Restoring the missing context in HRM: Habitus, capital and field in the reproduction of Japanese repatriate careers

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Abstract

HRM literature often fails to adequately consider the political-economic context that can strongly influence HR practices and outcomes. This problem is particularly visible as regards international careers. Notions such as 'boundaryless careers' privilege HR and employee agency and neglect the complexity, variety and importance of social structure in influencing careers and constraining agency. Informed by Bourdieu's theory of practice, this paper explores Japanese HRM through the careers of repatriate managers. Through in-depth and prolonged narrative inquiry it documents the powerful 'forms of capital' that structure the 'salaryman' career field. Although tensions and conflicts existed - notably in relation to gender - traditional 'lifetime employment' careers remain powerful, highlighting the continued centrality of capital and habitus in reproducing the Japanese white-collar career field. We conclude by suggesting alternative ways of conceptualizing, researching and portraying white-collar careers within varied employment environments that are always shaped by specific and situated contexts.

Keywords

Bourdieu; Careers; Habitus; HRM in MNCs; Japanese management; Job security; Narrative analysis; Qualitative Research Methods

Practitioner Notes

What is currently known

- Much HRM research tends to ignore or downplay the importance of context and social structure
- This is often particularly true in literature on 'wars for talent', 'boundaryless careers', and internationally-mobile expert labour
- A decontextualized approach can exaggerate the agency of employees and HR managers / employing organizations

What this paper adds

- This paper, based on the conceptual work of Pierre Bourdieu, takes a narrative inquiry approach to studying the careers of Japanese corporate managers who have worked overseas and returned to Japan
- It reveals the depth and resilience of social structures that shape the behaviour, dispositions and actions of all persons employed in the Japanese white-collar corporate career field
- It demonstrates that Japanese repatriate managers are not as mobile or globally-oriented as the 'war for talent' and 'boundaryless careers' approach assumes

The implications for practitioners

- It is important to appreciate that all forms of employment relationship are embedded into wider social structures that provide a context for both employer and employee
- As an example of this, the paper shows that highly-traditional employment norms around loyalty, long-service, conformity and gender difference remain enduring features

of Japanese white-collar employment

- Pro-active HR approaches to 'managing' expatriation and repatriation might not be appropriate to all employment contexts and career structures

Introduction

The employment landscape for white-collar expert work is routinely described in the following terms. We live in an age of global labour markets and a 'war for talent' (Michaels et al, 2001; Scullion et al, 2010). Employers attempt to attract and retain 'talent' that is in short supply as mobile high-value workers leverage their powerful market positions in pursuing 'boundaryless careers' (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Dickmann and Doherty, 2010; Florida, 2012). Global labour markets operate within a broader context of unrelenting international competition, driven by the short-term demands of financialization or 'investor capitalism' (Dore, 2000; Dundon and Rafferty, 2018). The 'war for talent' perspective assumes a permissive environment where governmental, professional or union regulation of the employment relationship are increasingly feeble. Job security cannot exist in such a turbulent environment, nor should any working person expect or even desire it. Expert workers in boundaryless careers are in any case unconcerned with job insecurity. They possess a 'global mindset' and are thereby accustomed to frictionless movement and adaptation to new positions in any geographic environment. While such fluidity and disruption can be a challenge for employers, the most informed, 'strategic' and professional HR departments can handle the complexities of boundaryless careers by recruiting and retaining high-value talent through 'better management' of expatriation and repatriation processes that, ultimately, are always amenable to management control.

This paper argues that such a portrayal of global labour markets is managerialist in outlook, Anglocentric, theoretically naïve, and empirically exaggerated. It falsely inflates the agency and power of both employer and employee, largely ignoring structural influences and constraints that have considerable impact on employment relationships and careers. Neoliberal discourses of global labour markets, the war for talent, boundaryless careers and the proactive 'management' of overseas postings and returns privileges HR by portraying these problems as tractable through more effective management while ignoring structural conditions that

complicate the diverse realities of employment in national and occupational contexts that can differ significantly from those associated with financialized Anglo-Saxon capitalism. This managerialist picture narrows the field of HRM inquiry, fueling criticism of HRM as 'immiserated', overly focused on esoteric attempts to 'prove' an HRM-performance link, and blind to the distinctiveness and varieties of political economies (Dundon and Rafferty, 2018; Fleetwood and Hesketh, 2010; Harley, 2015; Kaufman, 2015; Morishima, 1995; Thompson, 2011).

