Trust and repatriate knowledge transfer
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Trust and repatriate knowledge transfer:

Whom do you trust, and how does this trust develop?

Abstract

This paper reports the results of theory-building qualitative research that aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the role of trust as it affects repatriate knowledge transfer. Data were obtained from 29 semi-structured interviews with German and U.S. repatriates using the critical incident technique. First, repatriates perceived an asymmetry between themselves and knowledge recipients regarding the different importance attached to the underlying dimensions of trustworthiness. Second, the type of knowledge influenced the mode of interaction and the trust development process between repatriates and knowledge recipients. Third, three trusting relationships between repatriates, recipients, and supervisors were detected as relevant for RKT. This study overcomes the simplistic treatment of the trust construct in previous studies on knowledge transfer. In addition, it clarifies the impact of different knowledge types and third actors, namely supervisors on the knowledge transfer process.

Keywords: Content analysis; critical incident technique; international assignment; knowledge transfer; repatriate knowledge transfer; repatriation; trust; trustworthiness.
In order to build and sustain competitive advantages, organizations are required to establish effective mechanisms to create, distribute, and exploit knowledge (Argote, 2013; Drucker, 1992). Tacit knowledge (i.e., personalized, contextually embedded, difficult to transfer) in particular is useful for organizations because it has proven to be imperfectly imitable, non substitutable, rare, and therefore valuable (Barney, 1991). Operations of multinational organizations and those of small and medium-sized enterprises reflect increasing exchanges of knowledge across borders, thus highlighting the need to manage the transfer of such knowledge on a global scale (Bender & Fish, 2000).

One mechanism to enable the flow of global intracompany knowledge is personnel exchanges and rotations, because people can be important enablers of knowledge transfer through their ability to adapt and restructure tacit knowledge in different contexts (Argote, 2013). On the one hand, expatriates (i.e., employees sent abroad for a work assignment by their company) can be important knowledge transferors to foreign affiliates, translating their individual and organizational knowledge to different cultural environments (Riusala & Smale, 2007). On the other hand, repatriates (i.e., returned expatriates) can be equally effective enablers of organizational learning in their domestic work unit by transferring their newly acquired knowledge upon reentry (Oddou, Szkudlarek, Osland, Deller, Blakeney, & Furuya, 2013b). In general, repatriates obtain a variety of useful knowledge, ranging from technical facts about markets, products, and customers to intercultural knowledge, as well as improved personal competencies (Berthoin Antal, 2001; Fink & Meierewert, 2005; Oddou et al., 2013b).

Surprisingly, repatriate knowledge transfer (RKT) often fails, thereby undercutting the strategic value of repatriate knowledge for organizations (Oddou et al., 2013b). This does not make good business sense, particularly due to the high costs involved in sending employees abroad (Black &
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Gregersen, 1999; Oddou et al., 2013b). The underlying reasons for unsuccessful knowledge transfer attempts can be diverse. Previous studies have identified knowledge characteristics, individual characteristics, organizational characteristics, as well as characteristics of the relationship between individuals as possible causes for this lack of success (Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000; Kostova, 1999; Oddou, Osland, & Blakeney, 2009a; Oddou et al., 2013b; Szulanski, 1996). Knowledge researchers who have investigated the characteristics of the relationship between knowledge sender and recipient often emphasize the importance of trust for successfully initiating knowledge transfers (Joshi, Sarker, & Sarker, 2006; Oddou et al., 2013b). Accordingly, trust between knowledge sender and recipient has been shown to facilitate knowledge transfer (Joshi et al., 2006).

