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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

One of the most significant outcomes of our discovery process was the formulation of a grounded hypothesis (Glaser and Strauss 1965, 1967) regarding variation in repatriation experiences. The hypothesis states that variation in repatriation experiences (i.e., difficulty versus ease of repatriation) is related directly to variation in the structure and ideology of organizational units that send and receive International Service Personnel (ISPs). This hypothesis grew out of our discovery of two fundamentally different types of organizational structures within GM (reported separately in Briody and Baba 1992) which may be described briefly as follows:
- the *coupled system*—a single structural unit integrating GM domestic and international subunits, and
- the *decoupled system*—a single structural unit containing *either* domestic or international subunits, but not both.

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

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

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

Data and Methods

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

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

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

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

Selection for and Participation in an Overseas Assignment

Factors Involved in Selection

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

Job-Related Learning

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

Repatriation

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

Return Placement

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Return Job Satisfaction and Career Enhancement

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

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

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

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

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

> In the long run, I probably have not done as well career-wise [than if I had stayed in the United
> States]. Before going [overseas], I was considered to have high potential in the finance area, but
> once I left it was difficult to get back into their progression. . . . Once you are in the overseas
> business, you fall off any career path domestically. Unless you go out as a managing director—
> [one GM manager] was one in Opel[7]—you don't have much chance. If you go to a small oper-
> ation which has no impact on GM at all or its profits, your career is not enhanced. If I had gone
> to Opel and done well there, my career might have been enhanced due to my visibility.

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

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

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

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

Specific Hypotheses Concerning Variation in Repatriation Experiences

Specific Native and Researcher-Generated Hypotheses

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

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

2. *Size and Structure of the Overseas Operation.* ISPs assigned to work on corporate staffs[8] or in large GM subsidiaries[9] structured like GM's domestic operations are more likely to experience ease of repatriation, since the corporate atmosphere is similar. An assignment to small GM subsidiaries or joint-venture operations reflects a qualitatively different experience for ISPs.

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

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

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

6. *Type of Home Unit.* ISPs originating from and returning to GM component divisions[10] (which are located both in the United States and overseas) are more likely to repatriate easily than those originating from and returning to GM car divisions[11] (whose operations are located only in the United States).

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

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

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

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

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

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

Return Job Satisfaction as a Proxy Variable for Ease of Repatriation

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

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

Testing the Specific Hypotheses

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

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

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

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

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

Table 1

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

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

[a]JV = joint venture; Major sub = major subsidiary; Corp = corporate staff; Div = division; Sub = small subsidiary.
[b]$p \leq .01$.

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

Managers' Explanations for Variation in Repatriation Experiences

Car and Component Divisions

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

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

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

> Once you leave the North American Car Group[12] to go and work for any overseas car operation, you drop out of the headcount of the North American Car Group and you are replaced by someone else. . . . On the other hand, while the components are all U.S.-based divisions, their headcount is all internationally based. . . . They can swap people back and forth. They have the advantage of putting people back in the domestic operations.

Another manager commented in a similar fashion:

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

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

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

Service Parts Operations

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

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

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

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

General Motors Overseas Operations

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

Motors Overseas Operations (GMOO) and the Foreign Distributors Division (FDD)—which were active until 1978.[13] We discuss the structure and functions of these two divisions in Briody and Baba (1992). It is necessary and useful here, however, to provide a brief synopsis of the overseas operations for purposes of comparison with the component divisions and SPO.

Because GMOO and FDD were responsible for GM's overseas operations, they were charged with the recruitment, selection, overseas stay, and repatriation of all ISPs. The majority of these individuals hired into the two overseas divisions at their New York headquarters. According to one former staff member, "Implicit in the hiring at the New York office was the fact that you'd be going overseas. . . . [Potential hires would] know that, realize it, and accept it, or [they would] go to work for another company." Although some of these employees worked and resided in New York for their career, most worked for a period as a staff member to gain knowledge of the overseas operations and then took a series of overseas assignments. They were known as "career internationalists."

