of the car, developed market-specific knowledge (Johanson and Vahlne, 1977; Boisot, 1995, 1998; Verbeke, 2013).

Upon the family's return after two years abroad, Keiko had some difficulty finding a job in Barcelona. She eventually found a position within Nihon Group similar to the one she had held prior to moving to the UK. Her new position included acquisitions and budget control for projects, liaison among various departments of Nihon Group, and liaison between another car manufacturers and Nihon Group. Nihon Group buys product development from another car manufacturers. When there are modifications to be made in the design acquired, Keiko takes part in integrating these changes into the production process, acting as a liaison among the firms involved. She perceived her role as solving problems, almost as a fire fighter. For example, if a department had problems understanding a process, she participated as if she were an interpreter, providing engineering knowledge derived from her diverse experience, even though she is not a qualified engineer. Keiko acted as an important bridge (Richardson and McKenna, 2014) between MNC subunits both while abroad and upon her return to Barcelona. Keiko's self-initiated expatriation resulted in professional development and social networks akin to those in a traditional expatriate assignment involving rotation through functional areas, and benefitted Nihon Group immensely:

> Many people do not see the needs of the factory. Then I can [take part] when there is a conflict. One side needs one thing and the other one does not understand the need. I could help others by explaining how the other side works, so we can provide the information correctly. I also met more people. Obviously, when someone wants to investigate something, I can direct them: 'for this matter you should contact such a department, such a person, such a director …'.

Keiko considers that, at the professional level, her international assignment was successful because, with her diverse contacts and functional expertise, she can now facilitate interactions between organisational members and external parties. Again, this was an informal role:

> This is not my job … When you know the other person in the same company, there is more motivation to help the other one, not only for friendship. When you know the other person, I feel bad rejecting to help them. Therefore, it increases the willingness to work.

What is striking in Keiko's stories of her self-initiated expatriations, in terms of knowledge transfers and potential innovation, is how she contributes to the interface competence of Nihon Group, the 'ability to coordinate external organizations into the strategy of the local firm, to liaise with external bodies and governments and to cohere these activities into one strategy' (Buckley, 2009, p.233). Nihon Group's global strategy emphasises cost leadership, with efficiencies sought in purchasing, logistics and in-house activities in production across borders. Value creation activities are dispersed around the world with, for example, research and development units concentrated in Japan and the United Kingdom, factories in South America, and financing and leasing services in Australia. In terms of MNC archetypes (Verbeke, 2013), Nihon Group's operations most closely approximate to those of the international coordinator. Hennart (1994)

argues that in MNCs such as Nihon Group, it is the coordination of multiple and geographically-dispersed activities that adds value and constitutes an important ownership-specific advantage for MNCs (Dunning, 1988; Dunning and Lundan, 2010). Such ownership-specific advantages have taken on elevated importance over the last decade with ever more finely-sliced and distributed functional tasks in global value chains. Approximately 80% of global trade is cross-border trade in inputs and outputs taking place within the networks of affiliates, contractual partners and arms-length suppliers of MNCs (UNCTAD, 2013). Eriksson *et al.* (2014, p.172) argue that an interface competence thus 'takes into account managers' skills in identifying appropriate external partners, screening their applicability and negotiating contracts'. Thus, an interface competence is crucial in international coordinator type MNCs for implementing new ideas, including improvements in processes. These implementations, and not only the new ideas, are a crucial element in innovation (Kastelle and Steen, 2011; Rainford, 2011).

Yet Keiko's experience as a trailing spouse self-initiated expatriate draws into question the conceptualisation of an interface competence as currently portrayed in the international business literature (Buckley, 2009, 2011; Eriksson *et al.,* 2014). First, the acts of coordination in which Keiko engages – transferring and transforming various types of technical, organisational and social knowledge – relate not only to external parties, but also to intra-MNC exchanges. That is, exchanges or interactions occur among the various subsidiaries within Nihon Group, including functionally distinct subunits. Second, this competence resides not only at the managerial level and with managerial decision making (Buckley, 2009; Eriksson *et al.*, 2014), but, as in Keiko's case, also at an operational level in routines and patterns of behaviour that emerge in interactions between individuals and teams, and from associated learning.