This limited perspective is especially visible in much of the HRM literature about how companies should handle the repatriation of staff following overseas assignments. The 'problem' is constructed around how to re-incorporate repatriate 'talent' and minimize 're-entry shock' with the assumption that if HR departments fail to provide adequate re-entry policies then mobile, high-value talent will exercise its rational choice to leave the organization (Cox 2004; Greer and Stiles, 2016; Kraimer et al, 2011; Linehan and Scullion, 2002; Scullion and Linehan, 2002; Tahir and Azar, 2013; Tungli and Peiperl, 2009). The notion of repatriation 'failure' rests on the above assumptions around global, portfolio and boundaryless careers (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Dickmann and Doherty, 2010; Florida, 2012; Hall, 1996; Stahl et al; 2002).

This paper attempts to restore context and structure to discussion and rejects ideological notions of 'boundaryless' careers. Building on an alternative stream of research into career narratives (Cohen et al, 2004; Kato and Suzuki, 2006; Peltonen, 1998), it explores the careers of high-value workers within their social context rather than viewing repatriation solely as a technical puzzle for HR managers to solve. A growing body of careers research is based around Bourdieu's theory of practice and its notions of habitus, capital and field (Chudzikowski and Mayrhofer, 2011; Coupland, 2015; Dick, 2008; Iellatchitch et al, 2003; Kalfa et al, 2018). This literature emphasizes the diversity of career arrangements by theorizing careers as 'the link

between person, organization and society' (Iellatchitch et al, 2003: 730).

The current paper develops a Bourdieusian account of white-collar careers, showing how social context (encompassing both structural and agential influences) plays important roles in the reproduction of Japanese internal labour markets. Processes of expatriation and repatriation are to a large extent governed by social structures rather than unfettered labour market signals and incentives. They operate according to logics that are difficult to explain in terms of managerialist, Anglocentric HRM constructs and assumptions around global neoliberalism and boundaryless careers. Bourdieu's sociology of practice is a potentially useful way to explore careers, by virtue of its theorization of the interaction of habitus, capital and field, rather than regarding agency and structure as 'indissoluble' (Mayrhofer et al, 2007: 91).

Based on a four-year qualitative research study of Japanese corporate repatriate managers, we document the resilience of internal labour markets and the weak purchase of 'boundaryless' white-collar careers in Japan even as corporations and labour markets internationalize and as social norms around work and family slowly change. Our paper contributes to ongoing efforts to denaturalize prescriptive and positivistic HRM discourses that ignore national and local context and privilege HR managers' agency (Delbridge and Keenoy, 2010; Dundon and Rafferty, 2018; Fournier and Grey, 2000; Harley, 2015). It also aims to build on the career fields literature by exploring a particular case of a country with generally strong embeddedness effects that continue to structure the field even amid potential disruption caused by staff exposure to overseas employment.

The paper unfolds in the following directions. Firstly, it provides an overview of the classical Japanese postwar HRM model, explaining the background context for Japanese employment systems. Secondly, the paper introduces its conceptual framing in the roles played by habitus, capital and field in Japanese white-collar internal labour markets. Methodological questions are

addressed in the third section, before we explore our qualitative data in sections four to six. Conclusions are then drawn about what this study might mean for our understanding of the distinctiveness, robustness and variety of national HRM models (Bamber, et al, 2016; Dore, 2000).

