

# The Place of International Human Resource Management in International Business

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**Abstract** This article addresses the issue of whether International Human Resource Management (IHRM) is disconnected from other International Business (IB) studies. A content analysis was conducted of 383 articles published in five main international business journals used by IHRM scholars as outlets for their work over a 21 year time span. We classified the articles into two streams of IHRM research: international assignment management and what we term MNC-related research. These streams were found to be given almost equal research attention, developing in tandem across the time period examined. A thematic analysis of articles within each stream facilitated the identification of areas receiving the most research concentration, those with partial attention, and topics yet to be explored. A third stream of articles we designated as non-empirical allowed consideration of theoretical developments within the field. This assessment demonstrates how IHRM is developing a stronger connection with more general IB research.

**Keywords** Content analysis · Field evolution · Multinational HRM · Non-expatriate workforce · International assignees · Expatriates

## 1 Introduction

How to effectively manage the expatriate process has been a core research question in International Human Resource Management (IHRM). Sparrow (2009, p. 4)

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suggests this focus may be attributed to the somewhat prescribed nature of human resource management that directs research to “issue-driven concerns” faced by human resource practitioners in multinational companies. But IHRM scholars generally consider that the field has moved on from its earlier preoccupation with expatriation. As the authors of several overviews have concluded, the IHRM field has rapidly developed into an area concerned with the wider range of people-related issues in multinational firms (see e.g., Ferner 2009; Schuler and Tarique 2007; Sparrow 2009; Stahl et al. 2012).

Broadening the scope of research enquiry, though, has resulted in a blurring of the definitional boundary of what constitutes IHRM. As research has extended into broader multinational management issues, such as the transfer of HRM practices into subsidiary operations, some scholars have suggested that IHRM overlaps with, or is subsumed into, the related research areas of comparative human resource management and cross-cultural management (see e.g., Harzing and Pennington 2011; Sparrow 2009). However, based on definitions used in key texts and handbooks, it would seem that the prevailing consensus is that IHRM is concerned with all the issues related to the management of people in the MNC context (Dowling et al. 2013; Evans et al. 2011; Stahl et al. 2012); and thus falls under the international business research umbrella.

A lack of clarity as to what delineates IHRM makes it difficult to explain to ‘outsiders’ what IHRM involves as a scientific field. For the broader international business (IB) scientific community, IHRM may appear to be a field preoccupied with expatriate management and its related activities—particularly expatriate adjustment. As IHRM scholars, we have heard IB colleagues comment that ‘IHRM equals expatriate management’. Of more concern perhaps is the identification by the current co-editors of the *Journal of International Business Research* (*JIBS*), of what they term a disconnection of IHRM from other IB studies (Cantwell and Brannen 2011). While IHRM scholars may dispute these observations, it does reflect how the field may be perceived within the IB research community. The challenge is to demonstrate that IHRM scholars are engaged with broader IB-related issues; that the growing body of IHRM research findings make important contributions to answering what Peng (2004) describes is the overarching IB research question: What determines the success and failure of internationalising firms.

One way of meeting this challenge is to map the field of IHRM. As Williams and Plouffe (2007, p. 408) comment: “Systematically analysing the state of knowledge development in an academic field is a critical step in any discipline’s growth and maturity”. We therefore conducted a content analysis of IHRM publications in five journals considered to be the major IB outlets for those engaged in IHRM-related research. The objective was to determine research streams and topic areas to provide a general thematic overview of where research interest has lain over a selected time period. The resulting database of 383 articles constituted a research map covering a span of 21 years, broken into three time periods: 1990–1996; 1997–2003 and 2004–2010. Through an analysis of the resulting database, we are able to provide reasonable evidence that IHRM research does not equal expatriate management, though that remains an important stream of inquiry. Instead, IHRM is becoming multi-level in focus and draws on different disciplines and methodological

approaches to explain the contribution of people management to the success of the internationalising firm.

In addition, our results reveal what could be likened to a mosaic of the IHRM field. Building on the mosaic metaphor, our content analysis depicts where the picture is strongly visible (the field's research concentration); where it is merely incomplete outlines (areas that have received partial attention); and blank patches awaiting the attention of the artist (areas that have been ignored or neglected). While we deliberately avoid setting out a prescriptive research agenda, we draw attention to areas where IHRM research can make a stronger contribution to IB research in general.

## 2 Methodology

As explained above, our purpose was to map the field of IHRM. A content analysis was therefore deemed the appropriate methodology, rather than a meta-analysis or a literature review. Meta-analysis is a technique that combines of the results of comparable studies to produce a quantitative estimate of overall effect of a phenomenon, and to provide a single conclusion with greater statistical power (Borenstein et al. 2009; Rosenthal and DiMatteo 2001). A narrative or critical literature review is useful if one is concerned with theoretical development or evaluation, or to provide an overview of research into a particular topic (Baumeister and Leary 1997). In contrast, content analysis methodology allows scholars to objectively analyse published text in a systematic way to build a picture of a field's accrued knowledge (Williams and Plouffe 2007).