Learning and innovation by Japanese MNCs through inter-organisational networks and relationships has long been a theme in international business, with early managerial studies emphasising the superior learning and knowledge recombination capabilities of Japanese firms *vis-à-vis* their European and North American equivalents (e.g. Hamel *et al.*, 1989; Prahalad and Hamel, 1990; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). More recent research has explored the learning challenges faced by Japanese MNCs as network cohesion and related information flows are threatened through global expansion (Hatani and McGaughey, 2013), and the difficulties Japanese expatriates face when seeking to maximise organisational learning through international assignments (Wong, 2001, 2005). A significant impediment to learning identified by Wong (2001, 2005), for example, is the strong corporate clans (*dozuku*) operating in Japanese MNCs, from which head office tends to select expatriates. *Dozoku* inhabitants are considered less likely to bring back non-Japanese work practices to the parent-company from their overseas assignments. Further, Japanese expatriates consider the parent company as their community base, which relates to the concept of a household group (*ie*). Human relationships within the *ie* (the parent company) are typically more important than relations with host country nationals, and so adaptations to work practices based on host country needs are discouraged where they diverge from parent company norms. Combined, this emphasis on group consciousness and identification and the expatriate selection practices of headquarters proves an impediment to learning from subsidiary operations.

If the learning opportunities of Japanese executive expatriates are curtailed by the organisation and norms of Japanese society, to what greater extent might the potentially valuable knowledge and learning of a mere trailing female spouse be overlooked or under-utilised by Japanese management? Indeed, it is not only managers in such contexts who may fail to recognise the value of prior experience and the potential for knowledge transfer within an MNC. When Keiko was first invited to participate in our research, her initial response was:

> I must say that I can probably contribute very little to your study. As you can understand from my profile, the reason for my re-location was not due to an assignment requested by the company, and therefore, there was no transfer of knowledge involved in the professional aspect. My position in the home unit and that of the host country had no relation at all.

Maria – contrasting traditional and virtual international assignments

Maria is from Brazil and, like Keiko, currently works at Nihon Group:

> I am an industrial engineer … I always worked in the automobile sector. I started to work as process engineer; in other words, designing. At the moment, in Nihon Group, I work in the quality department, project quality.

Prior to joining Nihon Group and directly following her studies in industrial engineering, Maria relocated from Brazil to Vigo in Spain to work for a French car manufacturer, Nouveau Cars, as part of an internship. Like Nihon Group, Nouveau Cars has different stages of its value chain in different parts of the world. The headquarters, human resources and other support departments are located in the parent country, France, with R&D facilities, smelting plants, production plants and assembly plants distributed in Europe, South America and Asia. Nouveau Cars thus coordinates a network of wholly-owned subsidiaries and alliances to seek global efficiencies. Nouveau Cars sent Maria on her first international assignment to work on a specific project for eight months at a plant in southern France, where there was a lack of engineers specialised in her area. Maria described her motivation to accept this short-term international assignment (Collings et al., 2007) as follows:

> It seemed a good professional opportunity to get to know another country, and … well, I spoke a bit of French, so it was an opportunity to use French. … I was 24 years old and I was open to new opportunities. Then, it was a bit for this, a bit more for the adventure.

Maria received considerable organisational support from Nouveau Cars, intended to facilitate work-related and in-country adjustment:

> When it was decided I was going to go, about two months before leaving, they gave me an intensive French course. I had a private teacher after my workday to be able to work more easily in French. … They [the company] explained me a range of cultural things, not linked with the company, but with life in Toulouse.

In addition, the firm took care of all the paperwork associated with the international assignment, including immigration as a Brazilian passport holder, and general day-

to-day concerns, such as access to medical facilities. While in France, Maria learned about a database that catalogued and enabled the retrieval of design and production measurements in a far more efficient manner than the spreadsheets used in the Spanish subsidiary. Upon her repatriation to Spain, Maria took the initiative to mention this to her line manager, who was not aware of the existence of this tool within the MNC. The database was subsequently incorporated in the operations of the Spanish plant with the assistance of Maria. Hence, while Maria brought expertise to the French subsidiary through her short-term assignment, she also engaged in reverse transfer of procedural knowledge about subsidiary best practice (Moorman and Miner, 1997; Black and Gregersen, 1999; Alic, 2008).