The context of Japanese lifetime employment

Large Japanese employers generally operate in a context that encourages a managerial and strategic focus on conservative decision-making and stability. Finance and corporate governance of Japanese firms are generally focused around long-term investment horizons rather than shareholder value logic (Jacoby, 2005). Companies also tend to work closely with long-term partners such as suppliers and distributors (Gerlach, 1997). Within this context, white-collar employment structures in large corporate or public-sector organizations are oriented around an administrative, rather than a market, logic. Job tenures are long. Salary, pension and promotion systems reward extended service. There is little mid-career hiring and no real market for management 'talent' (Dore, 2000; Graham, 2003; Matanle and Matsui, 2011; Robinson, 2003). Centralized HR departments have strong control over hiring, promotion, skills generation and role rotation, including to overseas assignments (Dasgupta, 2013; Jacoby, 2005; Kawaguchi and Ueno, 2013). Corporations and public bureaucracies are highly selective in recruitment and tend to exert great effort in reinforcing the symbolic power of their companies' histories, values and norms onto their white-collar staff (Dasgupta, 2013; Graham, 2003; Matanle, 2003). A high degree of organizational control over careers is a price that salaried employees have traditionally paid in return for employment security and generous pay and pensions. An ad hoc approach to managing white-collar human resources within the context of lifetime employment is a central element of the long-term orientation of Japanese companies, with salarymen often rotated around various departments of firms, including to overseas assignments, often with little or no staff input about the desirability of these postings (Dore, 2000; Jacoby, 2005). This approach gives firms flexibility to deal with changing environments while bestowing security

on a core of employees.

This core is highly gendered. Working hours are extremely family-unfriendly, reinforcing a structure in which salaryman roles are traditionally reserved for men, with women confined to temporary work, menial support roles as 'office ladies' (Ogasawara, 1998), or homemaker roles. The salaryman construct is an extreme version of the 'ideal worker' thesis (Acker, 1990), explicitly relying on gendered social relations and obstructing women's routes to middle and senior-level managerial roles. Recent figures suggest fewer than 10% of managerial roles are occupied by women in around three quarters of Japanese workplaces (Kajimoto, 2018).

Such a degree of stability and tradition is at odds with the widely-publicized view that organizations and careers are undergoing drastic change (Arthur and Rosseau, 1996; Bauman, 2000; Beck, 2000; Dickmann and Doherty, 2010; Inkson and Arthur, 2001; Hall, 1996; Sennett, 1998; Standing, 2014). A wide range of commentary suggests that job security no longer exists and that individuals cannot hope to stay with one employer to build a career. Concepts of 'protean' (Hall, 1996) and 'boundaryless' (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996) careers dominate; notions that emphasize rational choice, mobility, adaptability and external markets for white-collar talent. This implies that HR departments must develop extensive policies for the retention of talent (including repatriates) given their labour market mobility (Cox 2004; Dickmann and Doherty, 2010; Kraimer et al, 2011; Linehan and Scullion, 2002).

While some authors have predicted or described potentially significant changes to Japanese HRM towards a more liberal, flexible, market-based system (Ahmadjian and Robinson, 2001; Benson and Debroux, 2004; Dore, 2009), a significant body of literature has instead documented limited and piecemeal change that leaves the overall structure described above intact (Genda, 2003; Hassard et al, 2009; Matanle and Matsui, 2011; Morishima, 1995; Morris et al, 2006, Morris et al, 2018; Morris et al, 2019). The Japanese economy has faced well-

documented recessionary and deflationary pressures since the early 1990s, leading to growing employment insecurity and irregular employment among certain workers in the 2000s, especially those at the lower and upper age ranges (Gottfried, 2014; Keizer, 2008) or those working for non-traditional employers (Hassard and Morris, 2019; Morris et al, 2019). But overall it remains a largely successful, efficient and powerful economic model (Endo et al, 2014), and the 'need' for reform of Japanese labour markets is often overstated. This is not to say that change has not occurred or is somehow impossible. Shifting the focus to the level of individual employees' careers reveals many observable instances in which workers confront changes to their working lives (Hassard et al, 2009; Hassard and Morris, 2019). Overall, however, the traditional white-collar career system has a remarkable ability to reproduce itself. The next section provides an explanation of how we conceptualize the social forces that assist its reproduction.