Nevertheless, the treatment of the trust construct in existing studies on knowledge transfer has not been nuanced enough in order to fully understand how the knowledge transfer process is affected by trust. First, researchers have not clearly differentiated between perceived trustworthiness and trust. However, trustworthiness should be seen as a necessary condition for trust as an outcome that eases and facilitates cooperative behavior in organizations such as knowledge transfer behavior (Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998). Second, the underlying and distinct affective (i.e., benevolence, integrity) and cognitive (i.e., ability) dimensions of the trustworthiness construct have largely been ignored. This overly simplistic treatment precludes the identification of potential differences between actors involved in the knowledge transfer process. Third, scholars have highlighted the need for a greater understanding of micro-processes that underlie knowledge transfer, such as investigating whether certain transfer mechanisms “vary as a function of the type of knowledge being transferred” (Argote, 2013: 180). The link between the type of knowledge being transferred and the level of trust needed has not yet been made explicit in the literature. Consequently, the results of our qualitative study address these shortcomings.
Trustworthiness and trust

McAllister (1995) introduced an interpersonal trust framework that distinguishes between two principal forms of trust, cognition-based (i.e., peer reliability and dependability) and affect-based trust (i.e., reciprocated interpersonal care and concern). While this framework has been proven useful for a less nuanced analysis of trust, it disregards the sequential nature of trustworthiness and trust that is necessary to understand how trust comes into existence (Colquitt, Scott, & LePine, 2007; Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). Mayer et al. (1995) improved the conceptual clarity in the literature by separating trustworthiness from trust. Accordingly, trustworthiness refers to the characteristics or situational state of the trustee (i.e., someone who is trusted) and will influence the extent to which a trustor (i.e., the grantor of trust) is willing to exert trust towards the trustee (Johnson-George & Swap, 1982). The authors argued that three dimensions of trustworthiness can be distinguished, namely ability, benevolence, and integrity. Ability enables someone to have influence in a specific domain and highlights the task-specificity of the trustworthiness construct. Benevolence has been defined as “the extent to which a trustee is believed to want to do good to the trustor, aside from an egocentric profit motive” (Mayer et al., 1995: 718). Integrity of the trustee means the adherence to certain values and principles that appear adequate to the trustor.

Whereas the distinctiveness of the ability dimension has largely been agreed in the literature, the relevance and distinct impact of the other two trustworthiness dimensions on trust has been critically evaluated. Scholars have suggested that benevolence and integrity should be seen as one dimension, named for example ‘character’ (Gabarro, 1978). In this view, ability represents the “can-do” component of trustworthiness, whereas the character dimensions capture the “will-do” element. However, Colquitt et al. (2007) demonstrated in their meta-analysis that all three trustworthiness
dimensions had a significant and unique relationship with trust, indicating that the trustworthiness construct contains three, rather than two dimensions.

Trust is the potential outcome of the assessment of these trustworthiness dimensions and has been defined as the willingness to be vulnerable to the actions of a trustee based on the expectation that the trustee will perform a particular action (Mayer et al., 1995). Thus, the two main components of the trust construct are the willingness to accept vulnerability and positive expectations (Colquitt et al., 2007). Previous studies have shown that trust can lead to more effective exchange relationships and higher job performance because trustors that accept their vulnerability are freeing up own resources that would have otherwise been used to monitor and control the trustee (Blau, 1964).

**Trust and RKT**

RKT constitutes an exchange situation and a specific knowledge transfer context, in which the repatriates are the potential knowledge senders and the members of the domestic work unit are the potential knowledge recipients. Oddou et al. (2013b) have shown that repatriates who return to their domestic work unit after their international assignment, are often viewed as outsiders by domestic work unit members and need to re-establish their position within the work units social hierarchy. At the same time, repatriates feel a natural responsibility and are eager to transfer their newly acquired knowledge to the members of the domestic work unit (Berthoin Antal, 2001; Oddou et al., 2013b).