Seeking career advancement, Maria joined Nihon Group in Barcelona, where she worked in the quality control department as a section manager, a mid-level position between engineers and managers. The Barcelona subsidiary was part of the MNC's regional organisation that, in addition to its own operations, provided support to different plants throughout Europe when they introduced a new product. Maria remained in this position for four years, and was then sent on an international assignment to the United Kingdom for two years. In the UK, Maria was tasked with establishing a new department based on the example of the Barcelona subsidiary and her own experience:

> [Nihon Group's Spanish subsidiary] has a very good structure working in Spain, and in the UK they needed to open this new business line. Then they needed a person with experience and who was willing to start from scratch, to hire people, and so on.

Maria explained that she decided to go because 'the opportunity was very good, and there was promotion at the end of the process'. The position arose in February, and by the end of March she found herself relocating with very little pre-departure preparation. This was not the only manner in which this traditional international assignment differed from Maria's earlier experience with Nouveau Cars:

> They told me, 'We want you to go, but you need to keep your function here. As we don't have a substitute for you, you have to do both things'. This is very common [in Nihon Group] – you promote a person, but the person is for almost a year carrying out the previous function.

Maria thus found herself simultaneously undertaking a traditional assignment (de Cieri and McGaughey, 1998) involving a relocation from Spain to the UK for two years, and a virtual assignment (Welch *et al.*, 2003) in which she was assigned to manage a team in Nihon Group's Barcelona subsidiary: 'I had to manage both plants'. This is in direct contrast to how virtual assignments are typically characterised. For long-term (greater than one year) virtual expatriates, most working time is devoted to the virtual organisation (Holtbrügge and Schillo, 2008), although there may also be some work interactions in the place of residence (Welch *et al.*, 2003). Further, the virtual assignment typically involves managing in the host country (the UK, in Maria's case) while physically located in the home country (Spain) (Pricewaterhouse Coopers, 2010). In Maria's case, however, the assignment in the host country involved a traditional relocation rather than a virtual international assignment, and Maria managed virtually the operations in her home country unit in Spain. Conceivably, this made the virtual assignment easier in some respects. In virtual assignments, face-to-face con-

tacts with colleagues, customers and suppliers are minimal, and so first-hand experience of the foreign culture and workplace is not gained (Holtbrügge and Schillo, 2008). Maria had, however, established working relations and acquired significant organisational knowledge of the Spanish subsidiary of Nihon Group. Indeed, Maria's reflections on her experience in the UK acknowledged that the organisational objectives of establishing a new operation and management development were fulfilled, and her personal objective of a promotion was achieved. In this new role, she was also able to transfer subsidiary practices from the UK to improve operations in the Spanish subsidiary, and she developed her own management skills, as well as knowledge about the operations of the host country, further building her organisational knowledge (Hedlund, 1994; De Long and Fahey, 2000).

> It was very interesting because I could compare a great deal, like the cultural differences, because the work was the same, but the way of doing things was completely different. This is what I liked the most of this experience, to be able to compare two business units which are exactly the same, but which are in two different countries.

Nonetheless, problems of role conflict in virtual assignments (i.e., to which unit allegiance and responsibilities should lie) and around work time (Welch *et al.*, 2003) were exacerbated for Maria by the dual-job assignment. Maria was the only member of the Barcelona department who was working from a distance. Despite her experience in the Spanish subsidiary, she found getting access to people and departments in the home unit and related knowledge problematic because 'you are not there'. Further, rather than working an eight-hour day when having responsibility for only the Spanish operations, she worked 12-hour days and sometimes weekends when combining the traditional IA with a virtual IA. It was 'almost exclusive dedication to the job'. Maria reflected:

> At the end, it has a negative impact on the new position. This was one of the biggest problems I detected. … When I was in UK, I was more worried about Spain, and in Spain I was more worried about the UK. In other words, I did not do well in either job.