Once an individual hired into one of the overseas divisions, he usually remained with that division for his entire career. These ISPs, and to some extent the staff members, seem to have been a close-knit group sharing a common lifestyle rooted in an expatriate/international culture. Furthermore, they shared a common ideology that held that overseas assignments were valued highly by the overseas operations because ISPs filled critical positions abroad. Most employees of the overseas divisions anticipated promotions within the managerial ranks as their careers within these divisions progressed. Each new assignment was viewed as an integral part of their career path and as a "stepping stone to something better." During the 1970s, repatriation options increased whereby some ISPs accepted return positions on a domestic staff or division. Nevertheless, throughout most of GM's history, employment and career pathing for the employees of the overseas divisions occurred within the overseas divisions.

It was in reexamining our early interview data that we first understood the strong relationship between organizational structure and ideology surrounding the overseas assignment. GMOO and FDD were both organizational units that maintained administrative linkages between the domestic and international operations. Because of the importance of international work to GMOO and FDD, these divisions evolved a strong pro-international ideology, one that valued overseas experience highly and promoted individuals based on their overseas success. As we reread the initial descriptions of GMOO and FDD in light of our second-phase interview data, we finally conceptualized two organizational patterns or models that linked structure, ideology, and repatriation experience. These patterns or models, described in the following section, may be applied to GMOO, FDD, SPO, and the component divisions on the one hand, and car divisions on the other.

Coupled and Decoupled Systems and Their Relation to Theory

In a separate piece (Briody and Baba 1992), we proposed two models representing ideal types to illustrate the relationship between organizational structure and ideology surrounding the overseas assignment. In a *coupled system* model, personnel and technology circulate within an integrated organizational system that crosses international boundaries. Organizational units participating in a coupled system possess direct linkages between the overseas and domestic operations. From an ideological standpoint, such administratively linked units are associated with ISPs and managers who value the overseas assignment. Based on the comments stemming from both phases of data collection, such ISPs and GM managers perceive that the coupled system model also is associated with ease of repatriation to a domestic assignment. They have argued their case with illustrations drawn from the component divisions and SPO. ISPs from the component divisions and SPO continue to be affiliated with the same organization abroad as they were domestically. They do not exit the system to take a position in a separate overseas organi-

zation. Furthermore, when such ISPs repatriate to the United States, their domestic managers view the knowledge and skills they acquired abroad positively. Indeed, the ISPs' experience is tapped and incorporated directly into their new domestic work environment. As noted above, this is the same pattern of relationships that is found in the former overseas divisions—GMOO and FDD.

In a *decoupled system* model, by contrast, there are few, if any, administrative or operational linkages between domestic and overseas units. Indeed, the domestic and overseas units exist more or less independently of one another, and personnel and resources do not circulate freely between such units. Domestic units that maintain few or no linkages with the overseas operations are associated with GM employees who do not value the overseas assignment. Our interview data suggest that ISPs and managers believe that a decoupled system also is associated with repatriation difficulties. They single out the domestic car divisions as a case in point. In such cases, an ISP's employment spans two separate organizational structures. He first must exit the domestic system to accept a position in an overseas organization with no domestic ties. When he returns, the reverse occurs. He must exit the international system to enter a domestic system with no overseas ties. While the ISP may value the experience gained abroad, his new domestic managers either do not see the potential benefits for their unit or do not know how to make use of such experience. Consequently, the overseas assignment is not incorporated into the organizational structure of the domestic car divisions and the ISP's career path is disrupted.[14]

The General Hypothesis Concerning Variation in Repatriation Experiences

On the basis of new data gained through interviews with GM managers, explicit in which was their own explanation of ease of repatriation, we initiated our third phase of research. In this phase, we elaborated and expanded Hypothesis 6, Type of Home Unit, to account more generally for variation in repatriation experiences. Our broadened, more general hypothesis is no longer limited strictly to car and component division employees, as proposed by our key informant, but is more comprehensive in scope. This general hypothesis emphasizes the linkages or lack of linkages between overseas and domestic units. The interview data gained from managers during the second phase of our research, together with the coupled and decoupled systems models described above, suggest that positive repatriation experiences result when the domestic unit is able to appreciate and utilize an ISP's newly acquired international career skills. Such employees would not be labeled as expendable. It seems reasonable to argue that a return unit's capacity to use an ISP's international skills should be enhanced when the ISP has had international experiences that relate more or less directly to the operations of that unit. The general hypothesis derived from these considerations may be stated as follows:

- ISPs repatriating to return positions in units that have established linkages to organizations overseas (a coupled system) will report ease of repatriation as indicated by current job satisfaction.
- Alternatively, ISPs repatriating to return positions in domestic organizations without established administrative linkages to organizations overseas (a decoupled system) will report repatriation difficulties as indicated by current job dissatisfaction.