As in other situations of social exchange, for both repatriates and knowledge recipients, there is a risk involved in sharing and receiving knowledge, which demonstrates the need for trust as a facilitator of RKT. On the one hand, repatriates might be afraid of losing their competitive advantage, power, or importance within the organization when sharing their individual and potentially specialized knowledge with others (Oddou et al., 2009a). Second, they might fear reputational losses
if their knowledge is assessed as irrelevant or trivial by others (Bordia, Irmer, & Abusah, 2006). Third, repatriates might fear that knowledge recipients present shared ideas and knowledge as their own, thus stealing the knowledge senders’ intellectual property (Berthoin Antal, 2001). On the other hand, knowledge recipients might be apprehensive to appear less knowledgeable and competent in front of colleagues and superiors when admitting their knowledge gaps and openly showing interest in others knowledge (Bender & Fish, 2000; Berthoin Antal, 2001).

Szulanski, Cappetta, and Jensen (2004) showed empirically that in the absence of trust, knowledge transfer initiation was more difficult, more likely resisted, and consequently less accurate. In addition, Huang, Chiu, and Lu (2013) reported that the use of formal and informal organizational mechanisms increased opportunities for interaction, and the development of mutual trust, as well as respectful relationships between repatriates and knowledge recipients. In turn, knowledge sharing behavior was facilitated. Finally, the theory-building case study research study of Andrews and Delahaye (2000) and the qualitative study of Oddou et al. (2013b) provide some initial insights into the relevance of the underlying dimensions of trustworthiness. Andrews and Delahaye (2000) showed that knowledge holders made conscious decisions with whom and when to share their valuable knowledge, in order to protect their intellectual property and to prevent misuse of commercially sensitive information. Therefore, they concluded that cognition-based trustworthiness (McAllister, 1995) of knowledge recipients plays an important role in knowledge transfer processes. Conversely, Oddou et al. (2013b) found that repatriates needed to find ways to demonstrate their credibility in order to make knowledge recipients trust in them. Thus, repatriates’ trustworthiness seemed to be important to knowledge recipients, and recipients were most interested in previous accomplishments of repatriates and the relevance of their experiences. These aspects could be subsumed under the cognitive dimension of trustworthiness (i.e., ability).
In sum, trust appears to be an important variable for understanding the success and failure of RKT but the current understanding of this relationship is not nuanced enough. Due to the simplistic treatment of the trust construct and the lack of understanding of the micro-processes during the transfer process, further explorative empirical studies are needed. Consequently, this study explores three research questions. 1. How does trustworthiness affect trust development and RKT? 2. How does the type of knowledge affect trust development and RKT?; and finally 3. What kinds of trusting relationships affect RKT?

Method

Participants and procedure

Twenty-nine semi-structured interviews with repatriates from Germany (n = 15) and the United States (n = 14) were conducted. Germany and the United States were selected because these countries have a long history of expatriation and repatriate large numbers of employees each year. Given the explorative nature of the study, a sample of about 15 respondents in each country was deemed sufficient. Previous qualitative studies in this research area have used similar sample sizes (Berthoin Antal, 2000, 2001). In order to meet the selection criteria, the duration of repatriates’ international assignments needed to be at least six months, and their return to their domestic work unit must have been at least three months ago. These criteria were applied in order to enable sufficient periods of learning and knowledge acquisition abroad, as well as the opportunity to engage in knowledge transfer behavior after repatriation (Berthoin Antal, 2000; Oddou et al., 2013b). The average length of participants’ international assignments was 30 months (SD = 14.4), ranging between 6 and 60 months and the average time between reentry and the interview was 17 months (SD = 18.7), ranging between 3 and 72 months. Moreover, the assignments took place in seventeen different countries, namely Brazil, China, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Hungary, India, Italy, Japan, Mexico, the
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Netherlands, Puerto Rico, South Africa, Spain, Switzerland, United Kingdom, and the United States. The majority of repatriates were male (n = 20); the minority were female (n = 9), and the average age of repatriates was 42 years (SD = 5.4), ranging between 29 and 51 years.

Interviews were conducted in person at the repatriates’ workplaces by the authors and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Repatriates were asked to talk about and reflect on both successful as well as unsuccessful incidents of RKT. In order to elicit concrete knowledge transfer experiences of repatriates, we asked the following questions, following the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954):

(a) What happened? How did it unfold? Who was your target (with whom were you trying to share your knowledge)? What was transferred?
(b) What led to the incident you just described?
(c) What do you think were the critical factors in making it a successful/an unsuccessful transfer?

