



Constructing Careers 'in Chaos'. Exploring Career Progress of Expatriates and Repatriates on Career Ladder or Career Lattice Pathways

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Abstract

This article explores expatriate and repatriate career progress on career ladder and lattice paths through the theoretical lenses of career construction theory, chaos theory of careers and the career ladder versus career lattice model. The research method is an exploratory, qualitative study, using purposive sampling and snowball sampling techniques. 78 interviews were conducted with expatriates and repatriates originating from countries across the globe. Findings reveal that respondents had multidirectional global careers, shifting from linear, hierarchical career ladder paths to non-linear, unpredictable career lattice paths on which they made career progress. This paper contributes to the international HRD literature by providing insight into the different meanings of career progress of expatriates and repatriates on diversified, multidirectional, dynamic career paths that continually evolve across the lifespan. A limitation of this study was that it relied on self-reports of expatriates and repatriates regarding their career pathways and career progress. Future research should incorporate data triangulation by a multi-actor and a multi-source approach to gain insights into constructing global career paths to facilitate expatriate and repatriate career progress. Implications for practice are the integration of individual career mastery with organizational career path planning to enable expatriates' and repatriates' career progress on multidirectional career pathways.

Keywords

international assignments • career ladder and lattice pathways • career progress • expatriates • repatriates

Introduction

Organisations largely rely on expatriates for building international capabilities across multiple geographical boundaries, for transferability of knowledge and filling competency gaps, for control and coordination, for business expansion and success, and for increasing global competitive advantage (Baruch et al., 2016; Chiang et al., 2018). These expatriates are called 'Company Assigned Expatriates' (CAE) - individuals who engage in international geographical mobility and reside temporarily in a country where they do not hold citizenship, and who are legally employed by an organisation to complete an international assignment (IA) for accomplishing organizational goals (Baruch 2016; Mello et al., 2023 a, b; McNulty & Brewster, 2017; Suutari et al., 2018). An IA typically begins when an employee (expatriate) is sent abroad (expatriation) to work in an organization's foreign operations (headquarters or subsidiary) for a prolonged period, typically more than six months and less than five years. The scope of an expatriate's IA encompasses a wide range of organizational objectives, including establishing, managing and coordinating foreign operations, opening new markets and expanding

business networks, transferring knowledge and skills, and building international experience, capabilities, and learning (Chiang et al., 2018). The IA ends when the expatriate returns home to the country of origin upon completion of the assignment (repatriation) (Chiang et al., 2018; Kraimer et al., 2016). The expatriates who were sent overseas by their employing organizations and who return home to their parent or initiating organization and country of origin are called 'repatriates' (Chiang et al., 2018; Kraimer et al., 2016).

The existing evidence on career outcomes associated with working abroad in an IA is still limited Mello et al., 2023b; Suutari et al., 2018). One such outcome is career progress, which can be viewed as an evaluative statement about the condition of an individual's career and the accomplishment of desirable work-related outcomes in a person's career trajectory over time (Pryor & Bright, 2014). Empirical evidence on career progress during expatriation and upon repatriation remains limited and less conclusive (Andresen et al., 2021; Buckner et al., 2016; Chiang et al., 2018; Suutari et al., 2018). This is a gap in the existing literature that needs to be filled as

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career progress and human resource development (HRD) are two interrelated concepts whose synergistic action is essential for a person's self-realization and the effective functioning of the organization (Chagelishvili et al., 2023). Encouragingly, there is increasing interest in career progress of expatriates and repatriates that stems from the complexity of international work as well as the nature, purpose, context, and demands of work and careers that have changed substantively and irrevocably from older paradigms (Andresen et al., 2021; Ghosh et al., 2023; Pryor & Bright, 2014; Selmer et al., 2018). The nature, demands, and complexity of work epitomizes the peculiarities of the contemporary career landscape in which new diversified broadened career paths have emerged, including lateral and diagonal directions along which people can grow (Benko et al., 2011). Acknowledging these contemporary career landscapes when exploring career progress entails a shift in focus. It moves away from external, organization-defined career progress towards internal, individual-centric means of career progress. This transition underlines the importance of personal values, desires, goals, and career fulfilment in evaluating career progress. The socially constructed, phenomenological, and subjective nature of this construct has been overlooked in the contemporary literature, which presents no consensus and conceptual clarity on what career progress means. The objective conception of career progress on the hierarchical organizational ladder is insufficient to capture the multidimensionality of the construct. Therefore, a more comprehensive conceptualization of career progress that considers its multidimensionality and subjectivity is needed to understand what career progress means in the views of expatriates and repatriates. Hence, the rationale for this paper is to enrich the understanding of the socially constructed meaning of career progress, incorporating expatriates' and repatriates' perspective on career progress, and exploring what constitutes career progress according to them. In so doing, this paper provides a better understanding of this multidimensional construct in an expatriation and repatriation context. This is relevant as it has important implications for how organizations design career paths along which expatriates and repatriates can progress in their careers. The *purpose* of this paper is to investigate how expatriates and repatriates construct their careers on diversified, multidirectional pathways and the meaning they attach to career progress. The research question driving this empirical inquiry is:

RQ1. What are the pathways on which expatriates and repatriates progress in their careers and what meanings do they ascribe to career progress?

This paper contributes to the literature by providing insight into the different meanings of expatriate and repatriate career progress on diversified, multidirectional, dynamic career paths that continually evolve across the lifespan. In

so doing, it highlights the construct's multidimensional and socially constructed nature of career pathways and captures the richness and diversity of meanings ascribed to career progress of expatriates and repatriates.

Literature Review

Career pathways and progress: contemporary career theories and frameworks

The present research on careers of expatriates and repatriates is grounded in Career Construction theory (CCT) (Savickas, 2012, 2013) and Chaos Theory of Careers (CTC) (Pryor & Bright, 2007; Pryor, 2010) as well as the Corporate Ladder versus the Corporate Lattice model (Benko et al., 2011). To our knowledge, these theories and model have not been applied to expatriation and repatriation research. To fill this gap in the literature, the current study draws upon CT, CTC and the Corporate Ladder versus the Corporate Lattice model to augment insights of what career progress means in the context of expatriation and repatriation.