Career fields, habitus and capital

Bourdieu's theory of practice revolves around three interacting, closely-related concepts: field, habitus and capital. Field is a social setting; a network of relations and positions in which 'patterned' sets of practices take place. It is where agents' social positions are established, contested and re-evaluated (Coupland, 2015: 111-2; Iellatchitch et al, 2003: 732; Kalfa et al, 2018; Ozbiglin and Tatli, 2005). Secondly we have 'habitus', which is 'an acquired system of generative schemes' (Bourdieu, 1977: 95). Habitus refers to the durable dispositions that structure how actors think, feel and behave. Lastly there is 'capital' which takes four forms: economic, social, cultural and symbolic (Bourdieu, 1986). Capital is the socially-conferred assets of respectability, distinction, and experience that agents deploy in the field in order to defend or advance their positions, almost as in a 'game' (Thomson, 2012: 66-73).

The four forms of capital enrich our understanding of the complexity and situatedness of human

action. Economic capital is just one form of capital; personal status and relations in any given field cannot be determined by economic resources alone. Rather, they depend critically on a person's acquirement of various compositions of social, cultural and symbolic capital that convey legitimacy, order and competence as determined by the distinct features of a field (Mayrhofer et al, 2004: 874-5). Field, habitus and capital are conceptual tools that allow us to move beyond a neoliberal frame of reference that 'reduc[es] the universe of exchanges to mercantile exchange' (Bourdieu, 1986: 16). The following demonstrate how we mobilize these concepts in our paper.

We understand corporate Japanese white-collar internal labour markets as a field. Fields exists prior to and external from actors, requiring them to work within these constraints and enablements, in this case powerful institutions that structure the 'game' of corporate employment such as employment laws, contracts, pension systems, and education credentials. Compared to the market-driven systems of the Anglophone world Japanese white-collar internal labour markets are inflexible, resulting in long-term employment relationships and substantial employer control over career paths (Dore, 2000; Graham, 2003; Matanle and Matsui, 2011; Robinson, 2003). But this complex legal and corporate structure is not solely constitutive of all aspects of the employment relationship. Japanese white-collar employment (like all fields in which actors' positions are established and contested in relation to one another: see Mutch et al, 2006) is constituted by elements that emerge not only from economic, legal and corporate sources, but also from social and cultural ones, such as long-standing norms over loyalty, servitude and gender (Hays, 1994). This is where habitus plays a crucial role. Habitus is a property of agents but is derived from broad social sources and influences that are internalized and 'carried within' individual agents (Maton, 2012: 51). Habitus is a product of the social structures that condition individuals, yet it also serves to reproduce structure through actors' repeated expression of behaviour and disposition (Wacquant, 2008: 268).

A significant body of international careers research has drawn on Bourdieu's theory of practice in developing notions of 'career field', 'career habitus', and 'career capital' (Iellatchitch et al, 2003; Mayrhofer et al, 2004). Career field refers to the 'game' or 'arena' where careers are pursued; 'a given and unfolding network of work related positions' (Mayrhofer et al, 2004: 873). Career habitus is the specific combinations of personal perception and predisposition that 'fit' a given career field. Career capital represents the compositions of capital valued within distinct career fields. White-collar internal labour markets are the 'career field' in question in this paper. Time in service and circulation around the firm (Jacoby, 2005) - including to overseas posts - allows white-collar employees to accrue career capital upon which their respectability and status in the company are judged. Career habitus represents the agential dispositions that play important roles in reproducing the norms, values, and expectations of salarymen, such as those around company loyalty, submission to authority, and trust that there is a logical place and a future for each white-collar employee in the hierarchy.