Linking the General Hypothesis with the Coupled and Decoupled Systems Models

It should be noted that the first portion of the general hypothesis captures only part of the repatriation pattern. Interviews during both the first and second phases of our research emphasized positive repatriation experiences as the final segment of a complete career-path loop linking the domestic and overseas branches of a single organizational unit. In other words, our interviewees described situations in which ISPs *originated from* the domestic arm of a coupled system, took an overseas assignment in the international arm of that same unit, and *repatriated back to* the domestic arm of the original coupled system. Such a career-path progression may be conceptualized as a closed loop.

Our general hypothesis, however, does not describe or test an entire closed-loop pattern. Rather, the hypothesis stipulates only that an ISP must *return to* the domestic arm of a coupled system; it does not require that he originate from such a unit. Our hypothesis does not describe a complete closed loop for two reasons. First, the logic of the structure-ideology-repatriation pattern suggests that it is the *return unit* whose needs and interests will determine whether or not an ISP's international skills will be utilized. Thus, it should not matter whether an ISP originates from a coupled or decoupled system as long as he repatriates to a coupled one. Second, our initial ISP sample included only four ISPs who originated from a coupled unit, while there were eight ISPs who returned to coupled domestic units. Thus, our general hypothesis captures the most critical part of the closed-loop phenomenon described by our interviewees and permits a test based on our initial set of fifteen ISP interviews.

Preliminary Testing of the General Hypothesis

Once we specified the general hypothesis concerning administrative linkages between the domestic and overseas operations, we conducted a preliminary test using the ISP experiences from the project's first phase. A test of the general hypothesis now was possible because of broadened parameters associated with Hypothesis 6, Type of Return Unit, as described above. Everyone in our initial sample repatriated to either one of two types of units or organizational structures: coupled or decoupled systems.

Table 2 presents the type of organizational structure associated with the fifteen ISPs by their current job satisfaction data. There were eight ISPs whose overseas assignments and first return assignments occurred within GM units that were coupled or administratively linked. By contrast, there were seven ISPs whose overseas assignments were not administratively linked or were decoupled from the unit of their first return assignments.

In our test, we find preliminary support for the general hypothesis. Of the eight returning ISPs who were employed by the same type of organizational unit in both their overseas and first return positions (i.e., units with administrative linkages between domestic and overseas branches), seven (88%) were satisfied with their current jobs. By contrast, four ISPs (57%) who repatriated to units without overseas operations reported dissatisfaction with their current jobs. These results were statistically significant ($p \leq .10$) in a one-tailed Fisher's exact test.

Our general hypothesis concerning coupled and decoupled systems did not predict the current job satisfaction of four of the fifteen ISPs. One ISP returned as part of a coupled system but reported dissatisfaction with his current job. Although he returned to the United States with two possible job offers, one never materialized and the other, which he accepted, only lasted one month. Following the latter assignment, he was able to get another position but was not satisfied with the job content. There were three other ISPs who returned as part of a decoupled system but who reported satisfaction with their current jobs. In two of these cases, the individuals were satisfied with their job content upon return. In addition, their work was similar to the work they had done overseas. In the

Table 2

Percentage of ISP current job satisfaction by type of organizational structure during and following the overseas assignment.

Current job satisfaction	Type of organizational structure[a]	
	Coupled system	Decoupled system
Positive	88% (7)	43% (3)
Negative	12% (1)	57% (4)
Total	100% (8)	100% (7)

[a]$p \leq .10$

third case, the ISP turned down a "weak job" offered him by his home unit to accept a somewhat better position on a corporate staff. However, he soon began to assist some top GM managers on a temporary basis—a position that led to a permanent assignment with one particular high-ranking manager. Perhaps these more recent experiences outweighed the repatriation difficulties he faced, so that he reported satisfaction with his current job.

