

## Low-status expatriates

### Introduction

Early research on expatriation concentrated almost exclusively on individuals in high-status positions, i.e. assigned expatriates (Black and Gregersen, 1990; Tung, 1998; McNulty and Selmer, 2017). Much recent research continues this focus. In this regard, high status may be granted as a result of national origin (developed country), organisational affiliation (parent company assigned), position (managerial level) and identification with dominant majority groups based on ethnicity, religion, age, gender or sexual orientation. Critically, although status differences exist in all societies, what is valued as high status or demoted as being associated with low status can vary across countries (Hofstede, 1991). In other words, what is high status in one country can be low status in another country – for example, being of a particular gender or skin colour, having specific education or being a member of a certain religious group (e.g. Chow, 1999; Selmer *et al.*, 2009).

In this spirit, we have learned much from research focused on high-status expatriates, which has uncovered important aspects of international human resource management. This arises from the focus on assigned expatriates, because the cost of sending them means that only high-status expatriates will be included. However, since the identification of self-initiated expatriates (Suutari and Brewster, 2000), the range of expatriate positions explored in the research has expanded, despite attempts to restrict that field too to high-status expatriates (Cerdin and Selmer, 2014). Recent work has expanded the research scope to begin exploring lower status expatriates, previously “hidden” from the management scholarly discussion (Haak-Saheem and Brewster, 2017). For example, reports show that around 150m individuals with no, or limited, educational background live and work outside their country of origin as low-paid and (often) low-skilled expatriates (ILO, 2015).

Based on such numbers and other indicators, scholars have begun to encourage the inclusion of more minority expatriate populations (Olsen and Martins, 2009). Correspondingly, such individuals are presumed to have a low power base and can be perceived as a weaker minority from social, legal and economic perspectives (Ellemers *et al.*, 1992). They are therefore likely to face difficulties in accessing resources and recognition (Bourdieu, 2004).

So far, expatriate studies have addressed the concerns of low-status expatriates from developing countries in the Arabian Peninsula (Haak-Saheem and Brewster, 2017; Lauring, 2011, 2013), and discrimination and degradation of expatriates based on gender or sexual orientation (Bader *et al.*, 2018; Hutchings *et al.*, 2013; Kim and von Glinow, 2017). Olsen and Martins (2009) argue that the more prestigious an expatriates’ racial or ethnic group is deemed to be by local employees and the host community, the more support they will receive. This is confirmed by more recent research, showing that expatriates perceive their ethnic and racial identity as having the greatest impact on the response they get when interacting with host country nationals (Haak-Saheem *et al.*, 2017). Additionally, studies are emerging distinguishing between expatriates in higher and lower status based on position level (Lauring *et al.*, 2019; Stahl and Caligiuri, 2005) or their connection to a parent company (Tarique *et al.*, 2006; Lauring and Selmer, 2018).

## Articles in this Special Section

The study of low-status expatriates is a growing field, befitting the fact that that they are the majority of expatriates around the world and that they are increasingly becoming a



problem that employers are attempting to address. However, they are still very much a minority issue for our studies of international HRM. Although the articles in this Special Section do not include all the submissions, of course some fell out during the reviewing process, it is true to say that there were only a small number of papers submitted. We call for increased attention to this group of expatriates.

The contributions in this Special Section are from different conceptual and methodological backgrounds and cover different sub-topics within this field of research from the “talent management” of low-status expatriates to the role of power differentials. Methodologically, the studies adopted both qualitative and quantitative as well as conceptual approaches. The samples range from business expatriates in Asia to religious ministers relocating from African countries to France. This diversity functions to expand extant insights into the lives of low-status expatriates.

The first article, “From expatriation to global migration: the role of talent management practices in talent migration to Ghana,” written by Marina Latukha *et al.* (2020), aims to examine the role of talent management practices in talent migration from developed countries to Ghana that may enhance a country’s economic development through knowledge transfer. The paper also investigates the determinants of migration to the African countries. Drawing on a conceptual framework, the article sets out to develop propositions and to build a theoretical framework showing how firms from Ghana can push SIEs to a longer stay in Ghana, stimulating inward migration by implementing talent management practices. It is argued that in the Ghanaian context expatriates may become migrants by overcoming negative perceptions about Ghana as a destination. Furthermore, that talent attraction and talent retention practices with governmental support play an important role in inward migration to Ghana.

Continuing with the themes of global mobility, Africa and the transition from expatriation to migration, the second article is “African religious ministers’ transition from expatriation to migration: the role of world view” by Lovanirina Ramboarison-Lalao *et al.* (2020). This article, using the example of low-status ministers of religion, examines the process of moving from temporary expatriation to settled migration status. The study applies a qualitative in-depth analysis of the narratives of African religious ministers working in France as well as interviews with their superiors and host country national colleagues. Findings show that personal-level, organisational-level and country-level determinants come into play as levers or barriers in the “expatriation to migration” process. In particular, this group exhibits a clear “world view” or “God centrality” that determines approaches to their career and location. It is argued that although less visible in other cases, where religion is not so central, this could be a generalisable finding.

The last paper by David Guttormsen and Anne Marie Francesco (2020) is titled, “Status and success: do lower status expatriates in multinational corporations experience different types of success?” This is quantitative article drawing on a sample of 424 responses from business expatriates working within multinational corporations operating in Asia. The study examines how low-status expatriates in Asia (lower position, younger and female) are positioned differently compared to high-status expatriates (higher position, older and male) in terms of experiencing various types of success. The article demonstrates that expatriates with different status-related characteristics might experience success during an international assignment differently.

### **Contribution to future research**

The papers in this Special Section demonstrate some of the different perspectives and challenges low-status expatriates experience while living and working outside of their home countries. While there is always a need for advancing our current understanding on expatriation and IHRM theory development, the aim of this SI was to examine critically aspects of low-status expatriation that are germane to IHRM but have not been fully integrated with mainstream studies.

Even though the concept of expatriation was originally developed to explain human resource management choices of MNEs, the basic analytical approach towards expatriation has evolved significantly in the last two decades. Low-status expatriates are the majority of expatriates around the world and are finally attracting increased attention within the expatriate literature. A judicious approach to studying them will perhaps be a first step towards assessing whether our existing theories have comprehensive explanatory power and can effectively explain the most relevant aspects of expatriation practices and policies.

The papers in this Special Section fulfil an important function in bringing the limited understanding on low-status expatriation to the forefront of expatriate management and IHRM research agenda. We need far more studies of this group, but it is our hope too that, in combination, they might serve not only to delineate current frontiers in IHRM and expatriation research but also inspire work on new (and as yet unidentified) ones. Building on this work should ensure ample opportunities both for empirical and conceptual studies aiming to advance our current understanding on expatriation.

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### Further reading

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