Career construction is how individuals build their own career that best fits their life (Savickas, 2013). Individuals will proactively engage in career construction activities, which entail aligning oneself with the work role for enhancing value, perceived marketability, and employability in the job market to achieve career progress (Savickas, 2012, 2013). Perceived marketability refers to the beliefs that one is valuable to current or to other employers given their existing skills and experiences with a focus on unique core characteristics invaluable to employers (De Vos et al., 2011; Mäkelä et al., 2016; Mello et al., 2023a; Park et al., 2022).

Employability refers to employees' capabilities and adaptive skills to maintain, nurture, and further develop essential qualifications for continued employment, within (internal employability) or outside (external employability) the current organization (Baruch & Vardi, 2016; Bucker et al., 2016; Park et al., 2022). In the context of expatriation and repatriation, employability means that expatriates/repatriates are capable of being employable within or outside the organization that sent them on an IA, by proactively self-managing, navigating, constructing, and crafting their careers in a foreign country or the home country, even under circumstances of chaos, unpredictability, uncertainty, and instability to make career progress. In this context, career construction acts as a 'guiding compass' in times of uncertainties, such as non-availability of work, providing a clear sense of direction for how to progress in one's career. CCT underlines the importance of career adaptability, referring to the "attitudes, competencies, and behaviours that individuals use to ensure a good fit with their work to adapt to new work demands, diverse groups, and different environments" (Savickas, 2013). Indeed, research

has found that individuals are required to exhibit a great deal of career adaptability, which acclimatizes them to present and future work demands in a dynamic global labour market environment characterized by job or career insecurities (Haibo, et al., 2018; Park et al., 2022). Career adaptability means taking up activities that buffer against uncertain employment scenarios and is an important factor for individual competitiveness in the labour market, enabling career progress (Ghosh et al., 2023; Haibo et al., 2018; Mello et al., 2023a).

CTC (Pryor, 2010; Pryor & Bright, 2007) addresses such times of job or career insecurities and considers individuals, their actions and thoughts in a perspective of unexpected events, chaos, and uncertainty. CTC proclaims that individuals' optimism, flexibility, efficacy, career resilience, and coping skills help them to navigate their careers in a life filled with uncertainties and chaos (Pryor & Bright, 2007).

In both CCT and CTC, career resilience is a prominent concept, defined as "a developmental process of persisting, adapting, and/or flourishing in one's career despite challenges, changing events and disruptions over time" (Mishra & McDonald, 2017, p. 216). Individuals exhibiting career resilience are successful at adapting to significant adversity, hardships, unexpected disruptions, and unpredictable changes in the business world, have the capability to bounce back from external changes and adversity and overcome turbulent conditions in the career-related environment, cope with the changing nature of work, successfully handle career hurdles challenges, optimistically accept changes, and show high job mobility preparedness

(Mishra & McDonald, 2017; Park et al., 2022). Exhibiting career resilience enables alternative career pathways for employees to progress in their careers. Furthermore, CCT and CTC posit that successful career agency, self-directed career management, individual's adaptive capabilities, career navigation, and crafting careers requires the following competencies, individual traits, and behaviours that often must be acquired and utilized under stressful conditions: a) think, plan, and act under circumstances of chaos, unpredictability, and instability; b) utilizing, adapting to, and recovering from unplanned events, economic and political crises, and technology invasion, and changes in the organization and labour market as they impact lives and careers; c) having a willingness to learn (from failures); d) self-initiating, proactive form of adaptation to present or future or unpredictable, sudden changes in the labour market and employment demands to manage one's career; e) engage in career exploration and exploitation as constructive approaches to career progress (Baruch & Vardi, 2016; Bucker et al., 2016; Pryor, 2010; Pryor & Bright, 2007; Pryor & Bright, 2012; Pryor & Bright, 2014; Ramaci et al., 2021).

Rudolph et al. (2019) highlighted the need for further empirical elaboration on the application of CTC and CCT in specific groups. Hence, the present study explores the manifestation of CTC and CCT in an expatriation/repatriation context to show how expatriates and repatriates navigate and construct their global careers on diversified pathways. This is illustrated in the '*Corporate ladder versus Corporate lattice*' model (Benko et al., 2011), see Figure 1.

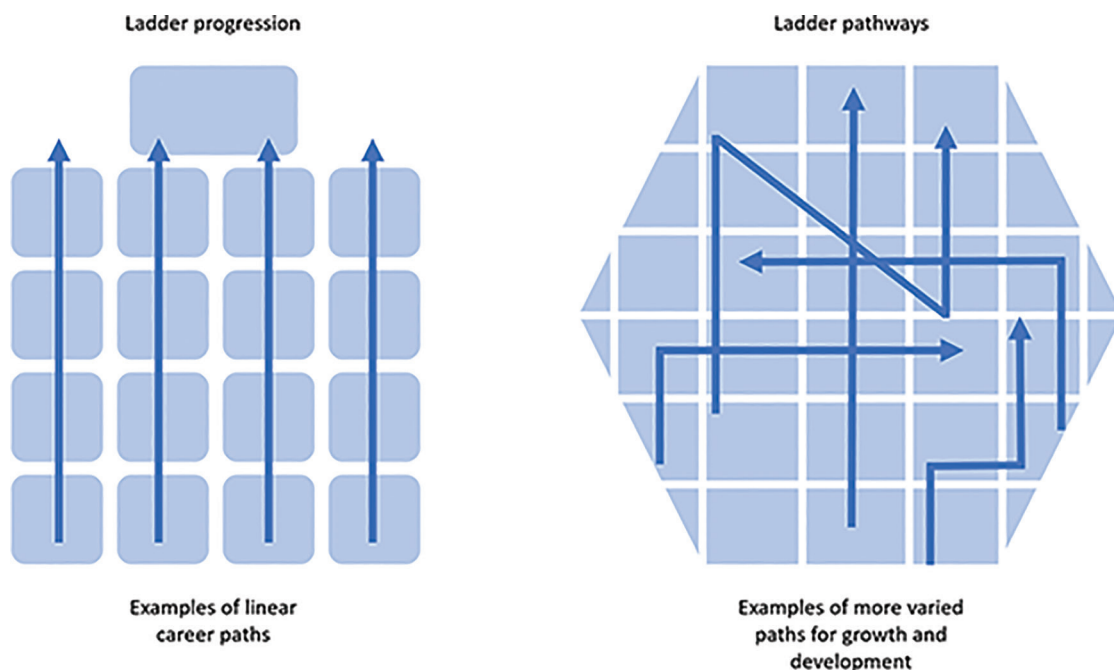


Figure 1. Corporate Ladder Versus Corporate Lattice Career Model.
Note: Adapted from: Benko et al. (2011)