From these four cases, a number of variables emerge that color an ISP's evaluation of his current job satisfaction. Extenuating circumstances in a coupled system model may lead to ISP dissatisfaction with a current job. Similarly, there are conditions that foster a favorable appraisal of an ISP's current position despite the fact that he may have been associated with a decoupled system. In these four cases, current job satisfaction was affected by a number of different variables including return job content, similarity in overseas and domestic job content, problems related to return openings, and return assignment success associated with getting back on the career track. These four cases suggest that the overseas assignment is highly complex and that its evaluation in relation to an ISP's career path may be affected by many intervening phenomena.

Discussion

Methodological Implications

In this article we presented the results of an inductive research project focusing on the overseas assignment. The organization of the paper parallels the iterative discovery process that we experienced in our effort to understand the interrelationships among complex organizational phenomena. From a methodological standpoint, we found that the inductive nature of the investigation required a combined iterative and holistic research strategy. When our initial phase of data collection and hypothesis testing failed to produce satisfying results, we broadened our data-collection net to include semistructured discussions with a wider range of managerial employees representing several different organizational units and classification levels (Gregory 1983; Trend 1978). We believed that such a methodology would provide a "stereo vision" of the complex organizational landscape (Kluckhohn 1949; Werner and Schoepfle 1987) and improve the validity of our study through triangulation parameters (Denzin 1975). Furthermore, an iterative approach enabled us to seek and subsequently test more complex explanations for repatriation variation.

Our interviews with GM managers also permitted us to conceptualize two different patterns of relationships among organizational structure, ideology, and behavior. These patterns were holistic in several respects. They were both historically and multi-unit based, since they included GMOO, FDD, SPO, the component divisions, and the car divisions. They comprised all three phases of the overseas assignment. In addition, they linked our initially narrow interest in repatriation to broader organizational dimensions, such as structure and ideology.

The discovery of the decoupled pattern was facilitated by the prior discovery of the coupled pattern. Once we recognized the existence of the three interwoven elements in the coupled system of structure (international linkages), ideology (pro-international), and behavior (positive repatriation experiences), it was possible to predict an alternative model—the decoupled system. We found that the decoupled or anti-pattern phenomenon was associated with the existence of units with few, if any, international linkages, an anti-international ideology, and negative repatriation experiences. The length and complexity of procedures required to discover and recognize patterns and anti-patterns reflect the complexity of organizational phenomena, and underscore the need for anthropologically informed methodologies in organizational research.

Implications for Anthropological and Organizational Theory

Our problem-oriented research demonstrates the relevance of anthropological theory to the study of organizations. First, our findings corroborate and extend earlier work by

Dubinskas (1988a), Gregory (1983), Van Maanen and Barley (1984), and others, which suggested that large formal organizations comprise multiple subcultural enclaves (where culture is defined generally as distinctive patterns of ideology and related behavior). Much of this literature, however, emphasized the importance of "occupational culture" almost exclusively as the basis for conflicting ideologies and behaviors within organizations (Morgan 1986; Dubinskas 1988b; Baba 1990). Our study extends this concept by demonstrating that multiple subcultural enclaves may exist not only as a function of different occupational experiences, but also as a function of specific organizational structures, regardless of whether or not such units are dominated by a single occupation or profession. We found that several different functional types of units, each with a different mix of occupational and professional groups, display similar ideologies and behaviors related specifically to their unique structural properties and associated operations. These findings suggest that studies of organizational culture should consider structural and other environmental factors as influential or causal in shaping ideologies and behaviors.

Second, our findings address the issues of integration between social structure and ideology in complex organizations (see Allaire and Firsirotu 1984). We find that the relationship between structure and ideology is not characterized by *either* dissonance or consonance, but by *both* of these phenomena. Consonance is found in the relationship between structure and ideology at the unit level, in which integrated structure-ideology patterns emerge together historically and exist in relative harmony at the point of their emergence. Dissonance between structure and ideology grows out of changes that affect the corporation generally and its units specifically over time. We found that such dissonance may emerge when units with different structure-ideology patterns come into contact with one another. Contact may take place as a result of individual employee transfers between units with different structure-ideology patterns (as when ISPs repatriate from an international assignment to a decoupled system). Similarly, contact may occur when top-ranking corporate executives attempt to implement new structure-ideology patterns through pro-international policy changes, which then find resistance at the unit level (as when managers of domestic decoupled systems resist corporate efforts to recruit high-caliber ISP candidates); efforts by top corporate executives to implement pro-international policy changes are addressed in Briody and Baba (1989). In both of these cases, pro-international ideologies held by individual ISPs and corporate executives clash with the social structure and entrenched managerial ideology found in decoupled units.