Bourdieu's approach has been criticized for 'conflating' action and structure, especially by critical realists such as Bhaskar (2008) and Archer (2003) who suggest that the theory of practice downplays the importance of structures that exist prior to and external to agency, thus collapsing structure into agency (see also Fleetwood and Hesketh, 2006; Reed, 1997). Recent Bourdieu-influenced research in management and organization studies has addressed this issue by emphasizing the importance of structural conditions as objective constraints on action. In Vincent's study of self-employed HR consultants for example (2016), women generally had reduced opportunities to develop and trade cultural capital because of the gendered structuring of work and family time. Our research similarly notes gendered norms around family and work as potentially major structural impediments to the development of female managerial careers. While recognizing the controversies over Bourdieu's highly abstract and sometimes unclear conception of action and structure (Mutch et al, 2006), we argue that a close focus on the manifestations of habitus, capital and field can provide powerful and sociologically rich insights

into the diverse forms of social context which exert powerful influences over the employment and HRM systems into which they are embedded. Such is the degree of stability in the Japanese career field, our analysis leans towards the structural and 'realist' end of Bourdieusian analysis (see, for example Vincent, 2016; Vincent and Pagan, 2019). Rather than acting as free agents or 'career capitalists' (Dickmann and Doherty, 2010: 322) whose careers are their 'personal property' (Inkson and Arthur, 2001: 50) Japanese employees involved in international assignments are strongly influenced by the structural conditions of the field in which they are employed. Even with overseas experience, their careers are far from 'boundaryless' and are powerfully governed by the structuring conditions of field, habitus and capital of Japanese corporate employment.

Research design and methods

Our study focuses on a sample of eight Japanese repatriate managers. We conducted fifty-three interviews individually with these managers between 2011 and 2015, interviewing each several times per year. In addition, the process of keeping in touch with these respondents meant that over two hundred emails were exchanged between the authors and the study participants between 2011 and 2016. These often contained the managers' instructive comments and reflections about their careers, so these texts were also drawn upon in our analysis. We used personal networks to gain access to people who would be willing and able to remain in the study for several years. All had recent and prolonged experience of working in overseas assignments. They all held upper middle management positions in large and prestigious Japanese business groups, except for Takeda-san[1] who worked for the Japanese subsidiary of a U.S. multinational. The repatriates in this study had between eleven and twenty-four years with their companies, with the average tenure being nineteen years. These interviewees had been expected to accept overseas postings followed by a re-integration back to Japan as part of a

[1] Pseudonyms are used in this paper to protect the identities and respect the privacy of the research participants.

centralized yet ad hoc HRM approach. These respondents were high-achieving managers; their employers had conferred considerable status on them by entrusting them with overseas postings and they were expected to eventually move into more senior level posts. General information about our respondents is displayed in Table One.

TABLE ONE ABOUT HERE

Our research is based on career narrative, an approach with a rich tradition in qualitative inquiry (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1995) and widely used in studies of identity, class and gender (Hebson, 2009; Skeggs, 2000), and work (Cohen et al, 2004; Coupland, 2015; Kato and Suzuki, 2006; Peltonen, 1998; van Maanen, 2015). Narrative approaches can create compelling accounts of change or continuity (Clandinin and Connolly, 2000; Frank, 2010; Wolcott, 2001), with a sensitivity to social context that an increasingly 'scientific' HRM discipline tends to ignore.

Interviews were semi-structured. We informed the respondents that our research focused on the development of managerial careers after repatriation, encouraging participants to reflect over their careers and allowing their narratives to develop over time. The foci of the interviews adapted over the four years to encompass three broad themes: 1) the experiences of working overseas and how this differed from Japanese practices, 2) the repatriation process, including how (if at all) the company actively accommodated the returner's reintegration, and 3) the overall effects of the period of expatriation on the returner's subsequent career development and prospects.

Interviews typically lasted around 90 minutes, were conducted in English, and were recorded and transcribed. When combined with the emails (ranging in length from between a few sentences to 4-5 paragraphs), the project generated over 900 pages of textual data which the

authors read with a focus on drawing out the most salient and richly detailed passages of text that spoke to our research themes (Gubrium and Holstein, 1997; Wolcott, 1994). We did not use computer software in our analysis of the interview transcripts and email texts as we feel that such systems tend to privilege notions of 'rigour' and 'objectivity' that can be problematic when the overall research process is more aligned to reflexive interpretation (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1995; Harley, 2015; Wolcott 2001: 40-42). Eschewing positivistic and scientistic norms which increasingly dominate HRM literature, we had no hypotheses to test. The focus instead was on in-depth, reflexive exploration and illumination of career habitus, career capital and career field, with the use of repeat interviews allowing the career narratives to develop and evolve.