In addition, participants were also directly asked the following question – “Did trust play a role in transferring knowledge to your work unit?”

Data analysis

All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and content-analyzed based on Krippendorff (2013), with the assistance of the computer software MAXQDA 11. Due to the limited and fragmented existing knowledge about trust and RKT, an inductive content analysis approach was applied and the categories were allowed to emerge from the data (Patton, 2002). In a first step, the transcripts were read several times, with a focus on the trust-related information in order to obtain a sense of the whole and make sense of the data (Tesch, 1990). Second, while reading the transcripts again, we
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categorized repatriates’ quotes according to their main themes. These initial categories were discussed amongst the researchers and merged if they included redundant information. Finally, the resulting list of categories was grouped into higher order categories under which the sub-categories could be subsumed. We identified trust development process and trusting relationships as the two higher order categories. Table 1 depicts the final category system including the higher order categories and sub-categories as well as the corresponding frequencies of repatriate statements (i.e., excerpts).

[Please insert Table 1 here]

In order to assess the intersubjectivity of our category system, two independent coders fluent in English and German coded the interview transcripts. Their intercoder reliability was calculated using the macro KALPHA, provided by Hayes and Krippendorff (2007). Krippendorff’s α for the category system was satisfactory with α = .78.

Results

The role of perceived trustworthiness in trust development

Several trust related text sections of the interview transcripts referred to the development of trust. Not surprisingly, repatriates’ accounts demonstrated that mutual trust is not something that simply comes into existence but requires time and specific efforts by both parties involved. The following comment by one repatriate illustrated this:

This [trust] develops over time. After three months, this kind of trust is not really there but through working closely together and going to meetings together and having a chat afterwards…then it develops over time.
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The assessment of the trustworthiness of both parties was a key aspect of the trust development process. Thereby, repatriates seemed to attach more importance to benevolence and integrity dimension of knowledge recipients’ trustworthiness, which was dependent on a certain degree of familiarity between the actors. This is illustrated in the following excerpts:

We want to pass on our knowledge. However, sometimes it is difficult to talk over it. It is always difficult to talk over it. If you are really honest with yourself, of course it is nice to be able to transfer knowledge. I do this willingly. On the one hand, one should share knowledge so that others can benefit from it as well, and the company as a whole will be developing. On the other hand, it is first and foremost a matter of trust. So you have to find out with whom you are familiar, which is like the knowledge you need, before you can actually share knowledge. I try to tell myself that we are part of one team and I go into meetings and watch and see how things develop.

It [trust] plays a large role. Especially if you are in a certain position it might be critical to forward information, particularly information related to organizational weaknesses. Then you have to make sure that the counterpart is very careful and using the information in the right way. Consequently you have to trust that person.

Conversely, repatriate descriptions of the recipients’ assessment process emphasized the ability dimension of repatriates’ trustworthiness. The importance of one’s own credibility and track record was recalled by different repatriates in the following ways:

That’s the way it was. The colleagues needed to accept me as a competent partner and colleague. First, they want to understand who you are and what you want. That was the essential but not sufficient condition. And then you needed to trigger their will to listen and
interact. To accept some of the things I say, even if they actually want something else for their area.

If it works and they can verify it, because I found that if you come forward and you explain stuff, nobody listens. But an issue comes up and you actually propose a solution and it works, then you get a lot of attention the next time around. If you walk around saying, ‘Hey, I know how to do that’, nobody cares, nobody even believes you.

It’s an account. It’s like any relationship. You put credit and debits, so you have to put credits as you go and have an account that’s positive. If you make a mistake, that’s a withdrawal, but you don’t want to go in the red. But I guess you just want to have enough credibility that you’ve built, and that’s based on your background and your view on things and your way of thinking.