Content analysis has been applied in many ways across a variety of academic disciplines and research traditions (Duriau et al. 2007). Although there is no single set of rules or protocols, there are guidelines regarding the creation and definition of categories, coding of data, and assessing reliability and face validity (Downe-Wambolt 1992). It is more than frequency counts. It involves thematic coding of text content to structure meanings and trends inferred from open-ended data (Graneheim and Lundman 2004). Content analysis thus provides the appropriate scientific tool to obtain "a systematic, qualitative and quantitative description of the manifest content of literature in an area" (Li and Cavusgil 1995, p. 251).

As we now detail, our content analysis involved several steps: Journal selection and time period; compilation of the database; and article categorisation and thematic coding. Aspects related to reliability and validity of the generated database and the coding process we followed are explained for each of these steps.

### 2.1 Journal Selection and Time Period

Journal selection was predicated on our purpose to systematically build a picture of the IHRM field's accrued knowledge. We did not seek to determine the impact of any specific article; nor try to establish the field's most influential authors. Rather, we sought to establish patterns of how IHRM researchers over time have contributed to our understanding of what determines success or failure as a firm

internationalises. Thus, we confined our selection to IB journals. We began with the only extant published ranking of IHRM outlets, compiled by Caligiuri (1999) that placed the *International Journal of Human Resource Management (IJHRM)*, the *Journal of International Business Studies (JIBS)* and *Management International Review (MIR)* as the top three international journals used as outlets for IHRM publications. To give additional breadth and depth to our mapping exercise, we added *Journal of World Business* and *International Business Review*, which consistently feature among the highest ranking IB journals; for instance, they ranked second and third among the IB journals (after *JIBS*) in the 2010 ISI Web of Knowledge citation index. While we acknowledge that our search is not exhaustive, it is comprehensive enough to provide a representative body of IHRM publications, and is similar to that taken by Li and Cavusgil (1995) in their assessment of international marketing over a decade. This has been supported by a recent analysis of expatriate research that found that the field was “still being covered by a low number of different journals” (Dabic et al. 2013, p. 7). Details relating to the five journals are presented in the [Appendix](#).

*IJHRM* is considered by scholars in the field of IHRM research as the ‘leading outlet’ (Mayrhofer and Reichel 2009, p. 41). It was first published in 1990 and it seemed appropriate to make that calendar year our starting point. Thus, the analysis covers 21 years, finishing the review of each journal at the last issue of 2010. Three time periods of 7 years each are used: 1990–1996; 1997–2003, and 2004–2010. We recognize that the choice of time period was a somewhat arbitrary one, as was the division of the 21 years into three equally long periods (see Furrer et al. 2008, for a similar approach). The time periods and chronological presentation of our dataset of articles reflect the mapping purpose.

## 2.2 Compilation of the Database

The next step was to compile the articles that would form our databank. While there are several computer-aided text analysis software programs available, we considered that a manual search was appropriate for our purposes. The five journals were analysed to extract out only those articles that dealt with IHRM topics. Each article had to meet the IHRM definition in general use: All the issues related to the management of people in the MNC context (Björkman et al. 2012; Evans et al. 2011; Dowling et al. 2013; Poole 1990). This excluded articles dealing with comparative analyses of HRM and employee relations in different countries; and those dealing with cross-cultural management issues in a comparative, or national, sense.

In content analysis, “reproducibility is arguably the most important interpretation of reliability” (Krippendorff 2004, p. 414). Each author performed a separate examination across the five journals and the resulting lists compared. Differences were then discussed between the two authors to reach intercoder agreement. To enhance reproducibility, we used a third, independent coder. A colleague with teaching and consulting experience as well as a doctorate in IHRM independently examined the five journals using the same IHRM definition to identify relevant articles.

The use of statistical coefficients to determine inter-coder reliability was considered. However, we were concerned with making inferences from the manifest trend data as to the evolution of the field—not to test hypotheses, or determine the relative weight of the IHRM field within IB in general or the chosen journals in particular (cf., Furrer et al. 2008). Our purpose was to build, in a systematic way, an overall picture of a field of study. That meant we were dealing with a large unit of analysis—the field of IHRM over a time period of 21 years—and this carried the potential of compromised inter-coding reliability coefficients (Downe-Wambolt 1992, see also Krippendorff 2004). We were also cognizant of the danger of what Rosenthal and DiMatteo (2001, p. 68) call “high-tech statistication”; that is, using a technique that lends “an impressive air of sophistication but may be massively inappropriate”. These limitations and constraints informed our decision not to use statistical coefficients.