Local-level units may attempt to resist dissonance by clinging to consonant, historically based patterns. For example, certain decoupled units may devalue the role of pro-international returning ISPs, thereby reinforcing the original domestic orientation of such units. Influences from outside these units (such as individual transfers) or from higher organizational levels create continuing pressure toward dissonance. Such pressures generate confusing messages for unit employees, as when top executives support overseas assignments while local unit managers devalue them. These findings lend support to Geertz's (1973:144; cf. Allaire and Firsirotu 1984:195, 197) statement that:

> culture and social structure will then be seen to be capable of a wide range of modes of integration
> with one another, of which the simple isomorphic mode is but a limiting case—a case common
> only in societies which have been stable over such an extended time as to make possible a close
> adjustment between social and cultural aspects. In most societies, where change is characteristic
> rather than an abnormal occurrence, we shall expect to find more or less radical discontinuities
> between the two.

Also, because structure and ideology may display dissonance, these findings argue for the conceptualization of distinctive social and cultural (i.e., ideational) realms within complex organizations.

There is another note on the use of anthropological theory that is worthy of mention. The extent to which we needed to draw on concepts representing several explanatory paradigms to address repatriation variation was unexpected. For example, we understood the internal structures of different unit types by viewing these types within the his-

torical context of their emergence. Each structure-ideology complex reflected a historically distinctive type of adaptation strategy. In addition to the use of history in constructing our general hypothesis, we owe our basic hypothesis regarding differences in structure-ideology patterns to the cognitive school in anthropology. It was only through our efforts to conceptualize the overseas assignment from the viewpoint of GM managers in different local units (i.e., the "emic" perspective) that we were able to grasp the fundamental conflict between two antithetical ideological systems: one focused on the domestic arena and the other on the international arena. Learning about the underlying system of ideas, values, and rules that led managers first to recommend certain candidates for overseas assignments (frequently, the expendable ones), and then to discriminate against these same individuals when they repatriated, helped us to identify and define distinctive ideological patterns among domestic managers and relate these patterns to the larger organizational structure.

As we probed into the ideological systems held by domestic managers, we found an ethnocentric assumption within decoupled systems that underlay many of the values and rules that guided the behavior of these managers. This assumption, largely implicit but reflected in many of our interviewees' statements and actions, pertains to the primary importance of North American markets. Managers in decoupled systems assume that vehicle production and sales in North American markets have dominated in the past, and will continue to dominate GM's worldwide sales and profits in the future. Therefore, such managers reason, only work experience related to domestic vehicle operations should be valued and rewarded. This underlying assumption concerning the primacy of North American vehicle production and sales helps to explain why employees who are perceived to be expendable may be transferred out of such domestic units to overseas assignments, and then stigmatized upon return. We view the ideological patterns and underlying assumptions displayed by domestic managers as causally linked to historical and environmental contexts. Historically, North American vehicle sales have been the most important to GM's profit margins. As this market changes, and as the importance of sales in Europe and elsewhere increases, we expect that the long-held assumptions and ideological systems of domestic managers will erode slowly.

Although our general theoretical orientation continues to be broadly materialist (i.e., we understand material factors in the environment to play an important role in shaping structure and ideology over time), we conclude that materialism must be informed by other intellectual perspectives. A sense of history is necessary in understanding the reasons why organizational structures and associated ideologies do not conform well to immediate environmental pressures. Structures born in the environments of the past appear to persist and act as inertial forces, even as new structures arise in response to environmental change (see Stinchcombe 1965). The coexistence of old and new structures, and the conflict of their attendant ideologies, create a complex and dynamic organizational whole, one that does not match the elegant and seemingly stable "universal pattern" of internal elements envisioned at the outset of this research. Furthermore, we note that ideological systems appear to influence the stability and continuity of structures long after the environmental underpinnings of such structures have eroded substantially.