The corporate lattice metaphor represents the multidirectional, flexible, and expansive nature of how successful organizations work today and it marks an inflection point in the ways careers are built. Collectively, these changed ways of thinking and acting are called the "lattice ways". Lattice organizations comprise a complexity of 'multidirectional' career paths along which people can grow. Whereas linear careers are predictable based on "inflexible ladders" and "cause-effect" relationships (Crowley-Henry, 2012, p. 130), non-linear careers are flexible, unpredictable, complex, opportunistic, and even chaotic (McNulty & Vance, 2017). The corporate ladder metaphor represents notions of career as traditional, upward trajectory single career for life, where the direction of career progress is linear, climbing to the top of the hierarchical ladder, usually in one organization/occupation with rewards that are visible to others and valued by society. An example is promotions involving any increase in level and/or any significant increase in job responsibilities or job scope individuals receive throughout their careers (Mello et al., 2023a, b), pay increases, and high-status positions (Baruch & Vardi, 2016; Benko et al., 2011; Mello et al., 2023a, b; Mooijman et al., 2018; Pryor & Bright, 2014). By contrast, the corporate lattice metaphor epitomizes new career paths where the direction of career progress is multidirectional, usually inter-organizational as well as inter-occupational where people construct their own meaning of career progress. The lattice career path implies a re-evaluation of career progress where its meaning has shifted towards perceived employability, meaningful work, authenticity referring to the direction of one's career reflecting personal career and life needs, preferences, and goals, career satisfaction, inner feelings of achievement, self-actualization, and having a career that impacts life outside of work in a positive way with an emphasis on work-life balance and well-being (Akkermans & Tims, 2017; Baruch & Vardi, 2016; Biemann et al., 2012; Mello et al., 2023a, b; Mooijman et al., 2018; Pryor & Bright, 2012; Pryor & Bright, 2014; Rudolph et al., 2019; Savickas, 2011, 2012). We argue that the Corporate Ladder vs. Lattice career model is a valuable framework to explore in an international career context. Doing so would better capture the realities of global work and take account of the complex macro-, meso-, and micro-level influences that shape expatriate's and repatriates' career path and progress. Furthermore, the academic literature has nearly exclusively measured career progress in terms of climbing the corporate hierarchical career ladder with concomitant extrinsic rewards. Although these are important indicators of career progress, they do not capture the nuance, richness, and diversity of meanings expatriates and repatriates ascribe to career progress in different economic, cultural, and institutional contexts around the globe. Hence, this study entails a comprehensive analysis of career pathways of expatriates and repatriates and various meanings of career progress.

Methodology

The method in this study was an exploratory, qualitative study, which is a comprehensive research strategy suited to explore and conduct comprehensive in-depth analyses of a phenomenon in its context (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Vaismoradi et al., 2016). This method was considered most appropriate, as it focuses on the individual experience and understanding of a person's perspective (Creswell & Poth, 2018); in this study the expatriate's/repatriate's perspective on his/her career progress on global, multidirectional career paths. The study takes an emic view, that is, a perspective and methodology whereby expatriates and repatriates from various cultural regions of the world express their views regarding their career pathways and progress in their own words without pre-formed categorizations. The principal investigator in this study has significant experience working with expatriates and repatriates in her professional life. Additionally, she had been an expatriate herself, having lived and worked in various countries, and at the time of conducting the study, she had recently repatriated back to her country of origin. As a result, she has a familiarity with the issues facing expatriates and repatriates pertaining to their career progress that informs her reflections of her observations from the study. Making this positionality statement (Holmes, 2020) is an important principle not only for collecting rich data, but also for conducting research in an ethical manner. Furthermore, it aids in understanding the principal investigator's own commitment and perspective on the topic under study.

Sample and procedure

The first sampling technique was purposive sampling, a widely used technique that involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals that are a) especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest; b) have the availability and willingness to participate; c) the ability to communicate experiences and opinions in an articulate, expressive, and reflective manner to yield insights and in-depth understanding of the phenomena under study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Palinkas et al., 2015; Patton, 2015). To identify and select knowledgeable and experienced expatriates and repatriates for participation in the study, LinkedIn was utilized.

The second sampling technique was snowball sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018), where existing study subjects provided referrals to other expatriates/repatriates within their organization or global network. The principal investigator reached out to these nominated people and invited them to participate in the study. Participants were assured of the confidentiality of the information they would provide, and their identities were kept anonymous by using fictional

names when presenting excerpts of their narratives. Table 1 presents the demographic data of the total of 78 respondents. They were globally mobile individuals who had moved from one assignment to the other or had alternated between assignments abroad and some periods in their home countries, those who had set off to work abroad again

(re-expatriation) and hence had repeated expatriation career patterns, and those who had repatriated. All respondents had continued on global career paths with various international jobs and assignments in different locations, home or abroad, and were therefore all global careerists with holistic career journeys.

Table 1. Demographic profile sample expatriates and repatriates.