Intercoder agreement provided a measure of consistency with regard to the selection of relevant articles (Lombard et al. 2002). Credibility and trustworthiness of results was a primary concern and the use of an independent arbiter provided an appropriate way of checking inter-coder reliability through reproducibility. The resulting lists of articles across the five journals were compared. Differences were discussed until agreement was reached that all selected articles conformed to our IHRM definition. By the end of the coder agreement process, ten articles had been added and six deleted. The authors removed a further two articles from the data set. These dealt with the teaching of IHRM and thus were treated as outliers for the purpose of our mapping exercise. The final result was a total of 383 articles that conformed to our definition.

## 2.3 Article Categorization

In content analysis, category schemes are defined by the researcher, based on the research purpose, and the knowledge and experience of the authors (Downe-Wambolt 1992). Article categorization involved two rounds: First, sorting into research streams; and second, thematic analysis within these streams.

### 2.3.1 Round 1: Research Streams

Both authors separately sorted articles into two distinct research streams: Those relating to empirical research on international assignment management; and those related to broader HRM issues in multinational corporations (MNCs). Our two categories are broadly reflected in a Delphi study of IB research topics: Global organisations’ staffing; and expatriate management (Griffith et al. 2008). We are cognizant that not all articles are easily classified (see Clark et al. 1999). The independent researcher’s assessment provided a useful check-point for the few articles in contention, and again coder agreement was reached through discussion. As the round progressed, we also formed a third category: Theoretical/conceptual/field review (henceforth: ‘non-empirical’) articles. These were articles that dealt with efforts to develop general frameworks or models; or reviewed the field of IHRM more generally.

*Research Stream 1: International assignment management* Articles in this stream dealt with the expatriation process both for the international assignee and associated stakeholders such as spouse/partner, family members, and dual career couples. Classification was relatively straightforward. Articles mostly were self-defining in that they clearly dealt with HR activities related to assignment management, and these could more easily be broken down according to topic or theme. The most difficult category was that of expatriate performance given that the perspective could be the MNC as well as the individual, and agreement again was reached through discussion. We used the level of analysis—the international assignee—to separate out those specifically dealing with individual employees (and their accompanying partners/family), including articles on expatriate failure.

Given that we were primarily concerned with determining research concentration, we did not make any distinction in our classification between articles dealing with various categories of assignees. The term ‘international assignee’ was used to encompass articles dealing with the broad range: ‘Traditional’ expatriates sent on foreign assignments; and employees on ‘alternative’ arrangements like short-term assignments, self-initiated assignments, returnee assignments, international commuter assignments, rotational assignments, and virtual assignments (Evans et al. 2011).

*Research Stream 2: MNC-related topics* The second category covered the broad range of HRM issues arising from global expansion (staffing policies or HR practices in foreign subsidiaries, for instance), and the HR effects of corporate practices. Articles related to the staffing of international operations (with expatriates or local employees) as well as the purposes and roles of different employee groups (such as expatriates as transferees of knowledge) were included. This separation also was applied to compensation. There were two articles that dealt with compensation at the corporate headquarters level (for example, designing a global compensation system) and so were classified as MNC-related articles. Again, categorization differences were resolved by discussion between the authors.

*Research stream 3: Non-empirical.* This research stream consisted of the remainder of the identified articles; that is, non-empirical articles. As we discuss later, the combining of review and theoretical articles into a separate category allowed us to obtain a picture of how the field was evolving from its early atheoretical characteristic (Björkman et al. 2012) and its contribution to IB theory more generally.

### 2.3.2 Results of Round 1

Table 1 presents the result of the first round of analysis. We found that 40 % of total articles dealt with international assignments; the proportion remaining relatively constant across the time periods. The proportion of MNC-related IHRM articles increased steadily over time, reaching 42 % in 2004–2010. The non-empirical research stream comprised 21 % of the total data base but dropped from 29 % in 1990–1996 to 15 % in 2004–2010.

Given its position as a primary outlet for IHRM scholars, it was not surprising that, overall, there were more articles published in *IJHRM* (62 %) than in *JIBS*

**Table 1** IHRM research streams

Period	Stream	IJHRM	JIBS	MIR	JWB	IBR	Total
1990–1996	International assignments	14	9	5	0	1	29 (43 %)
	MNC-related	9	7	2	0	1	19 (28 %)
	Non-empirical	12	3	1	3	1	20 (29 %)
		(35)	(19)	(8)	(3)	(3)	(68)
1997–2003	International assignments	25	3	3	9	3	43 (35 %)
	MNC-related	30	3	3	8	3	47 (38 %)
	Non-empirical	19	1	5	8	1	34 (27 %)
		(74)	(7)	(11)	(25)	(7)	(124)
2004–2010	International assignments	63	5	2	10	2	82 (43 %)
	MNC-related	51	9	3	15	3	81 (42 %)
	Non-empirical	15	4	0	8	1	28 (15 %)
		(129)	(18)	(5)	(33)	(6)	(191)
Total		238	44	24	61	16	383
International assignments		43 %	32 %	42 %	31 %	37.5 %	40 %
MNC-related		38 %	43 %	33 %	38 %	44 %	38 %
Non-empirical		19 %	18 %	25 %	26 %	19 %	21 %