General Implications for Practice Within and Beyond GM

While the data presented here are related to a particular multinational corporation, we believe that the structural-ideological models discovered at GM might have broader applications to other types of organizations and institutions. Generally speaking, any organization with historical roots in one nation that has evolved to assume a worldwide orientation may display internal differentiation with respect to the geographical breadth of its operations (e.g., government agencies, units of international foundations). In such organizations, we would expect that only *selected units* would participate extensively in the expansion of operations outside the home base. In GM's case, units such as FDD, GMOO, SPO, and the component divisions (along with their predecessors) participated

directly in the transformation of GM from a national to a multinational corporation. By contrast, other units in the organization (such as the domestic car divisions and corporate staffs at GM), have continued to be associated with domestic operations almost exclusively. With the exception of providing specific types of resources (such as personnel) for overseas assignments, such units have remained largely decoupled from any overseas operations. If this type of internal differentiation exists within an organization, then we believe it is plausible to postulate the existence of coupled and decoupled systems beyond the GM experience. Indeed, such an inference emerges from this article as a general hypothesis that we believe warrants further investigation.

In addition to the concept of internal diversity with respect to geographical breadth, it is possible to postulate an *evolutionary continuum* of units ranging from those that are domestically oriented to those that are globally oriented (see diagram below).[15] This continuum could apply to other organizations beyond GM as well, since it appears to reflect the empirical evidence pertaining to the development of international business linkages generally (Harris and Moran 1987). Decoupled systems represent units on the left end of the continuum, in which there is a domestic concentration of (1) personnel and resources, and (2) production and sales/marketing activities of goods and services.

Decoupled System	Coupled System	Supercoupled System
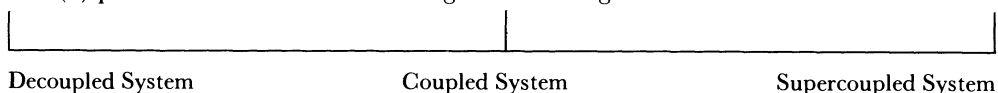
Coupled systems, on the other hand, have mutually beneficial exchanges of personnel, resources, technology, and products, which cross domestic and international boundaries. We placed coupled systems in the center of the continuum. While personnel exchanges might occur freely within a coupled system,[16] all products would not necessarily circulate for sale within that system. At GM, for example, some of the component divisions produce components in the United States and sell those components in the United States. Those same divisions with European facilities produce and sell their European-manufactured components in Europe, but not in the United States. Thus, while production and sales for any given component division may occur in multiple locations crossing international boundaries (such as the United States and Europe), sales of products made in one country may not always cross international boundaries. Coupled systems may be viewed as expanding the potential for international circulation of resources, while still maintaining some restrictions on this circulation.

The continuum described above may be extended to include a third structural type—a supercoupled system—which would be located at the far right end of the continuum. If it existed, it would be characterized by an unrestricted exchange of personnel, technology, and resources between domestic and overseas units, and by the multiplicity of production sites (both domestic and international) that sell products or services without regard to international boundaries.[17] Products and/or services developed and sold domestically also would be produced and sold overseas; those developed and sold abroad also would be produced and sold at home. This model potentially could be applied to any corporation or organization with global personnel and marketing linkages.

Is it possible to predict the *evolutionary potential or survival* of these different structural types? Organizations that are located and function in only one type of environment are specialized in their approach to adaptation; their potential to adapt in other environments is limited (Aldrich 1979). Sahlins (1964:138) made a similar argument with respect to culture, stating that "The more adapted a culture, the less therefore it is adaptable. Its specialization subtracts from its potential, from the capacity of alternate response, from tolerance of change in the world." Considering these arguments, decoupled systems appear to be in a much weaker position with respect to market expansion than coupled systems. In a decoupled system, market potential is restricted geographically. For example, marketing and sales of GM's domestic car divisions are limited largely to the United States (although some vehicles are sold through International Export Sales in

areas with no GM manufacturing facilities.[18] Furthermore, sales are decreasing as import and transplant vehicles increase their market share.[19] A decoupled system remains solely dependent on domestic consumers because it has adapted to and is specialized in a particular niche—in this case, the North American vehicle market.