The role of the type of knowledge to be transferred. The data even pointed to more boundary conditions that impacted the trust development process. The type of knowledge to be transferred appeared to influence the required intensity of the trusting relationship or the trust level. Repatriates’ accounts included several examples, indicating that the knowledge transfer initiation of more tacit knowledge required higher levels of trust between repatriates and knowledge recipients. This point is illustrated by the following excerpt:

If I don’t trust someone then I would only transfer technical knowledge. But I would not share more personal things, like how I can change my appearance or my behavior.
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Thus, if the knowledge to be transferred was more tacit and the perceived risk in transferring that knowledge was high, the trust level needed to support the knowledge transfer was higher. In order to build this higher level of trust interactions needed to be more informal and required closer personal or face-to-face interactions between knowledge senders and recipients. Another repatriate highlighted the importance of face-to-face interaction for the successful transfer of tacit knowledge in the following two excerpts:

I think that the fact that she came and it was face-to-face, I think that’s very valuable. […] So, I would say time and face-to-face are probably the two most important things to help the success of this.

So, for those executives that are doing highly international or global jobs now in my portfolio, and I can think of at least two of them, I work with them fairly closely to sort of help leverage the knowledge of learning that I had in my experience to help them. And I think it’s reasonably successful.

Figure 1 shows how the asymmetry in the assessment of the underlying trustworthiness dimensions, resulting trust and RKT initiation are related. In addition, it indicates how the tacitness of the knowledge to be transferred moderates the relationship between trust and RKT initiation, based on the available data.

[Please insert Figure 1 about here]

The role of trusting relationships

The critical incidents, as reported by the participants, revealed the involvement of three trust actors (i.e., repatriates, knowledge recipients, supervisors) and three different trusting relationships on the
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dyadic level (i.e., repatriates’ trust in recipients, recipients’ trust in repatriates, and supervisors’ trust in repatriates) that seemed to be important for RKT (Figure 2). Furthermore, the contextual influence of the organizational trust culture emerged as a relevant contingency or boundary condition. The following paragraphs show how clearly the data includes references to these relationships on the different levels.

[Please insert Figure 2 here]

**Recipients’ trust in repatriate.** Knowledge recipients’ trust (e.g., the trust of colleagues or subordinates) in the repatriate was frequently mentioned in the interviews and was perceived as determining whether knowledge transfer was more difficult or even resisted. Recipients’ trust was dependent on repatriates’ trustworthiness as determined by the perceived ability of the repatriates, based on their general track record, previous achievements, and performance during the international assignment. This expressed in following comment by a repatriate:

Totally, they’re not going to accept it all. I think trust is the biggest piece in making it all happen. It [trust] obviously plays a large role. If you expect someone to approach you, then there has to be some kind of receptivity for that knowledge in advance. And you need trust to be able to say: ‘He has built that knowledge, and I will ask him for that knowledge’, trusting that the colleague or superordinate actually knows what he is talking about because he had this experience.

If repatriates were not seen as credible and competent, perceived trustworthiness was lower, and potential recipients were less interested in acquiring repatriate knowledge. Thus, recipients were mostly focused on the cognitive dimension of the trustworthiness construct based on this sample of repatriates.
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**Repatriates’ trust in recipients.** Repatriates mentioned repatriates’ trust in recipients less frequently. However, this trusting relationship was also relevant for knowledge transfer initiation and particularly important when more tacit knowledge was involved, as supported by this quote:

Yes, maybe you limit the exchange to the formal level, you give away the facts but you certainly are more careful. You don’t really hold back anything, not really, but you...

Assessing the trustworthiness of knowledge recipients, especially the recipients’ integrity and benevolence, was a strategy to reduce repatriates’ vulnerability and the perceived risk involved in transferring knowledge. One repatriate pointed out the need for familiarity with the recipient for this kind of risk assessment:

On the one hand, one should share knowledge so that others can benefit from it as well, and the company as a whole will be developing. On the other hand, it is first and foremost a matter of trust. So you have to find out with whom you are familiar, before you can actually share knowledge. I try to tell myself that we are part of one team and I go into meetings and watch and see how things develop.