Percentages rounded

(12 %), *MIR* (6 %), *JWB* (16 %) and *IBR* (4 %). *IJHRM* increasingly became the dominant outlet of assignment-related research (77 % of the articles published during 2004–2010, up from 48 % in 1990–1996). Research in Stream 1 has become an increasingly mature area of study and, as we will later discuss, many of the more recent papers only offer marginal contributions to the literature. It is therefore natural that such papers stand a better chance of being published in the more narrowly and functionally focused *IJHRM*.

The analysis also shows the growth of the field. The number of articles more than doubled from 1990–1996 to 1997–2003, increasing during 2004–2010 to more than three times that of 1990–1996. This can partly be attributed to the overall interest in IB as a scientific field of endeavour, as reflected in the incremental growth in the number of issues per volume in four of our five journals (see [Appendix](#)). The increase in articles published in *JWB* beginning in the year 1997 is noteworthy. The rebranding and increased focus of *JWB* on “challenges facing global managers” (Luthans and Slocum 1997, p. 1), including HRM, did indeed lead to a change in the kind of articles published, and special issues devoted to IHRM topics such as global talent management and boundaryless careers. The growth of IB itself and the multi-disciplinary nature of the other four journals inevitably mean authors from any research area face a highly competitive publication environment.

### 2.3.3 Round 2: Thematic Coding

Our second purpose was to identify, over the relevant timeframe, areas of research focus due to the growing diversification of the IHRM field. Thus, Round 2 involved

a thematic analysis of articles in Research Streams 1 and 2. Each article was scanned for key words, with both authors using an agreed a priori coding system. In content analysis, categories can be concept-driven or data-driven. As we were concerned with manifest rather than latent content, we used concept-driven categories, based on our combined knowledge of the IHRM literature, and in line with the topics included in recent IHRM textbooks (Dowling et al. 2013; Evans et al. 2011; Harzing and Pennington 2011) and two recent IHRM research handbooks (Stahl et al. 2012; Sparrow 2009). Our independent colleague's assessment again provided a useful check, and differences discussed to reach agreement.

*International assignment management themes* Based on the literature, eight specific topics were identified: Adjustment and failure, repatriation, expatriate career, spouse/partner/family, female/gender, expatriate performance (including performance appraisal), selection and cross-cultural training, and compensation. Articles that dealt with international assignment management in a general sense (such as willingness to accept an assignment; expatriate characteristics) or from a specific country or group perspective (Taiwanese, New Zealand, etc.) were dealt with as a separate category (coded 'Other'), as they covered more than one focal topic. Thus, nine categories were delineated for this research stream.

Table 2 presents the nine themes, broken into time periods, in order of frequency to illustrate research concentration. Adjustment emerged as the clearly dominant topic (34 %) across all journals and time periods. Apart from those specifically dealing with the topic, our thematic analysis found that in-country (culturally related) adjustment was a consistent topic in articles dealing with female expatriates; with spouse/partner and other family members; and with repatriates. Adjustment was also included as one of the issues discussed in many of the more general and country-specific articles.

More emphasis in recent years has been placed on the performance of international assignees (14 % overall). This is a topic area of obvious academic and practical interest where, so far, there is less conclusive research evidence. Across the time period, there was growth in research on the subsequent effects of international assignments: On the person's career; repatriation; and to a lesser

**Table 2** International assignment themes

Theme	1990–1996	1997–2003	2004–2010	Total
Adjustment	10	15	27	52
Performance	8	3	10	21
Selection/training	1	7	10	18
Career	2	5	9	16
Repatriation	3	6	6	15
Female/gender	1	4	6	11
Other	0	1	9	10
Spouse/family	3	1	5	9
Compensation	1	1	0	2

extent, on the expatriate's spouse/family. The area that has received consistently low attention has been compensation (only 2 articles), which is curious given the emphasis that tends to be placed on financial outcomes as a motive to accept an assignment.

*MNC-related themes* The eclectic nature of this research stream made thematic coding a somewhat more challenging task. We first sorted articles into three levels of analysis: The macro context; the MNC; and the subsidiary/unit level. Both researchers then conferred to reach agreement on thematic coding to arrive at seven categories across these three broad areas: MNC macro context; Headquarters HRM issues, staffing policies and practices, expatriate roles and purposes (MNC level); subsidiary HRM; transfer of HR practices; HRM and operation modes (subsidiary/unit level).