By contrast, coupled systems not only appear to be more *adaptable* since they are less specialized in their approach to the world market, but also are *on the rise*. In the GM case, the collective expertise of operating in a global market has grown since the emergence of coupled systems in 1911 with the GM Export Co., FDD's predecessor. By the 1980s, more units and personnel were participating in coupled systems than at any other time in GM's history. Most of GM's component divisions, such as Inland-Fisher Guide, Delco Moraine, Hydra-matic, and Packard Electric, operate overseas plants and facilities. And, of the ISPs abroad in 1987, for example, 54% were affiliated with component divisions—coupled systems operations (personal communication with a GM administrator, 1987). Why are coupled systems on the rise? According to several managers that we interviewed, knowledge and skills acquired abroad are incorporated directly into units that we have identified as coupled systems. Improving the collective organizational expertise is one way of giving the corporation a competitive advantage. Such an advantage could benefit any organization operating in an increasingly global environment, and by extension, the stakeholders (e.g., employees, customers, stockholders) associated with that organization.

Although decoupled systems are more adaptable in terms of market penetration than decoupled units, the former could be superseded by even more geographically general systems, such as supercoupled systems. In supercoupled systems, international boundaries would not limit the flow of personnel, resources, goods, or services. Harris and Moran (1987:14–25) anticipate that the next evolutionary stage in the development of multinational corporations would be "world or global corporations." Many corporations today face the difficulties of developing or refining products that either will appeal to a broader customer base or can be adapted to local conditions. Furthermore, development of this evolutionary process would include decentralization within firms so that companies could "produce and sell for local markets," reflecting cultural sensitivity to customer and host-country-government requirements.

We agree with Harris and Moran (1987) that the world is rapidly becoming a global marketplace, but argue that as environmental pressures motivate the expansion of product and service availability cross-nationally, only those organizations with global implementation strategies in place will be in a position to compete with rivals. Thus, organizations decoupled from the international arena will be at a disadvantage relative to those based on the coupled or supercoupled systems models. Of the three models, supercoupled systems may hold the greatest promise for a competitive advantage because they are associated not only with a pro-global ideology and a cross-national organizational structure, but also with unrestricted exchanges of personnel, technology, resources, and products, all of which are central to global development. It is the simultaneous presence of all of these elements that is the foundation for the supercoupled system. The performance or effectiveness of such a system is dependent on both internal organizational factors (e.g., employee knowledge and skills, product quality) and external environmental conditions (e.g., product supply and demand, government regulations).

Notes

ber Chrisman helped interview some of the GM managers and assisted with portions of the analysis. Library support was provided by Marilynn Alexander, Sara Bowker, and Suzanne Petre.

[1]The reader should note that we have chosen deliberately not to use the term "culture" in describing GM. We are not entirely comfortable with the current definition of this term as used in the literature on organizational research (i.e., culture as restricted to ideational phenomena). Furthermore, we did not wish to add to the proliferation of new definitions by creating our own definition of culture. Thus, we chose to refer to organizational components by their descriptive names—organizational structure and ideology—leaving to future work a definition of organizational culture that grows out of our own research.

[2]Seven ISPs were contacted to participate in the study but were excluded because a second household member was not available for an interview. It appeared that these ISPs were separated and/or divorced at some point since their return to the United States. We also contacted eight high-ranking GM executives, three of whom granted us interviews.

[3]There were two main differences between our ISP sample and the ISP population. First, there were more "unclassified" employees (i.e., high-ranking, bonus-eligible executives) in the sample than "classified" employees. Second, no one in our sample was employed in a component division (i.e., a unit producing and selling automotive, defense, or electronic products) prior to their overseas assignment. Instead, all respondents in our sample originated in either a domestic staff or car division. By contrast, about one-half of the ISP population were employed in component divisions before going overseas.

[4]By the late 1970s, some female employees accepted overseas assignments as ISPs. In 1987, for example, 4 of the 472 ISPs worldwide were females. However, since the majority of ISPs have always been male, we decided to use the masculine pronoun for the sake of simplicity.

[5]Three ISPs accepted overseas assignments that were interrupted by a period of domestic duty of at least two years.