Sonia – a traditional assignment

Sonia is a Spanish woman working in Spain for a designer and builder of trains – Rail Engineering Services (RES) – headquartered in Spain. She finished her studies in industrial engineering in 2007, and in 2010 was assigned to the United States:

> At the end of 2009 I had the opportunity to go temporarily to Washington, DC, to the United States. There was a commercial office and they needed a team to provide technical support for the offers [proposed deliverables in a tender or contract], the ones for the US. … This department only existed here in Spain. A new colleague came with me, who is also from here [Spain] and was new in the company. I went to train him and two other colleagues that were hired, and in some way, to start the group.

While RES both designs and produces different types of trains, a characteristic of this industry – in contrast to Nihon Group – is the need to adapt the trains to the characteristics of each location. For this reason, the final assembly is conducted in the country of use. The subsidiaries overseas are mainly commercial offices or plants producing the trains, with the core designs and know-how developed in the single

R&D unit at home. That is, RES transfers its home country recipe abroad to provide a single, global, specific solution, approximating an international projector MNC archetype (Verbeke, 2013).

Sonia's assignment lasted two years. As well as developing management skills, Sonia acquired significant market-specific knowledge, often of a procedural and social nature 'about how they do offers [in the US], how the relationship with suppliers works, customers … basically about the market'. Referring to the sharing of knowledge acquired in the US with colleagues in Spain upon her repatriation, Sonia echoed Keiko's observation of the importance of informal knowledge transfers: 'it is true that, in an informal way, people ask, but in an informal way'. Sonia explained that the international assignment gave her knowledge about the North American market held by a few at headquarters. In her department:

> I am as a reference [in the department] to … the person who you should go for matters about the United States and when somebody is not familiar with the process, I always try to explain what the characteristics are and why things are like that.

Sonia described how there is an intention within RES to develop training by those who have engaged in an international assignment to transfer market-specific knowledge, in particular, acquired abroad to home nations, but 'in a more formal way … but we have not done it yet'. Further, despite there being a well-developed system of documenting characteristics of trains, with the documents shared to facilitate the transfer of technical knowledge within the MNC, there 'is not any official document for transferring "like this is how things are done in the United States", it is more informal'. While international projector MNCs are adept at transferring their core competencies abroad through international assignments, they may well be less adept at recognising and integrating knowledge from host countries.

Anna and Gloria – living out of suitcases

Anna and Gloria are both Spanish nationals who, at the time of our interviews, were working in a consultancy firm, Barcelona Management Consultants (BMC). BMC is the strategy and management consulting business of a leading IT MNC operating in Europe and Latin America. Roles within BMC were highly structured, with positions starting from entry-level analyst through to consultant, senior consultant, manager, senior manager and partner – as is typical in management consultancies (Werr and Stjernberg, 2003). Anna was a manager within BMC, and had previously worked at Nexus Consultants on telecommunications projects, followed by Dial Consultancy, with whom she was based in Barcelona. Gloria was a senior consultant. The lifestyle of both women is best described as 'living out of suitcases' because of the numerous international assignments the women undertook throughout their careers, including short-term, flexpatriate and commuter assignments, as captured by Anna's career summary:

> Since I finished industrial engineering, I have always worked as consultant. I finished 10 years ago, in 2003, and started to work in Nexus Consultants. Basically, I never worked in Barcelona. I was six months in Madrid, three in Brazil, three in Casablanca, and one year in Middle East, in Kuwait. Then I worked in another consultancy [Dial Consultancy Services], but we developed projects in Barcelona and went overseas just to present them. … Then, I said 'well, change job and look for the same, but that requires less travelling'. And I worked in Barcelona Management Consultants. … I

have been in Casablanca every week [for two or three nights] for a year, and then, I
went to Manchester [also weekly] until I was five months pregnant.