The focus of repatriates on trust dimensions beyond recipients’ abilities showed that they attached more importance to the emotional facets of perceived trustworthiness (i.e., benevolence and integrity).

**Supervisors’ trust in repatriates.** Finally, in some critical incidents, the repatriates’ supervisor played a key role as a facilitator for knowledge transfer when they demonstrated their trust in the repatriates and gave repatriates autonomy in fulfilling assignments. For example one repatriate described the following:
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In the end, which was good for the department, she just said: ‘I trust you, you have autonomy, I just want to see the results.’ My manager, she had 100% confidence in my abilities to carry on the project, and that’s why she put me in that role.

In general, this confidence in their abilities motivated repatriates to use their newly acquired knowledge in their assignments and to transfer knowledge to colleagues and subordinates.

**Organizational level: Organizational trust culture.** Beyond these relationships among trust actors, some accounts of repatriates indicated the importance of a trusting environment within the organization for the facilitation of knowledge sharing behavior. The following excerpt offers an illustration of this point:

Trust is important, but I am in a trustful environment, in every direction, vertically and horizontally. It plays a large role that the organization supports you and has your back.

Organizational trust culture seemed to influence the behavior of organizational members and the perceived openness with which people interacted with each other. Consequently, repatriates seemed to be more willing to engage in potentially risky cooperative behaviors and initiate knowledge transfers when they worked in a trusting organizational environment, as this example indicates:

Generally speaking, all people I work with have trust in me and I trust in them. If there is a situation where my knowledge seems to be useful than I will share it independent of the person. I do what I experienced myself.

**Discussion**

This explorative study helps to decipher the impact of trustworthiness and trust on the initiation of RKT from the perspective of repatriates. The findings shed light on the trust development process in
RKT, addressing the importance of trustworthiness and the role of the type of knowledge to be transferred. Additionally, the results clarify which actors are involved in RKT and how trusting relationships amongst those actors influence the RKT process. The crucial role of trust during knowledge transfer processes, such as RKT seems to emerge, as highlighted by the limited number of previous empirical studies (Huang et al., 2013; Oddou et al., 2013b). Finally, this study addressed the reported shortcomings of the treatment of the trust construct in the knowledge transfer literature, thereby closing a research gap.

First, we followed a more differentiated view of trustworthiness and distinguished between ability, benevolence, and integrity (Bakker, Leenders, Gabbay, Kratzer, & Van Engelen, 2006; Mayer et al., 1995). The data pointed to an asymmetry between repatriates as knowledge senders and domestic work unit members as knowledge recipients, regarding the different importance they attached to the underlying trustworthiness dimensions. Accordingly, repatriates attached more importance to the benevolence and integrity dimensions of trustworthiness, whereas knowledge recipients focused on the ability dimension. This finding lends support to the results of the case study by Andrews and Delahaye (2000).

Moreover, we suggest that these results can be explained by integrating aspects from uncertainty reduction theory (Hogg, 2000, 2006) and social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1961). Accordingly, repatriates and knowledge recipients engage in social exchange upon repatriates’ return to the domestic work unit, however, they experience different levels of uncertainty about ones’ social identity during this interaction. As Oddou et al. (2009a) have pointed out, repatriates are often perceived as outsiders upon their return and need to undergo a socialization process in order to reestablish their social identity and position within the domestic work unit. On the contrary, knowledge recipients are established members of the domestic work unit. Based on this asymmetry
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the expected reciprocations or benefits as a result of the social exchange might differ for repatriates and knowledge recipients. On the one hand, conditions of uncertainty motivate behavior that is aimed at reducing the prevailing uncertainty because “people like to know who they are and how they behave, and who others are and how they might behave” (Smith, Hogg, Martin, & Terry, 2007: 771). In this context, it seems reasonable that repatriates focus on the more affective trustworthiness dimensions (i.e., benevolence, integrity) in order to protect themselves and their knowledge from negative exchange outcomes such as being viewed unfavorably by others or knowledge being misused. On the other hand, knowledge recipients do not face the same uncertainties like repatriates because they are established members of the domestic work unit. Therefore, knowledge recipients’ focus on the more cognitive trustworthiness dimension (i.e., ability) appears rational because this helps recipients’ to generate positive exchange outcomes, such as acquiring new and relevant knowledge and in turn improving their work performance.