As not all authors specifically stated the level of analysis used, the classification of some articles required additional dialogue to reach intercoder agreement. Others were more straight-forward. For example, global talent management articles were more clearly focused on Headquarters HRM activities (see Farndale et al. 2010) while articles dealing with staffing policies and practices sometimes included the subsidiary unit level. Indeed, the subsidiary level of analysis posed the most challenge in our coding process as it warranted careful differentiation of IHRM articles from comparative HRM/IM and cross-cultural management (e.g., Kwon et al. 2010; Khilji 2002). The nuanced nature of the exercise reinforced our decision to conduct the analysis manually.

Table 3 presents our results, again in decreasing order of frequency. The MNC level contained the highest number of articles, of which the dominant category was that labelled 'Headquarters HRM issues'. This category comprised articles relating to corporate HR policies, practices, activities and systems, and the MNC's designated HR function in charge of HRM in the MNC. Considerably more of the 'Headquarters HRM issues' research has focused on the configuration and effects of corporate HR policies and (intended) practices than on the HR function as an actor. A sub-theme of this group was auditing and return of investment from international assignments in the MNC (a total of three articles).

Articles relating to staffing policies and practices addressed issues related to the use of MNC Parent Country Nationals, Host Country Nationals and Third Country Nationals; developing international or global managers; and using alternative

**Table 3** MNC-related themes

Theme	1990–1996	1997–2003	2004–2010	Total
Headquarters HRM	6	18	29	53
Staffing policies and practices	6	4	17	27
HR practices transfer	4	8	15	27
Subsidiary HRM	1	8	10	19
International assignee roles	2	7	4	13
HRM and operational modes	0	2	6	8
MNC context	0	0	0	0

international assignment forms. Articles concerning the purpose of international assignments and the roles played by expatriates were separated out from Research Stream 1 as they took an organisational level approach (e.g., Harzing 2001). These articles examined either the use of expatriates from a MNC perspective and/or attempted to assess the return from, or effects of, such assignments. Some articles built upon the early interest in issues related to control and coordination of MNCs, following the work of Edström and Galbraith (1977). A distinct group of articles analysed the effect of staff transfers on social capital development in the MNC and/or knowledge transfer across units and/or individuals (such as Minbaeva et al. 2003).

Three themes were concerned with the subsidiary/unit level of analysis: HRM and operation modes; HR practices transfer; and subsidiary HRM. A rapidly growing category of articles examined HRM in different FDI modes of operation such as international mergers and acquisitions; joint ventures, and alliances. The subsidiary HRM category included articles dealing with specific HRM issues pertaining to the individual unit. The final level of analysis—context—received the least research attention. In the whole database, only two articles dealt with the MNC context—both at the non-empirical level—and so were excluded from this research stream.

*Non-empirical articles* As mentioned above, separating out articles that comprised either IHRM field overviews (see e.g., Dowling 1999), conceptual frameworks (Bolino 2007), and broader literature reviews (such as Tarique and Schuler 2010) provided a valuable snapshot in terms of the overall status of IHRM as a scientific field. The resulting pattern across this category demonstrates the concerted efforts of IHRM scholars to move beyond the traditional narrow focus on expatriation. Table 4 shows the breakdown into sub-categories. The majority (51 %) were theoretical or review pieces concerning MNC-related issues; with 35 % considering aspects of international assignment management.

The database was further examined to classify articles by research method employed. Three categories were used: Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed method. The composite results from the five journals are shown in Table 5. Not unexpectedly, quantitative articles dominated. The dearth of articles across all five journals and time periods that specifically dealt with research methodology itself was noticeable though, in conformity with academic convention, authors would report on empirical limitations and other research issues pertinent to their own work.

**Table 4** Theory/field themes

Theme	1990–1996	1997–2003	2004–2010	Total
MNC-related	10	19	13	42
International assignments	6	12	9	27
Field overview	4	2	4	10
Literature review	0	1	1	2
Methodology	0	1	1	2

**Table 5** Research methods employed

Approach	1990–1996	1997–2003	2010	Total
Quantitative	34	63	94	191
Qualitative	8	25	53	86
Mixed method	3	5	14	22

When breaking down these results across the five journals, we found *IJHRM* the most eclectic—publishing articles covering the full spectrum, though there was a bias toward quantitative (113 quantitative; 61 qualitative and 15 mixed). The methodological spread continued over the three time periods. The eclecticism may support the popular view of this journal as the ‘home’ of IHRM research. *JIBS* maintained a bias toward quantitative articles, publishing only one qualitative-based article and one using mixed methods across the three time periods. Likewise, there was only one non-quantitative article published in *MIR*. *IBR* showed a swing towards a more eclectic methodology in the 2004–2010 timeframe. Of the five empirical articles, two were quantitative, two qualitative, and one mixed method. As the number of IHRM articles increased in *JWB*, so did the spread of research methods to the extent that in the period 2004–2010, there were more qualitative (15) than quantitative (8) articles published, along with two using mixed methods.