Consultancy firms are often described as knowledge-intensive firms (Alveeson,
1993, 1995; Werr and Stjernberg, 2003). As is typical of the multi-centred MNC
archetype (Verbeke, 2013), key routines (relating, for example, to how a consultancy
project is conducted) are transferred to the host market, where there is a need to
develop new knowledge bundles. Much of the new knowledge created will be
location-bound, being market- or client-specific, but some is internationally transfer-
able. Through their multiple assignments with clients, consultants such as Anna and
Gloria gain access to both problems and solutions in different contexts (Werr, 2012).
Some knowledge, acquired or developed in these different contexts for specific solu-
tions, can then be recombined in novel ways and applied in new contexts. By lever-
aging knowledge and experience from client projects, management consulting firms
can innovate in the content, efficiency and quality of their offerings (Werr, 2012). In
BMC, employees usually conduct the project onsite. During their stay in the host
country, consultants will also seek to identify new needs and sell other projects to
the client, drawing on prior experience. As explained by Anna:

> If you are there, you may find out that in that department they have trouble with some-
> thing. Maybe you had already solved that with another customer and you knew how to
> do it. Therefore, you prepare a commercial offer. … The objective is to execute a pro-
> ject that has already been sold … and, to identify new opportunities.

In contrast to more traditional IAs, Anna and Gloria stayed in the host country for
shorter periods during their flexpatriate IAs, but visited more countries. This repeti-
tion was essential to building a stock of knowledge that could be recombined and
deployed elsewhere:

> As a consultant, you go to a company that is doing a strategic plan, but in three months
> you go to another one. … In a short period of time, you accumulate a lot of experience.
> Therefore, doing the same, but in several companies, is essential.

The nature of the flexpatriate consultancy assignments also facilitated within-country
adjustment, as explained by Anna, reflecting on her experience as a flexpatriate in
Kuwait:

> You do not make local friends, you don't go to have dinner with local friends. You
> don't have an apartment, or you don't have to go to the supermarket. … You arrive
> there, you go to the hotel, and you find 15 people from your company, all Spaniards,
> that are there in the hotel, and they might have been there for two months. And they
> tell you 'the driver picks us up here, in the morning we do that', and so on. I mean
> that, when you arrive there, you are adapted at the moment.

Anna and Gloria described how they create and share knowledge to deliver and gen-
erate new projects using three main mechanisms: (1) constant interaction with differ-
ent people in different parts of the world; (2) a knowledge repository where learning
from all past projects is recorded; and, to a lesser extent, (3) formal presentations
within the organisation upon completion of a project. Knowledge repositories, in par-
ticular, are a common feature of consulting firms (Werr and Stjernberg, 2003), and

reflect an assumption that knowledge generated is an objectively definable commodity that can be codified and easily transferred from place to place. This also reflects an assumption that people are willing to share the knowledge they generate, which may not always be the case (Husted *et al.*, 2005; Welch *et al.*, 2007). Indeed, Anna made clear that some solutions were not made available because they remained in an implementation phase for some time, or because personal incentives worked against sharing. Hostility to knowledge sharing was most apparent when 'a consultant has a large commission and large variable part of their salary associated with sales'.

Anna and Gloria both acknowledged that the most important mechanism to transfer knowledge is through teamwork and personal interactions between consultants and clients, rather than through formal channels. The market- or client-specific knowledge that was needed for each project contained a large tacit and socially-embedded component. Consistent with prior studies, Anna and Gloria acquired this tacit, socially-embedded knowledge mainly while performing their job and engaging in face-to-face contact (Lazarova and Tarique, 2005; Holtbrügge and Schillo, 2008) that allowed for clarification and re-interpretation (Welch and Welch, 2008). As Gloria explained, 'you learn more by doing than if somebody explains something to you'.

Tahvanainen *et al.* (2005) find no evidence for the common assumption that shorter forms of IAs can transfer knowledge as effectively as traditional ones. There is, perhaps inevitably, a trade-off between breadth and depth of knowledge acquired across traditional and flexpatriate assignments. Traditional IAs hold greater potential for the employee to obtain deeper domain knowledge (such as subsidiary best-practices, as Maria experienced in her traditional assignment), but can be limited to the host country environment. In contrast, flexpatriate IAs hold greater potential for the employee to acquire knowledge from several locations, engage in novel recombinations, and apply this new knowledge in multiple geographic locations. We can only speculate whether the depth of knowledge garnered is sufficient for more than incremental innovations across projects.