Variable	Dimension	Numbers/percentages
Type of globally mobile employee	Expatriate	29 (37%)
	Repatriate	49 (63%)
Gender	Female	7 (9.0%)
	Male	71 (91%)
Nationality	American	2
	Australian	1
	Bahraini	1
	British	9
	Canadian	2
	Dutch	48 (61%)
	Egyptian	1
	Ecuadorian	1
	French	1
	German	1
	Indian	3
	Irish	1
	Lebanese	1
	Malaysian	1
	New Zealand	1
	Norwegian	1
	Scottish	1
	Swiss	1
	Turkish	1
Marital status	Married	75%
	Not married	25%
Parental status	Children	73%
	No children	27%
Age	Range	28-63 years
Previous expatriation experience	3 IAs or more	67 (87%)
	1 previous IA	7 (8%)
	No previous IA	4 (5%)
Industry	Energy/oil & gas	49 (62%)
	Material handling and logistics automation	19
	Fast moving consumer goods	2
	Opticians	2
	Finance & banking	1
	Legal	1
	Automotive coatings & resins	1
	Mining & metals	1
	Real estate	1
	Government	1

Respondents originated from 19 countries across the globe, see Table 1. Respondents were sent on an IA to countries including China, Cyprus, Germany, India, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Netherlands, Oman, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Turkey, UAE, UK, USA for the following company purposes: a) control and coordination: start-up, manage, or lead foreign business units or entire foreign organizational entities; b) project execution; c) fill technical or managerial expertise gaps, knowledge and technical skills transfer; d) to transfer corporate culture and train local people; e) management development.

Data collection

Data collection took place through semi-structured interviews to explore and elicit in-depth understanding of respondents' experiences, perspectives, and perceptions (Bucker et al., 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2016) regarding their career paths and progress.

Prior to the interviews, all participants received the interview protocol to give participants an understanding of the research concepts and corresponding questions. The semi-structured interview protocols encompassed open and closed-ended questions were based upon the relevant literature (Mayrhofer et al., 2016; Pryor, 2010; Pryor & Bright, 2007; Savickas, 2012, 2013). We asked expatriates and repatriates about their self-perceived career progress, i.e., their evaluation and experience of achieving the type of career progress that is meaningful to them personally. The semi-structure allowed for capturing the richness of interviewees' narratives and for probing where information seemed to be leading to deeper or unusual insights (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2016). In the interviews expatriates and repatriates were asked to reflect upon how they constructed their global careers and what career progress means to them. Sample questions were:

Could you describe your career as an expatriate and repatriate, including number of assignments, location, duration?

Could you describe your global career path and career progress?

Data collection took place between April and October 2018 through face-to-face, WhatsApp call and Skype interviews that lasted between 45-60 minutes. The total of 78 interviews is comfortably above the norms for theorizing within qualitative research (Boddy, 2016). This higher number of interviews enabled the capturing of rich data on career pathways and career progress from a diversified sample of expatriates and repatriates from various origins and locations across the world.

All interviews were recorded and professionally transcribed immediately after the interviews to ensure the transcripts

were a verbatim representation of the interview. Data collection continued until a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon and a point of informational redundancy was reached where repetition of information occurred and when no new or relevant data seemed to emerge regarding a category, i.e. "category saturation", critical for qualitative studies (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Palinkas et al., 2015). Member-checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), also known as participant or respondent validation were conducted by sending the interview transcripts to the interviewees to check for accuracy and resonance with respondent's experiences. This is a crucial process at the heart of trustworthiness in qualitative research to ensure valid inferences are drawn from the participants' original views and data (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Respondents added, removed, or clarified their statements and consecutively, the researcher corrected the transcripts. This process ensured accuracy and validity of the research data (Creswell & Poth, 2018), which added to the depth and quality of the data analysis.

Data analysis

Gathering and analysing data was conducted concurrently, in line with descriptive qualitative approaches (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Inductive content analysis, a highly data-driven approach (cf. Creswell & Poth, 2018; Miles et al., 2020; Vaismoradi et al., 2016) was performed, consisting of reading each transcribed interview, and applying holistic coding (Miles et al., 2020) of the interview data for content of career paths and progress. First, open coding served to label the responses and break down data into manageable building blocks. Second, the axial coding step assigned these blocks to categories, such that each category contained a collection of related thematic blocks. Third, selective coding related to establishing main overarching themes that represented the categories (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

Through inductive thematic analysis of the interviews, we were able to identify different dimensions of career progress as first-order codes and classify them into categories. Subsequently, we used these first-order and second-order codes to analyse expatriate progress meanings based on the occurrence of these codes. Table 2 provides an example of the coding process and outcome. The coding and categorization was an iterative process, i.e. conducting successive iterations between theory and data to refine codes, categories, and themes (Locke et al., 2022) whilst staying open to discovering concepts that emerged through alternation between the data collection, analysis, and sense-making process (Bucker et al., 2016; Miles et al., 2020; Vaismoradi et al., 2016). Themes and categories derived represented the connection between the empirical material and the interpretation of the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Vaismoradi et al., 2016). Themes were refined through successive iterations between theory and

data to provide conceptual clarity whilst remaining open to any additions or removals of themes as the analysis progressed (Farndale et al., 2014; Vaismoradi et al., 2016). This iterative process added to the depth and quality of data analysis and allowed for building plausible arguments and interpretations that are supported by the empirical data, thereby safeguarding the validity, trustworthiness, credibility, and reliability of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Vaismoradi et al., 2016). The categories and themes derived from the interview data are presented in the next section.

Findings

Data analysis revealed four themes under which meanings of career progress of respondents were categorized. These were derived from the interview data and the a-priori template grounded in the theoretical framework. Themes, corresponding categories and meanings of career progress are presented in Table 3. Findings are illustrated by excerpts from the interviews and discussed below.

Table 2. Career paths and career progress coding.

Open code (Data excerpt)	Axial code (Dimension)	Selective code (Meaning of career progress)	Theme
I am in a good position that I don't have to make money anymore. I still need to do work and I need challenge.	Challenge in work	Intrinsic value of work	Expatriate/Repatriate values, needs and desire for financial security and growth

Table 3. Overarching Themes and Meanings of Expatriate and Repatriate Career Progress.