[6]To check the reliability of our job satisfaction ratings, we independently interpreted the ISPs' comments about their return employment. Our ratings were in agreement in all but one case; one ISP's comments about his return job satisfaction seemed mixed. While we recognized that individuals may express both positive and negative statements about their employment, we wanted to arrive at an overall assessment of their current jobs. In this case, the ISP's comment appeared to be predominantly negative. Consequently, we classified him as being dissatisfied with his current position.

[7]Adam Opel A.G. is GM's largest wholly owned overseas subsidiary and it manufactures and sells Opel passenger cars. It was acquired by GM in 1929 and has its headquarters in Russelsheim, Germany.

[8]A staff is a GM unit providing specialized services and information. Here the term is used to refer to units that are not connected with a specific operating division and are responsible for corporate-wide activities.

[9]Our distinction between large and small GM subsidiaries was based on factory sales of cars and trucks manufactured outside the United States. For the purposes of this study, the major subsidiaries are Adam Opel A.G., Vauxhall Motors Ltd., General Motors do Brasil S.A., and General Motors-Holden's Ltd. (GM Information Handbook 1980:15; 1985–86:17).

[10]Component divisions are GM operating units that produce and sell (1) automotive products related to both the chassis and transmission, and body and engine, (2) defense products, and (3) electronic products. Prior to 1978, GMOO was responsible for the operations of the component divisions.

[11]Car divisions are GM operating units that sell Chevrolet, Pontiac, Buick, Oldsmobile, or Cadillac vehicles. For purposes of this article, the term also encompasses the sale of trucks—both Chevrolet and GMC. Car divisions also had production responsibilities until the early 1980s.

[12]The North American Car Group, currently known as North American Automotive Operations, includes the domestic vehicle groups of Buick-Oldsmobile-Cadillac and Chevrolet-Pontiac-Canada, Truck and Bus, Saturn Corporation, International Export Sales, and some engineering and operations groups affiliated with the above.

[13]Throughout the 1970s, GM initiated a series of organizational changes to integrate the overseas and domestic operations and, thus, internationalize the corporation. As part of these changes, the overseas operations' offices were moved from New York to Detroit by 1978 (Briody and Baba 1992).

[14]Since our data focus largely on ISPs' subjective experiences related to the overseas assignment and potential explanations for repatriation difficulties, we cannot test the relationship between ef-

fectiveness of the overseas assignment and unit performance. However, we know that ISPs asso-
ciated with coupled systems reported that their knowledge and skills were put to use once they
repatriated. Such knowledge and skills represent opportunities for units to learn about and institute
new methods, systems, and work practices that have the potential to improve organizational per-
formance.

[15]Both Service (1962) and Fried (1967) proposed continua of increasing complexity based on
type of sociopolitical units. Our continuum reflects certain parallels in ideology and personnel with
one proposed by Heenan and Perlmutter (1979) in which an organization's orientation toward its
subsidiaries evolves from one that is ethnocentric (in which the home country personnel hold key
executive positions abroad), to polycentric (in which host country personnel hold the high-ranking
positions), to a geocentric orientation (in which cross-national diversity is represented in the top
executive positions).

[16]For those employees taking overseas assignments, international transfers or headcount allo-
cation could be a proxy variable for type of organizational structure (i.e., indicative of a coupled
or decoupled system). Repatriation was problematic for those affiliated with decoupled systems in
part because they changed headcounts extending beyond domestic boundaries.

[17]Some GM subsidiaries produce and sell automobiles outside the country of origin. For exam-
ple, a GM plant in Zaragosa, Spain, manufactures and assembles Opel and Vauxhall passenger
cars (headquartered in Germany and England, respectively) for the European market. However,
Opel and Vauxhall cars are neither produced nor routinely sold in the U.S. market.

[18]International Export Sales (a coupled system at GM) is the staff responsible for the overseas
sale of vehicles produced by domestically based decoupled systems. As such, it acts as the decou-
pled systems' broker in the international market.

[19]Between 1983 and 1988, GM's retail sales of passenger cars dropped from 44.2% to 34.3%.
During the same period, transplant vehicles (those built in the United States by Honda, Mazda,
Nissan, Toyota, and Volkswagen) and imports rose from 27.5% to 35.0% (Motor Vehicle Manu-
facturers Association 1989:14–15).

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