An unexpected finding was the differential impact on knowledge transfer of flexpatriate and commuter assignments. While a flexpatriate IA implies multiple short-term transfers to multiple locations, commuter IAs are weekly transfers to the same host country (see Table 1). Neither form of IA requires the assignee or family to relocate (Collings *et al.*, 2007). Anna's experience with both forms of IA in different consultancy firms highlights important differences with regards to knowledge transfer and potential innovation. Commuting to Morocco for two or three days per week, for instance, there was 'less efficiency, less trust, less knowledge about the customer, less [business] opportunity identification'.

Communication and trust are key requisites for the effective transfer of knowledge (Crowne, 2009) and innovation (Daniel and Klein, 2014). Flexpatriate assignments in the consultancy firms in which Anna and Gloria worked were particularly suited to developing close relationships because of the intensity of the workload, and the role of colleagues and the shared luxury-hotel lifestyle in facilitating adjustment to the new context (which included avoiding culture novelty). Gloria, who undertook a flexpatriate IA, said 'we [team members] stick together and we are like a family'. A team spirit improves relationships, facilitates trust building and willingness to share (Sveiby, 2001), and positively affects the transfer of knowledge between the external (e.g. clients) and the internal (e.g. team members) (Zárraga-Oberty and Bonache, 2008). Both Gloria and Anna highlighted the importance of changing teams as a way to build social networks and transfer knowledge. Flexpatriate assign-

ments are thus a useful tool for developing professional ties that can be retained when employees are dispersed across countries for subsequent projects. In turn, enhanced teamwork and social relations facilitate the identification of new knowledge, new opportunities and knowledge recombinations.

In contrast, Anna found that her commuter assignment was less conducive to developing the interactions between the consultant and the client deemed necessary to deliver the optimal solution for the current project and to identify new opportunities:

> [As a flexpatriate, rather than a commuter] the level of confidence you develop with the client is different, the capacity you have to identify new commercial opportunities is different. … You have many more relationships. You find out many more things, outside the scope of your project, which gives you the opportunity to sell more projects …

Anna also explained that when she was undertaking commuter assignments, part of her role as a manager was to transfer her knowledge as an experienced consultant to consultants at lower levels within the organisational hierarchy. However, being less often in contact with other team members than a flexpatriate IA affected social relations within the team, the development of shared experiences and understandings of the local context, and hence the flow of knowledge intended to facilitate the development of less experienced colleagues. Overall, the limited interactions during commuter IAs negatively affected the relationship of the international assignee with both clients and team members in the host country (where most of the workload is conducted) and, thus, affected knowledge creation and flows.

Collective stories – social skills, informality and life priorities

Three themes were shared across all the women in our study, whether undertaking a traditional or alternative IA. First was the importance of social relations in facilitating knowledge transfer and related innovation, pointing to the value of social skills. Keiko spoke of friendships, Gloria of family-like relations among consultants, and Anna of team spirit and social interactions leading to trust and enhanced knowledge transfer. Sonia and Maria both described the difficulties that arose when undertaking more traditional international assignments that meant one could not easily maintain social relations and access the requisite people back home.

Second, and closely related to this first theme, was the informal character of many acts of knowledge transfer. With little notice of an IA, Anna and Gloria learned of country differences and client characteristics (i.e. market-specific knowledge) through informal networking with colleagues who had prior experience in the host location, or from other colleagues on-site. Knowledge informally gained was essential to building client relationships and transferring existing solutions to a new context or devising entirely new solutions in the multi-centred MNC. Keiko shared social knowledge about contacts and provided an interface role valuable in an international-coordinator MNC, but, again, often in an informal way and explicitly 'not as part of [her] responsibilities'. Sonia similarly spoke of the informality of knowledge transfer related to North American market-specific knowledge as opposed to technical knowledge. These informal communications supporting knowledge transfer and learning, and the related development of trust among organisational members, are central to innovation processes (Daniel and Klein, 2014).