Theme	Category Meanings of career progress	Code
<i>Theme 1</i> <i>Expatriates' value/expect/need/desire financial security and career growth</i>	Financial security Abundance and affluence	Material comfort Career growth and acceleration Increased access to high impact roles Promotions abroad Investment, value, appreciation, recognition and reward
<i>Theme 2</i> <i>Intrinsic value of careers & work life balance</i>	Intrinsic value of work Health and wellbeing	Interesting and meaningful job and career Contribution to others Freedom Challenges Leisure time Personal sacrifice Strive higher and higher job level/seniority vs. forgoing a higher level/seniority for the sake of the family Satisfaction and fulfilment: sense of, inner feeling of, proud of career achievements
<i>Theme 3</i> <i>Broad and multi-disciplinary career development</i>	Life-long learning Professional development Personal development	Competency development Challenging the self and adaptation ability Growth in a diverse field of expertise Personal and professional development/enrichment Steep learning curves
<i>Theme 4</i> <i>Internal and external marketability</i>	Employability	'Out-of-sight, out-of-mind' Marketability of the international position Labour market value Foreign experience valuable for CV Expatriation not good for your career International experience prerequisite for career progression Expatriation enhanced lateral mobility and career advancement Career plateau/down on the career ladder Marketable commodity (No) company loyalty

Theme 1: Expatriate/Repatriate values, needs, and desire for financial security and growth

The first category of this theme was financial security, i.e. a reliable supply of the material necessities for survival and living. Financial security resonated strongly with the notion of having enough money and being able to financially provide for his or her (extended) family. This meaning of career progress was particularly salient among respondents whose financial- and job security was threatened due to economic recession, industry downturns, organizational restructuring and downsizing. Evaluating one's career progress in terms of 'Getting secure', i.e. a sense of job security and financial security is illustrated by the following excerpts:

Until 2010-2012, I made career progress. The last 5-6 years I worked on projects that were cancelled and in 2014 the oil price dropped and people were made redundant. Hence, you had to be glad to be left with a job still. The choice was either to go to Kuwait or to be made redundant. Remaining employed by [name company] meant survival and ensuring that you were not pushed into a position in which your job was in danger. (Sheldon, Dutch expatriate in Kuwait)

In 2013, I was promoted to the position of senior principal. But within two years I was made redundant. Then, I had nearly two years of unemployment. I was not able to get a position in my original industry. I had to change careers entirely. It is quite different from my career plans. I basically had to retrain and I got into the real estate business and I found a position in an agency near where I live. It was really the only thing at the time that offered potential for long term employment. Now I am actually one of the leading agents in my particular area. So I really enjoy the move. I had not expected that I would have done this. There was a huge dip in salary so in that way the career move impacted in a negative way. Now, it starts to improve as I develop my own client base. I am able to thrive so far. (Niklaus, British expat in Australia)

These excerpts highlight the career shocks respondents endured across their career lifespan and show that meanings of career progress may change over the years with new self-discoveries or personal events that trigger major conceptual-emotional shifts. The excerpts are illustrative of respondents' proclivity, self-initiating, proactive and reactive forms of adaptation to handle the career challenges infused by unforeseen and uncontrollable changes in the labour market and industry in the current disruptive era. Respondents took control over their careers by actively searching for career opportunities on the internal and external labour market in either the same or a different industry, in either the home

country or abroad. In so doing, they secured employment, thereby safeguarding a financially secure situation for themselves and their families.

Only when financial security was achieved, respondents' meaning of career progress evolved to *Abundance and Affluence*, the second category within this theme. This meaning became prominent when respondents experienced an accelerated rate of progress in financial terms, achieving material success, e.g. power, prestige, social prestige and status, wealth, property, earning capacity, high pay, incentives, and perks, linked in part to promotions (extrinsic rewards). This was related to 'getting ahead', i.e. climbing the corporate ladder, upward mobility and promotion within the organizational hierarchy. As one respondent explained:

Both my international assignments have been good for my career. I climbed the hierarchical ladder, so this was a benefit (Mannox, Dutch expatriate in the USA).

Respondents mentioned that the likelihood of a top-level job with large responsibility and concomitant abundance was higher abroad. By contrast, there were limited high/top level career opportunities in the home country resulting in less abundance. Hence, instead of repatriating, many respondents opted for sequential IAs to maintain their royal compensation and benefits packages and to continue on career ladder paths.

Theme 2 Intrinsic value of careers & work life balance

The first category within this theme was *intrinsic value* where respondents' meaning of career progress was in the realm of non-materialistic aspects of work, such as freedom, variety, challenges, meaningful work, satisfaction, and fulfilment (intrinsic rewards).

Their meaning of career progress was '*getting free*', i.e., acquiring job positions with more personal autonomy and space and '*getting high*', i.e., work that provides challenge and evokes excitement, with career paths characterized by lateral movement and transitions within the organization. Respondents in their late career stages and more senior in life expressed a sense of fulfilment from helping and mentoring younger colleagues. Hence, career progress meant making contributions to the world and making a positive impact on others.

The second category was *work-life balance*. Many respondents considered career progress by the impact work has on the broader aspects of life. They were concerned with 'getting balanced', i.e., finding equilibrium between work and family, personal and professional life, and sustaining health and wellbeing across the lifespan. Some chose to forgo a senior/executive level position for the sake of the family. They expressed that striving for a top position would mean making sacrifices in their personal and family life. These respondents

chose a career path with lateral and diagonal directions along which they could still grow professionally and personally. Their career paths, which incorporated their personal values and interests outside of the workplace, allowed them to spend more time with their families, more leisure time, travel and enjoy life. Individuals strived to find their personal optimum in work life balance and rated their career progress by their ability to do so. The following expert captures this notion:

I am quite happy with my seniority level in [name company] and with the job I am doing. There are still opportunities for one or two progressions. I have made sacrifices. I could have progressed quicker if I had moved faster. So you sign your life away to some extent for the highest level. Even if I could go up one level higher from where I am now, it would have a serious impact on my private life. As long as the job is interesting and challenging, seniority is not important for me. (Seph, German expatriate in Iraq)