We now move to our discussion and analysis of this rich textual material, moving through the three main narratives that emerged over time through the repeat interviews; specifically the issue of adaptation back into Japanese work life, discussions of what effects the overseas experience has had on career advancement, and speculation on the possibilities for the Japanese career field to undergo change.

Finding their way back home: Repatriates' accounts of returning to Japan

Interviews conducted during the first two years of the study focused strongly on expatriation and repatriation experiences because as that point these were ongoing or very recent experiences. One of the two female participants, Uchiyama-san, spoke of enjoying her time in the USA, both professionally and personally. At work as a scientist, she felt that some part of herself matched an 'American' business style, specifically clarity of purpose, top-down strategy, directness of communication and what she called 'meaningful overtime'. But upon her return to Japan, she noticed how quickly and 'automatically' she reverted to traditional Japanese practices via a seemingly unconscious process:

> I was in Japan, I was working in, you know, the one edge, then after I lived in the United

> States I work like at the other, opposite edge. But now I am adjusting to a mirror and being more flexible, you know? Work with someone who prefers Western way? I have to take that way. And if someone prefers Japanese style, I should take that way. […] I can move and adjust, so I become more flexible. […] I can do it automatically right now. It means I just come back to just a Japanese style, so I don't know if I am doing it on purpose or just do it automatically (2011).

Her narrative demonstrates the structuring effects of habitus in this field. Cultural dispositions are the property of an agent rather than an external structure, but are internalized through a field's structured relations. Habitus – as reflected in everyday actions and dispositions such as the above - has important effects in reproducing and reinforcing everyday practice and structure. Similar accounts from other respondents described how Japanese cultural practices are unspoken yet powerful. Takeichi-san commented (2012) while working in the U.S.: 'I don't really wear a tie and suit here […] and also people can speak very frankly here in United States. But when I go back to Japan, I have to wear a tie and jacket every day, including summer.' Ozaki-san (2011) also described the casualness and directness of colleagues in the USA but within a context of much-reduced levels of job security in the USA compared with Japan:

> Right, first-name basis and it is really frank communication. However, I see American organization is very, very strong hierarchy organization because if you do not follow the advice from your supervisor you may be at risk you will be fired. But in Japan not the case, I think.

These examples reveal the importance of habitus in social reproduction. There were no formal procedures that immediately and directly governed particular styles of behavior, conduct and bodily appearance. Instead, the repatriates' narratives provided examples of action that emanate from the 'unconscious schemata' (Wacquant, 2008: 267) of habitus. These dispositions are

shaped by years of exposure to Japanese corporate norms.

None of our study participants received a detailed job description for their new positions back in Japan. The absence of individual written job descriptions is typical for Japanese companies, but different from what the repatriates had seen overseas. Some were critical of this lack of detail, but also emphasized the opportunities the vagueness can provide. Participants were unable to explain how decisions were made in Japan about assignments and promotions. Mainstream HRM literature on repatriation (such as Dickmann and Doherty, 2010; Kraimer et al, 2011; Tahir and Azhar, 2013; Tungli and Peiperl, 2009) would tend to regard this as sloppy practice that encourages repatriates to leave, framed as part of the prescriptive tendency of HR literature to emphasize performance outcomes, repatriation 'failure' and the need for proactive HR policies on mentoring and preparation to avoid 're-entry culture shock' (Greer and Stiles, 2016; Scullion and Linehan, 2002; Tahir and Azar, 2013; Tungli and Peiperl, 2009). And yet, throughout our study, the process of re-introduction to 'home' was relatively unproblematic even while vague and barely 'managed' at all by the Japanese companies. Despite their recent and deep exposure to overseas ways of working, the repatriates quickly settled back into the undefined and pragmatic working roles and routines of Japanese business, suggesting that they accepted the patterns and norms of the career field. Takeichi-san, for instance, reported that he had been given no clear description of his role upon his return to Japan, 'but right now I came to find what I can do little by little' (2012).