Kelan (2012) has argued that research on gender and skills in the information and knowledge society points to the rising importance of social skills. Social competence is commonly gendered 'feminine': while men and women can both display social competence, the related traits (such as empathy, community, vulnerability, and skills of inquiry and collaboration) are socially ascribed to women in our culture and generally understood as feminine (Fletcher, 2004). When found in men, social competence is treated as a valuable yet 'unnatural' skill in the workplace (Kelan, 2008). Thus, it draws attention and is rewarded. In contrast, in women social competence is 'more easily interpreted as being part of what is normal and natural for women' (Kelen, 2008, p.64). Women are often expected to be the carriers of relational skills and attributes, and the enactment of these skills does not attract particular attention or commensurate credit (Fletcher, 2004; Kelan, 2008). Similarly, the openness of the women to informal knowledge transfer activities that do not form part of a formally-designated role (and hence may be neither measured nor rewarded) could be construed as part of a gendered expectation for women 'not only to provide the collaborative subtext of life that enables individual achievement but [also] do it invisibly' (Fletcher, 2004, p.655).

Our study did not explicitly address the extent to which senior management recognised as valuable the social competence displayed by the women participating, including the related contributions to informal knowledge transfers. Keiko's story clearly shows gender and marital status to be playing a very overt role in the nature of her international assignments. An ethic of care – being responsive to her partner by maintaining family relationships and by making decisions in relation to her family members (Tharenou, 2010) – guided her self-initiated expatriations. The lack of support in relocation and finding new employment implies a low value placed on her contributions to knowledge transfer and recombinations by MNC headquarters, if not those with whom she directly interacted. Beyond Keiko, any conclusions drawn about the gendered value placed on the social competence of our participants or informal knowledge transfers would be purely speculative.

It is clear, however, that socially-constructed, gendered expectations and wishes guided the career choice of all women in the study. The third consistent theme was the importance of family life and perceptions that this is incompatible with international assignments at certain stages of life.

> All the partners are men; I think there is one women director and two or three women managers. There are girls at inferior levels. It is also normal because, at some point, women want to have children. … You need a lot of flexibility, and sometimes it is not compatible. … They call you, and they tell you the day after tomorrow you have to go to Mexico. And you have to go to Mexico.

> After two and a half years [working in that consultancy firm], when I broke up, I had the feeling that I had to choose between a fast, spectacular and international professional career, or to have a stable partner, a life in Barcelona, get married, have children.

After maternity leave, Anna left BMC as even a commuter assignment was incompatible with family objectives. Anna now works as an internal consultant in Sol Bank, where she does not have to travel. In management consultancies, those who want to work flexibly are often side-lined in terms of career progression as their commitment to work is often questioned (Kelan, 2012). Other women in our study faced similar pressures. Sonia, for example, explained that although her organisation

was keen for her to continue in her expatriate role in the US, she returned after two years because she 'wanted to organise her life' in Spain and 'start a family'. As long as family life and international assignments are perceived as incompatible, MNCs will continue to face shortages in recruiting and retaining key knowledge carriers.

Concluding remarks

Being exploratory, our study of how non-traditional forms of international assignment may affect knowledge creation and transfer within MNCs is, inevitably, suggestive rather than conclusive. Our findings illustrate ways in which the participating women engage with knowledge transfer and recombination that help create, implement and sustain innovation across diverse organisational contexts. The findings also point to variations in the type and quality of knowledge generated across different forms of international assignment, and draw attention to the socially embedded, informal interactions that underpin much knowledge transfer and recombination. Socially-embedded, informal interactions are highly context-specific and inherently difficult to objectify and measure. Indeed, attempting to do so may change the nature of underlying social relations, and thereby destroy the very advantage sought. Paradoxically, without measurement, the value of women's contributions to innovation may well remain underestimated by the upper echelons of the MNC, and even by women themselves. While the growing number of women undertaking IAs may help redress MNCs' concerns surrounding shortages in internationally mobile employees, the context-specificity and informality of social interactions, coupled with gendered assumptions, mean that women's contributions to the innovative efforts of MNCs may have little to do with formal management practices and even, at times, may be despite them.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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