Interestingly, there were differences between respondents from developed Western countries and developing Asian countries, pertaining to worklife balance as a meaning of career progress. The following excerpt is illustrative:

Opportunities for further progression and development by stepping into the role of senior management are tremendous. It is a path that will require personal sacrifice: holding higher management responsibilities is heavy and often requires personal sacrifice of your family time and space. It depends on work-life balance and the culture you have grown up in and are from. Coming from an Asian work background is also different. Typical Western culture is having more work life balance and typical of Asian cultures like in Japan and Singapore is that people work nonstop. Malaysian work life culture is better than Singapore or Japan for sure. Survival equates to hard work. (Kun, Malaysian repatriate)

This excerpt shows how institutional and national culture characteristics in the home and host country affect career pathways and meanings of career progress. That is, *work life balance* as a meaning of career progress appears more prominent among respondents from Western 'developed' cultures than Asian 'developing' cultures.

Theme 3: Broad and multi-disciplinary career development

This theme emerged from respondents' meaning of career progress as 'getting ahead' by self-development and development of competencies. Respondents were learning-oriented and engaged in life-long learning. This involved seeking opportunities for professional growth, to diversify

knowledge and experiences, and to develop professional skills through continuous informal learning and on-the-job learning as well as via training and/or formal education and learning. Respondents emphasized that developing themselves broadly and in a multi-disciplinary way was crucial to be multi-deployable in different divisions in different countries. This helped respondents to make career progress. The following quote is exemplary:

I have made enormous career progress. I became responsible for the business in China. I did an executive MBA, so I invested in my business and commercial knowledge and skills, and after a few years I became responsible for the whole of Asia. I have made more career progress than I would have in the Netherlands. (Matteo, Dutch expatriate in Singapore)

This excerpt is exemplary of respondents taking the initiative to manage their own careers, in concordance with CTC and CCT.

IAs enabled respondents to learn faster and more and they described the IAs as steep learning curves, especially at the start of their IAs when they were confronted with new job requirements, colleagues, the organization's foreign entity culture, policies, procedures and processes, external stakeholders, and contextual factors in a foreign country. One respondent explained:

I think that going abroad is good at the start of your career, because your learning curve is steep. Later, the steepness diminishes, but then you get at a level where your network at different locations abroad becomes important. That is seen from a career point of view and linked to progress. (Alcot, Dutch repatriate)

When the steep learning curve had reached a tipping point and flattened out, learning experiences and personal development in the IA were incremental or halted. At that point, respondents reconsidered their career options and engaged in career exploration and a deliberation between Corporate Ladder and Corporate Lattice global career pathways. Overall, being in a learning mode throughout their careers, experiential learning processes and learning from change and failure as enriching life experiences, drove perceived marketability and employability, addressed in the next section.

Theme 4: Internal and external marketability

Internal and external labour marketability appeared as crucial meanings of career progress. The meaning of career progress as *Internal Marketability* came to the fore when respondents spoke about the effect of the number of IAs and the period working abroad.

Respondents expressed that too many IAs or being assigned abroad for very long periods, known as the 'out-of-sight, out-of-mind' phenomenon, did more harm than good to their career progress. Being located abroad reduced expatriates' visibility within the headquarters where the corporate strategic, mission-critical decisions were made. It undermined the building, maintaining, and expanding of intra-organizational networks, which would help them to get a better understanding of the 'politics of progression' and to get access to people in positions of power, needed to obtain a position in a core business area central to the success of the organization. In this regard, respondents stressed the value of *'Being at the right place at the right time, meeting the right people'*, i.e. people who have authority and decision-making power over whom to place where. The following excerpt is illustrative of the role of visibility and networks in career progress on diversified career pathways:

In the HQ, I would have been with corporate people, to grow a new network with people at higher level, have coffee with the VP. On my next assignment, I can take a position in the HQ and take a global role. For now, the way I have driven my career is more horizontal than vertical. It is about how you want to move forward, I guess. (Vicente, French expat in Malaysia)

Respondents opined that the right international experience and the marketability of the international position determined the labour market value of an individual. Therefore, several respondents undertook just one IA for about 2-3 years to gain experience in a foreign country, to develop competencies and expertise that are sought after in the labour market to increase their marketability and employability upon repatriation. Respondents' career construction activities entailed networking and self-profiling that improved respondents' perceived marketability and employability and aided their career progress. Respondents were active agents who sought out the best available opportunities for further career progress. Their value, goodwill, and reputation in the job market as recognized 'authorities' in their fields of expertise established through their noteworthy global career accomplishments enabled them to make their desired career progress on multidirectional, diversified career pathways. The following excerpt is exemplary:

In a way my career and my CV are peculiar. As a tax adviser it is much fancier to have worked in London or New York. I worked at a tea plantation in Africa, so I have seen other facets than just Tax Advisory. It has made my career broader rather than going faster or steeper. I can't say it has helped my career forward. Many of my colleagues who stayed in The Netherlands are now partners in a Tax

business, so they were higher up in the organizational hierarchy than I was. I missed out on that, but I got much in return. People in organizations do not know very well how to assign value to my experiences in Africa in relation to taxes. I was lucky with my boss who saw the potential of my capabilities. (Annabel, Dutch repatriate)

In sum, the findings of this research show that respondents' global career pathways were highly idiosyncratic and often dynamic, unpredictable and unstable, and continually evolved across the lifespan. In concordance with CCT and CTC, career adaptability enabled respondents to ensure employability and forge sustainable careers and progress throughout the lifespan. Respondents opined that progressing in one's career is not limited to moving upward on the traditional corporate, linear career ladder; multidirectional lattice career pathways, either intra- or extra-organizational, within or outside the home country, were viable and/or desirable to make career progress. The findings elucidate the multidimensional and socially constructed nature of the career progress construct. Indeed, findings show that in the contemporary career landscape, considerable diversity exists in meanings individuals give to career progress, which appeared to be a dynamic interplay between work, private life, quality of life, work-family balance issues, and self-development. As such, findings provide a holistic view of the complexity and unpredictability of contemporary global careers and enhance our understanding of the meanings of career progress on multidirectional career pathways.