### 3 Discussion

We consider two main issues relating to Research Stream 1 (international assignment management): The concentration on expatriate adjustment as a research topic to the detriment of other areas; and the wisdom of a continued preoccupation with a relatively small cohort of MNC employees. We address these issues before turning to consider the implications arising from Research Streams 2 and 3.

*The dominance of expatriate adjustment* Cultural adjustment has long been recognized as an important aspect of on-assignment performance and of concern to MNC management, given the high maintenance cost of this staffing strategy. For example, many of the adjustment papers we reviewed examined some aspect of the Black et al. (1991) framework; a concentration reflected in a meta-analysis of this model by Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al. (2005). However, it could be argued that we have reached the stage of diminishing returns from research on expatriate adjustment. Indeed, the increased number of country-specific expatriate articles we examined makes only small, somewhat marginal, contributions to our understanding of the adjustment process; suggesting we have almost reached empirical saturation.

As Takeuchi (2010) critiques, expatriate performance research has largely neglected the effects of assignments on other stakeholders; such as family members, host country nationals, and parent country nationals. The use of adjustment as an explanatory variable for expatriate performance and turnover is dangerous if it

blinds us from seeking other potential explanations; and may be likened to the Drunkard's Search: Taking the easier, well-lit path of scholarly inquiry (Brewster 1999; McKenna et al. 2008). Moreover, continuing to devote research time to expatriate adjustment for marginal benefit carries the danger of reinforcing the perception that IHRM equals expatriate management, or that the field is an extension of cross-cultural management.

*Preoccupation with a small cohort* Recent developments—such as the launch of a dedicated outlet, the *Journal of Global Mobility*—suggest that international assignment management research is likely to continue (see e.g., Lazarova et al. 2010; Takeuchi 2010; Shaffer et al. 2012). But we question whether this focus is warranted. The recent work on different types of assignments shifts attention from senior management to a broader cohort of international assignees, but it maintains an emphasis on a select group. It is demonstrably clear that international assignees constitute only a fraction of a MNC's total global workforce, yet there has been relatively limited work regarding the HR management of local employees working for MNCs. Likewise, while there is merit in the work on global talent management (see e.g., Collings and Mellahi 2009; Mäkelä et al. 2010), it can be similarly criticized. Dabic et al. (2013) reached the same conclusion; that there needs to be a broader focus if the expatriate research area is to progress.

### 3.1 Research Stream 2: MNC-Related Topics

The diversity of the MNC-related stream reveals there are a burgeoning number of articles dealing with people issues beyond the confines of expatriate management. Given the current stage of development of the field of IHRM, it is not surprising that we find a concentration of work at the multinational and subsidiary levels of analysis. Though not specifically expressed by the relevant authors of articles in this research stream, some respond to what Wright and van de Voorde (2009) see as a need to analyse HRM issues across organizational levels (see e.g., Myloni et al. 2007; Reiche 2007; Sayim 2010). We also identified three theoretical frameworks linking IHRM activities with broader organizational and contextual factors (Harvey et al. 2001; Kim and Gray 2005; Schuler et al. 1993); and several field reviews (such as Collings et al. 2007; Stroh and Caligiuri 1998). We turn now to examining the implications of our findings across the three levels of analysis we identified in the MNC-related stream.

*MNC context* A large number of studies in the general IB literature have examined the way in which institutional factors (including political-legal, the economic system, the educational system, and the forms and values associated with these) and cultural factors influence an MNC's global operations. Further, the question of the influence of MNCs on the environments in which they are operating has been vigorously debated both in the IB literature and in the more public domain. By its very nature, examination of how IHRM influences and is influenced by the global environment provides a strong linkage to international business. However, there has been relatively little IHRM scholarly interest in investigating global and home country factors influencing HRM policies and practices in MNCs (for an exception, see Pudelko and Harzing 2007) and even less in examining how MNCs through their HRM practices and systems influence the societies in which they

operate. It is perhaps this neglect that has given rise to the perception that IHRM is disconnected from the wider IB community.

*MNC level* This level of analysis has received the most research concentration across the three time periods. However, it is perhaps somewhat telling that the central ‘actor’—the HR function—has not been front and centre. Articles we categorized as ‘headquarters’ HRM’—the area receiving the most research attention at this level—generally dealt with corporate HR policies, practices, activities and systems. Over the time period we investigated, only three articles clearly addressed aspects of the corporate HR function in MNCs (Martin and Beaumont 2001; Novicevic and Harvey 2001; Scullion and Starkey 2000). While HR managers are commonly the respondents in the empirical work we reviewed, little is known about the roles HR managers play in the planning, delivery, and monitoring of HR activities—whether at MNC headquarters, in regional centres, and in subsidiaries. This also means that there is a lack of understanding of how the HR departments contribute to organizational performance (cf., Hope-Hailey et al. 2005).