Second, the data indicated that knowledge transfer initiation of more tacit knowledge required higher levels of trust between repatriates and knowledge recipients, which was build during more intense interaction. Thus, we suggested that the tacitness of knowledge acts as a moderator between trust and knowledge transfer initiation in a way that the relationship is stronger if the knowledge is more tacit (Figure 1). This finding responds to Argote’s (2013) call for more research on the role of knowledge types in the knowledge transfer process and confirms previous insights from knowledge transfer researchers who stated that the richness of transmission channels needs to match the type of knowledge to be transferred (Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000; Kwan & Cheung, 2006; Wathne, Roos, & Krogh, 1996). For example, Wathne et al. (1996) argued that the richest channels for knowledge transfer are social mechanisms and face-to-face interaction. Consequently, the more tacit the
knowledge and the higher the perceived risk involved, the richer the transmission channels between knowledge senders and recipients should be, as our results demonstrate.

Third, we identified three trusting relationships on the dyadic level that impact RKT, namely recipients’ trust in repatriates, repatriates’ trust in recipients, and supervisors’ trust in repatriates. These findings substantiate previous research results with regards to trusting relationships among actors in the RKT process as we found evidence that supports the importance of trust in the knowledge sources (Oddou et al., 2013b; Szulanski, 1996), as well as trust in the knowledge recipients (Andrews & Delahaye, 2000; Huang et al., 2013). Besides, we found that supervisors’ trust in repatriates also had a positive impact on the RKT process. This finding adds a new perspective to current research on knowledge transfer that often neglects the impact of supervisors on knowledge transfer outcomes and provides the opportunity to link the knowledge transfer literature with the leadership literature. Leadership researchers have shown that leaders’ trust in their followers influences leaders to engage in more risk-taking behavior (e.g., autonomy, delegation, and empowerment) that can in turn result in positive subordinate outcomes such as increased satisfaction and performance (Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans, & May, 2004; Brower, Schoorman, & Tan, 2000). Our results suggest that the degree of leaders’ trust in their followers and resulting leader behavior should be considered when investigating knowledge transfer behavior.

**Practical implications**

From a practitioner standpoint, our findings can be used to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of existing organizational processes that are aimed at harvesting repatriate knowledge and enlarging the organizational knowledge base. First, our findings indicate that repatriates and knowledge recipients focus on different dimensions when assessing each others’ trustworthiness.
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Therefore, organizations should support repatriates and knowledge recipients alike to arrive at positive trustworthiness assessments of their counterparts. For example, the ability and credibility of repatriates, which seems to be of utmost importance to knowledge recipients, could be emphasized through modes of internal communication such as newsletters. Repatriates’ experiences and types of newly acquired knowledge could be highlighted in order to raise awareness and interest in repatriates’ knowledge and highlight repatriates’ credibility.

Second, we have seen that the intensity of interaction between knowledge senders and recipients is dependent on the type of knowledge to be transferred. Therefore, organizations should invest time and effort into analyzing the nature of repatriates’ knowledge prior to facilitating knowledge transfer in order to be able to offer the most effective opportunities for interaction. For example, organizations could establish compulsory de-briefing sessions after repatriates’ return, in order to support repatriates in reflecting on the nature of their newly acquired knowledge. Based on those insights, facilitation of interaction between knowledge senders and recipients could be tailored to the type of knowledge acquired.