Overall, the inference from the findings is that career progress can be conceived as a lifelong, continuous, and multidirectional process that is influenced by the interplay of personal desires and goals, contextual opportunities and constraints, leading to the accomplishment of desirable, positive psychological, work-related outcomes along the career trajectory.

Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to explore career pathways and meanings of career progress of expatriates and repatriates across the globe. Using the theoretical lens of CCT (Savickas, 2013) and CTC (Pryor & Bright, 2007, 2014), this paper showed how expatriates and repatriates constructed their careers on multi directional, diversified career pathways, and offers a deeper understanding of how individuals derived meanings of career progress on their career pathways. The research question that guided this exploratory study was:

RQ. What are the pathways on which expatriates and repatriates progress in their careers and what meanings do they ascribe to career progress?

In response to the research question, respondents considered their personal values, desires and preferences, life values, and goals when envisioning and re-evaluating what progress means to them. Accordingly, respondents constructed their career ladder or lattice career paths in professions and industries where they could achieve a 'career-life fit', i.e., careers that align with their professional and personal goals and lifestyle, a phenomenon highlighted in previous research (c.f. Akkermans & Tims, 2017; Benko et al., 2011; Biemann et al., 2012; Heslin et al., 2020; McNulty & Vance, 2017; Rudolph et al., 2019; Savickas, 2011, 2012). In concordance with CTC and CCT (Pryor & Bright, 2014; Savickas, 2013), respondents were career resilient and engaged in 'career exploration and exploitation', i.e., actively exploring and searching for career opportunities and employment beyond their specific field of expertise on the internal and external labour market as constructive approaches to career progress (Akkermans & Tims, 2017; Baruch & Vardi, 2016; Bucker et al., 2016; Pryor, 2010; Pryor & Bright, 2007; Pryor & Bright, 2012; Pryor & Bright, 2014; Ramaci et al., 2021). This entailed career construction activities (Savickas, 2012), such as pursuing further education or changing professions to enhance the 'fit' with the labour market, leading to a more favourable position on the labour market, in line with findings by Lo Presti et al. (2018). Their career construction activities enhanced expatriates' and repatriates' possibility to what Ghosh et al. (2023) and Ramaci et al. (2021) call "re-employ themselves" in the chaotic labour market, searching for a job and pursuing reemployment. As a result, several respondents made career transitions into other professions and industries, which have become more frequent and more challenging in the face of uncertain employment prospects, as reported by Ramaci et al. (2021) and Mello et al. (2023b).

Overall, in synch with CCT and CTC, findings support the notion that unplanned events and an apparently minor change in one part of a complex, dynamic ecological system can result in a major impact on the whole system, the so-called 'butterfly effect' (Pryor & Bright, 2014). To adequately respond to unexpected, unplanned events and changes, respondents exhibited flexibility, resilience, optimism, adjustment, adaptability, career agility and agency, career self-management and navigation, and proactive adaptation to changing labour markets to make career progress on diversified pathways. These findings are in concordance with CTC and CCT (Ghosh et al., 2023; Pryor & Bright, 2007; Pryor & Bright, 2014; Savickas, 2011, 2012, 2013) and findings by Baruch and Vardi (2016), Bucker et al. (2016), Haibo, et al. (2018), Mello et al. (2023b), Ramaci et al. (2021), Selmer et al. (2018).

This paper has provided a comprehensive analysis of career pathways of expatriates and repatriates and has shown the multidimensionality and subjective and socially constructed

nature of the career progress construct. There was a notable shift among respondents from a Corporate career Ladder to Lattice path over the course of their careers. Instead of climbing a traditional corporate career ladder to the top organizational echelons, several respondents sought engaging and meaningful work (*intrinsic value*) and a job in which they could achieve a satisfying balance between work and family life, and between work and non-work activities, for example, having sufficient leisure time, and pursuing hobbies. The tendency towards pursuing a career path characterized by meaningful work rather than climbing the corporate ladder has been established in previous research (Akkermans & Tims, 2017; Baruch & Vardi, 2016; Crowley-Henry et al., 2019; Ghosh et al., 2023; Mayrhofer et al., 2016; Mello et al., 2023a, b; Pryor & Bright, 2007, 2014; Savickas, 2012). Attaching value to work-life balance as meaning of career progress and pursuing a career path accordingly is called the 'satisficing' approach (Shortland, 2021), whereby respondents attempted to achieve a satisfactory level of both career and family outcomes rather than attempting to maximize one of the two with substantial exclusion of the other, for example maximizing career goals at the expense of family. Respondents' learning and development were beneficial to their career progress, either in consecutive IAs (expatriates) or in suitable re-entry jobs (repatriates), corroborating findings by Andresen et al. (2021) Baruch & Vardi (2016), Bucker et al. (2016), and Shortland (2021). Their perceived marketability reflected respondents' views on how easy or difficult it was to find new employment and the potential to find a new job, which respondents associated with perceptions of enhanced career progress, resonating previous research (Andresen et al., 2021; Bucker et al., 2016; Ghosh et al., 2023; Lo Presti et al., 2018; Suutari et al., 2018). Of note, the longer expatriates stayed abroad, the weaker their networks in the home country and the more negative impact on perceived home-country marketability and employability, which was also observed by Mello et al. (2023a, b).