The second area receiving considerable attention related to MNC staffing policies and international assignee roles. The literature on staffing policies and the use of expatriates in MNCs goes back to early conceptual work by Perlmutter (1969) and Edström and Galbraith (1977) and given impetus by Tung’s (1981) empirical research. More recently, this area has seen a revival with research on, for example, how Japanese, Chinese and Korean MNCs staff their international operations. That this topic remains on the research agenda is perhaps testament to an enduring reality: That success in international business depends on having the right person in the right place at the right time. However, we found an imbalance, in that this area tends to concentrate on the *reasons for* rather than the *outcomes of* staff transfers. For example, the issue of return-on-investment from international assignments has only recently been addressed—we found two empirical articles, both published in the 2009 *IJHRM* special issue on global staffing (volume 20, no. 6). In answering outcome-related questions, IHRM researchers may contribute to the on-going debate regarding the contribution of HR systems and activities to organizational performance.

*Subsidiary level* This level of analysis exemplifies the way in which IHRM is connected to the IB-related literature. As mentioned earlier, we found a group of articles dealing with the effect of staff transfers on knowledge transfer across units, and the development of social capital. These articles are written at the cross-section between IHRM research and the large and still growing work on social capital (Kostova and Roth 2003) and knowledge transfer/sharing in MNCs (Minbaeva and Michailova 2004). Likewise, articles focusing on the transfer of traditional HR policies and/or practices tended to use the seminal integration-responsiveness framework (Prahalad and Doz 1987) in international business, modified to examine MNC standardisation and/or local responsiveness of subsidiary HR practices (Rosenzweig and Nohria 1994).

At the same time, though, the focus on subsidiary units mirrors the research concentration within the IB field on foreign direct investment. While we found a growing interest in different forms of international business operations within this theme, the dominant area was the HR implications of international mergers and

acquisitions and international joint ventures—alternative forms of foreign direct investment to that of wholly-owned subsidiaries. Little is known about the HRM implications of other forms of foreign operations, despite a research call made two decades ago (Welch and Welch 1994). Basic international business textbooks cover ethical issues and company responses related to employment in subcontracted firms, yet in spite of extensive discussion on the topic in society our analysis found only one article that dealt with such an activity from a HRM perspective (Al-Husan and James 2003).

### 3.2 Research Stream 3: Non-Empirical Articles

Underlying our querying of the continued focus on international assignees are concerns related to theoretical development. As mentioned above, articles pertaining to this stream were separated out and examined as a way of determining the extent to which the field was overcoming its ‘theory deficit characteristic’ (Björkman et al. 2012). The several conceptual frameworks in this category related to various components involved in global staff deployment (see e.g., Harvey and Buckley 1997; Welch 2003; Oddou et al. 2009). There was a noticeable dearth of work that attempts to build a comprehensive framework of the international assignment *process*; that is, linking inputs (such as the purpose, nature and type of assignment); on-assignment factors (the themes in Table 2); and proximate and distant outputs (for example, individual career pathing, staff retention, and unit- and MNC-level knowledge and skills transfer), interacting over time. As Klein et al. (1999, p. 243) comment, multilevel theorizing “acknowledges the influence of the organizational context on individuals’ actions and perceptions *and* [authors’ emphasis] the influence of individuals’ actions and perceptions on the organizational context”.

Mendenhall (1999, pp. 68, 84) called for paradigmatic integration in expatriate management research to overcome what he referred to as ‘balkanization’—the dominance of the logical positivist paradigm that “may not have provided a complete comprehension of the phenomenon of expatriation”. He concluded that integration of methodological paradigms would overcome what he saw as a tendency to “conduct research studies that are merely variations of old, well-worn themes”. Perhaps the increase in the use of qualitative and mixed methods we identified is indicative that IHRM scholars are endeavouring to utilize the wider range of methodological approaches. It should be noted that the bias toward the logical positivist paradigm is not unique to IHRM.

## 4 Research Implications

The content analysis presented in this article provides the first published systematic and thematic analysis of the field of IHRM. It was a useful exercise in that it enabled us to take stock. The process of sorting articles into research streams and categories facilitated the highlighting of areas of research concentration—along with topics or themes that have received partial or minimal attention and aspects that are

seemingly neglected. We acknowledge that our analysis is confined to articles published in five IB journals over a specified time period and does therefore not provide a total picture of IHRM research, nor do we identify articles in other outlets that have influenced IHRM thinking. However, our mapping exercise represents a reasonable picture of the overall evolution of the field itself, given the number of articles examined over a 21 year period in the major IB outlets used by IHRM scholars. A further content analysis using a more diverse range of journals and books, over a longer timeframe, would be a worthwhile follow-up exercise.