Finally, our findings highlight the importance of supervisors as facilitators of the RKT process. Therefore, organizations could try to increase supervisors’ effectiveness in this role. For example, supervisors’ awareness could be increased by creating and distributing case studies and testimonials featuring repatriates that emphasize supervisors’ potential impact on RKT. In addition, supervisors’ ability to support the RKT process could be developed in targeted training sessions.

Limitations

Our results make important contributions to understand the role of trust in the context of RKT; however, based on the study’s design, a few limitations need to be acknowledged. First, we only
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interviewed German and U.S. repatriates, thereby limiting the generalizability of our findings to other countries and cultural contexts, particularly countries with more emerging economies. Second, the insights are based on repatriates’ experiences and do not include the perspectives of recipients and supervisors, who might see matters differently or attach a different importance to certain variables. Third, due to the applied interview methodology and sampling method, these results should be interpreted as a first glimpse into the impact of trust on RKT, based on a qualitative approach with corresponding sample size.

Directions for future research

Our results should be understood as a starting point for future studies that test the proposed relationship between trust and RKT. First, it would be interesting to understand how the development of trust between repatriates and knowledge recipients is situated within the RKT process. Future studies could build on existing knowledge transfer process models, such as the phase model introduced by Szulanski (1996), in order to refine the process phases and contribute to a better understanding of the micro-processes during knowledge transfer (Argote, 2013). For example, Szulanski (1996) stated that the first knowledge transfer phase, initiation, included all decisions that lead up to the flow of knowledge between senders and knowledge recipients. Here, studies could contribute to an even more nuanced understanding of the kind of knowledge transfer-related activities that lead to trust development within this phase prior to the actual knowledge dissemination.

Second, measurement of trustworthiness would have to be more sophisticated in order to account for the constructs multi-dimensional nature. The proposed asymmetry in importance attached to the cognitive and affective dimensions of trustworthiness by knowledge senders and recipients can only be tested with more advanced measuring instruments, including more specific questions if using a
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qualitative research design. Almost twenty years ago, Mayer et al. (1995: 729) acknowledged the lack of suitable instruments to measure trust in quantitative research designs and pointed out that “measures of the perceptions of a trustee’s ability, benevolence, and integrity must be developed.” Since then, several trust scales have been developed that could be used to reflect the multiple dimensions of trustworthiness.

Third, further empirical studies should test the relationship between the type of knowledge to be transferred and the preferred mode of interaction. Moreover, more attention should be given to the potentially perceived knowledge inferiority in knowledge transfer processes from developing to developed countries, and from subsidiaries to headquarters. While over three decades ago, Adler (1981) identified xenophobic responses of members of the domestic work unit to repatriate knowledge, we know very little about the dynamics of these prejudiced responses and therefore have little understanding of how to overcome such responses. Perceived trustworthiness in relation to these contextually broad sources of knowledge (i.e., country of origin or place in organizational structure) could be of high importance in making sense of this resistance to repatriate expertise.

Finally, future research projects could build on our findings with regards to trusting relationships and test the interactions among knowledge senders, recipients, and supervisors that we have identified. Whereas the trusting relationships between knowledge senders and recipients have already been investigated in greater detail, studies could contribute to a clearer understanding of the impact of supervisors on knowledge transfer behaviors of knowledge senders and recipients. Linking the literature on trust, leadership, and knowledge transfer could provide novel insights into each field.
Table 1. *Category system, frequencies, and Cronbach’s alpha*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Sub-categories</th>
<th>Frequencies</th>
<th>Alpha (.78)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trust development process</td>
<td></td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perceived trustworthiness</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Type of knowledge</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trusting relationships and organizational trust culture</td>
<td></td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dyadic level: Recipients’ trust in repatriate</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dyadic level: Repatriates’ trust in recipient</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dyadic level: Supervisors’ trust in repatriate</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Organizational level: Organizational trust culture</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1. Trust development and RKT
Figure 2. Trust actors and trusting relationships
References


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Tesch, R. 1990. Qualitative research: Analyses types and software tools. Bristol: Palmer PA.