In response to diminished internal marketability, respondents' career construction activities involved "self-profiling" - presenting and communicating one's personal knowledge, abilities, and skills to the internal and external labour market (cf. Akkermans & Tims, 2017). In this regard, respondents' career construction activities also involved establishing and expanding global networks, consisting of relationships that can be beneficial to one's work and career, corroborating findings by Bucker et al. (2016), Crowley-Henry et al. (2019), and Park et al. (2022). These proactive career behaviours enhanced respondents' marketability. Furthermore, findings revealed the 'rise until you reach the top or plateau' phenomenon among the senior respondents where increasing career maturity at a more advanced career

stage diminished their career progress. For some, plateauing meant a broken dream, a humiliating dead-end career path, with stagnating progress on career ladder pathways, in line with findings by Andresen et al. (2021), and Baruch and Vardi (2016). These findings thus touch upon and reveal the 'dark dynamics of international careers', i.e., negative impacts of IA on career progress, which most published work leaves almost untouched, as it addresses mostly positive aspects and career benefits of IAs (cf. Andresen et al., 2021; Baruch & Vardi, 2016; Mello et al., 2023a, b).

Theoretical Contributions

This article makes two contributions to advance research in the field of international HRD. First, this study expands the discourse of contemporary career theory by extending the application of Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2011, 2012, 2013), Chaos Theory of Careers (Pryor & Bright, 2007, 2014) and the Corporate Ladder versus the Corporate Lattice model (Benko et al., 2011) to an expatriation and repatriation context.

This paper advances CCT and CTC by showing that careers of expatriate and repatriates are increasingly shifting from traditional careers, where the direction of career progress is linear, climbing to the top of the hierarchical ladder, usually in one organization/occupation, to dynamic, flexible, non-linear, intuitive, spontaneous, chaotic, unpredictable, unstable, risky, hybrid, and kaleidoscope, lattice career paths where the direction of career progress is multidirectional, usually in different organizations and different occupations, supporting findings by Baruch and Vardi (2016), Crowley-Henry (2012), and McNulty and Vance (2017). Second, the present study is one of the first to provide a comprehensive analysis of meanings that expatriates and repatriates ascribe to career progress in diverse economic, cultural, and institutional contexts around the globe.

Practical Implications

The present research has several implications for expatriates, repatriates and organizations. The organizational implications of the multiple meanings of career progress involve integrating individual career construction and mastery with organizational career planning, which entails the design of personalized career development paths, enabling expatriates and repatriates to make career progress on diversified, multidirectional career pathways in internal or external labour markets. Hence, organizations are recommended to construct more diversified career pathways with varying developmental career opportunities beyond organizational silos (e.g., job

rotation and project-related, stretch assignments), as well as jobs that better enable a work-life balance and enhance wellbeing.

Implications for expatriates and repatriates are to ask themselves several career reflection questions: *What am I good at? What gives me joy in my career? What do I need to do to enhance my employability in the global labour market?* Pondering these universal questions, as well as the process of finding answers to them, helps expatriates and repatriates to identify their meanings of career progress and discover their desired career pathways for achieving career progress.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study has limitations that need to be addressed yet offer opportunities for future research in the burgeoning domain of international HRD research. First, this study relied on self-reports of expatriates and repatriates regarding their career pathways and career progress. Future research should incorporate data triangulation by a multi-actors' approach, including senior/line managers and Chief HR Officers from organizations across the world that deploy expatriates and by using a multi-source approach, e.g. surveys, interviews, and focus groups to gather multi-actors' views on constructing customized global career paths to facilitate expatriate and repatriate career progress. Second, women are proportionally underrepresented in the sample, which reflects the general representation of women in expatriate positions; women only hold 25% of all expatriate positions industry-wide and in particular sectors, such as oil and gas, their representation is only 7–15% (Shortland, 2021). This underrepresentation of women in the sample limits the generalizability of the findings to the female expatriate and repatriate population. The sample is also overrepresented by Dutch respondents. This restricts cultural transferability, meaning inferential generalization of the findings on the meanings of career progress from one cultural situation to another, specifically to expatriates and repatriates from other countries than the Netherlands. Hence, this study calls for more context-sensitive global careers research, drawing on a more equally distributed sample in terms of nationality and gender to identify meanings of career progress across cultures. Third, the purposive sample of 78 expatriate and repatriates only permits theoretical generalization and not statistical generalization. Therefore, we can only generalize to theory and not to a broader population (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). However, the focus in this qualitative research was on internal generalization, i.e., the assumptions that the statements in the interview situations can be generalized to what the interviewee thinks and says in other situations also (c.f. Flick, 2018). Furthermore, this study allows for analytical

generalization (c.f. Flick, 2018), i.e., generalizing our findings to people in similar situations to that of our interviewees, e.g. expatriates and repatriates working for various organizations across the globe. A suggestion for future research is to use both qualitative and quantitative research designs across a larger sample of expatriates and repatriates from different countries across the globe to establish the external validity and generalizability of the findings of the present study. Using a single-phase data conversion design, a mixed-method research design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) enables the exploration of the diverse aspects of career progress of expatriates and repatriates in a qualitative manner on the one hand, and examination of the relationships between these aspects in quantitative manner on the other hand to triangulate the qualitative results with the quantitative results. The current study supports the development of a future research agenda that draws upon CCT and CTC and the career ladder versus career lattice pathway model to further enrich, ground, and theorise the understanding of career progress of expatriates and repatriates on diversified career pathways across the international work-life span. A final limitation is that data were collected 6 years ago. Hence, changes in the external environment over the past 6 years, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, political unrest, and political conflict across the world, and their influence on career pathways and career progress of expatriates and repatriates have not been captured in this study. Therefore, future research can build on our research to develop a more holistic understanding of why and under what external conditions expatriates and repatriates pursue career ladder or lattice pathways to make career progress.

Conclusion

This paper explored career paths and progress of expatriates and repatriates from a 'Corporate Ladder versus Lattice career' perspective. Specifically, this paper has shown that careers of expatriates and repatriates are increasingly shifting from ladder careers to lattice career pathways along which they make progress. This paper has brought to the fore the multidimensionality and subjectivity of the concept of career progress, showing that expatriates and repatriates, throughout their career span, attach different meanings to career progress, which are influenced by personal desires and goals, contextual opportunities, and constraints. Organizations that construct multidirectional, diversified career paths will nurture expatriates' and repatriates' career progress and will enable them and the organization to be agile and adaptive to unpredictable, rapid, unprecedented global changes to stay competitive in the global (labour) market.

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