While perhaps not a surprising finding for those working within the field, the analysis provides evidence that IHRM does not equal expatriate management. The challenge though is to overcome the current disjunction that has given rise to the misperception of the dominance of expatriation studies. Macro, exogenous factors are included in early conceptual models (such as that of Schuler et al. 1993; Taylor et al. 1996; Welch 1994). These frameworks, or elements thereof, are frequently cited but from our content analysis would appear to have been largely ignored. As Dabic et al. (2013) comment, the groundwork has been laid, but there remains more work to be done in order to develop a stronger theoretical base. Refining and extending earlier conceptual models can assist in knowledge development by providing continuity with the past while incorporating new and novel discoveries (Suddaby et al. 2011). But one cannot develop the field by only keeping to well-lit paths; or by varying well-worn themes, continuing to shape and polish existing conceptual building blocks (Mendenhall 1999; Suddaby 2010; Corley and Gioia 2011).

As mentioned above, an obvious area would be that of HR issues associated with international subcontracting and outsourcing. Often, the arm's length nature of such arrangements poses context-specific HR issues such as ensuring adherence by contractees to codes of conduct relating to work practices such as health and safety, and compliance with local labor laws and regulations. Other concerns are whether the HR department is involved in the assignment of staff to oversee compliance, and the provision of relevant skills training and knowledge transfer. That is, what is the role of IHRM in ensuring that the international suppliers and even suppliers' suppliers deliver the expected outcomes in an ethical and socially responsible manner? Strengthening the breadth of research focus may show how all forms of foreign operations have critical HR challenges and consequences which may involve, but not be limited to, international assignments. There is the added advantage of shifting the focus from the traditional expatriate to HR issues pertaining to other employee categories.

Early work into HRM issues highlighted the role of staff transfers as a soft control mechanism (Edström and Galbraith 1977). Expatriates were expected to transfer corporate values thus assisting the MNC in developing informal control and coordination of the global entity. Likewise, bringing subsidiary employees into headquarters operations was seen as important to such cultural management. A question worth posing is to what extent staff transfers continue to play this role in the current global context. Our analysis found limited attention to the outcomes of HR activities on MNC performance. Further work would assist in identifying the intangible contributions people make to corporate objectives such as organizational

learning, dynamic capabilities, absorptive capacity, shared values, social capital and knowledge transfer as a result of staff transfers. Research is also needed on the implementation and impact of corporate-wide HR policies and practices such as performance management systems that, in addition to employee performance, include appraising local employees on their espoused values and behaviours. While there is some debate in the international management literature about the viability and desirability of corporate culture as a managerial tool, this has not been reflected in the IHRM literature we considered. Research into the HR department might consider its role in how MNCs “manage” their corporate culture.

## 5 A Concluding Comment

Firms operating in the dynamic global environment constantly make strategic decisions, such as divesting operations in one country or moving into new markets and contexts. Each of these decisions has HR consequences. As the work on social capital and knowledge transfer reminds us, people are an important resource. Thus, managing the staffing process will remain an integral part of what we define as IHRM. We hope that the results of the content analysis presented in this article will encourage colleagues to move away from the well-worn paths we identified into new areas that will enhance the standing of the field within the IB community.

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## Appendix: Details of the selected journals

- *IJHRM* was launched in 1990 with three issues; growing to 15 issues by 2010. Topics range from IHRM to comparative studies of management and HR, cross-cultural management; single national HRM; and employee and industrial relations studies.
- *JIBS* is consistently ranked as the premier journal in the IB field. It was founded in 1970 and is the official journal of the Academy of International Business. *JIBS* is eclectic in terms of article topics, with the current editors stressing its inter-disciplinary focus. As with *IJHRM*, the number of volume issues has slowly increased over time—from a steady four issues per year, rising to six in 2003; eight in 2008, and to nine in 2010.
- *MIR* is the oldest international management journal, celebrating its fiftieth year of publication in 2010. The journal now publishes six issues per year. Articles are rather eclectic in nature but fall within the stated editorial aim of furthering the field of International Management.
- *JWB* was founded in 1965. The journal’s original name was *Columbia Journal of World Business*, and it adopted its current name in 1997. It accepts papers on a range of topics and disciplines in IM/IB research. It consistently publishes four issues per year.

- Founded in 1992, *IBR* commenced as the *Scandinavian International Business Review*, but changed its name after its first year. It now publishes six issues per year, with a similar eclectic IB/IM scope of articles to *MIR* and *JWB*. In 2003, *IBR* became the official journal of the European International Business Association.

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