Repatriates had accrued valuable cultural capital through their overseas assignment, but the value of this capital was realized through the 'game' of the career field, a game still clearly based around internal career ladders rather than external markets. Quite unlike the mainstream western HRM narrative that assumes highly-mobile expert workers will leverage their experiences on external labour markets for managerial talent (Cox, 2004; Dickmann and Doherty, 2010; Kraimer et al, 2011; Linehan and Scullion, 2002), the value of overseas

experience was not externally tradable. Rather, the significance of the experience was realized as part of an internal system of values structured by habitus and field and evaluated by career capital. Even amid their varied overseas experiences and a repatriation process that was so indistinct as to be almost non-existent, these repatriates' career habitus allowed them to navigate the field with relative ease. As we shall see in the next section, repatriation overall was compatible with the career field because overseas experience was a valuable form of career capital.

Overseas experience as career capital

The second major theme to emerge from the interviews was the longer-term impact of the expatriation experience on repatriates' subsequent careers. The role of career habitus in culturally reproducing the field emerged strongly. One of the repatriates, Takeda-san, made the following observation in an email:

> Japanese people want to be in top or middle group. If they are in top or middle group, they don't want to try to change […] In my opinion, some of repatriates tend to be in the middle or top group. If they are in that group, they are happy to support the system. (2016)

As core members of this career field these repatriates were rich in cultural capital, conferring seniority, respectability and expertise that could be invested in their company and career. The repatriate managers accrued substantial career capital from their experiences of overseas working. But, rather than being singled out as experts in cutting-edge international practices and norms, their repatriate status upon return to the Japanese internal labour market was a form of cultural capital that had value only within the context of reproducing the traditional career field. They did not demand or even expect significant changes to the ways their large Japanese white-collar organizations operated and did not intend to leverage their enhanced status in order to job-hop. Rather, they fully understood that their overseas experience would be somehow

incorporated into the ongoing reproduction of their internal career.

Hiroshima-san explained (2016): ‘Even under the current HR system, repatriates tend to be promoted earlier. It makes them somewhat comfortable under the current system’. He went on to provide an account of ‘Japanese customs’ whereby ‘being different is a risk’, meaning that all persons employed on the white-collar career track need to be ‘cautious’, working within the norms and expectations of lifetime employment rather than expecting or considering changes:

> Even though the number of repatriates is increasing, they are still minority within Japanese companies … Within a Japanese company, being different is a risk, and being a repatriate is already a difference. Therefore repatriates could be cautious, not showing themselves too different to adapt to the Japanese customs. (2016)

Similarly, Takeuchi-san (2016) described not wanting ‘to be seen as a nuisance’ and ‘keep[ing] quiet’. His account notes the existence of those who propose changes to traditional Japanese employment structures, but describes this as a minority view, suggesting that the structuring conditions of the Japanese career field lead to conscious suppression of dispositions acquired from overseas postings. Cultural capital gained overseas took the form of an unspoken and invisible store of value, one that is not manifested in everyday behavior. This cultural capital was gained due to an employee carrying out the duty assigned by the company. There is really no benefit (and no practical option) for these returning expert workers to act in ways that are incompatible with the pre-existing Japanese corporate field. As he explains:

> Of course, there are some who really think [more in line with] overseas business, but I think it is still minority in our company. Those majority doesn’t want to be seen as nuisance. So they keep quiet and want to stay in not only status quo but also life-long stability at work. […] Japanese people believe lifetime employment

> while working environment surrounding us has been changing. In contrast, some minority group insist and explain what company needs for both HR management system and business strategy and everything too. Nowadays, more people has become to listen those opinion. So I think it has been changing but very slow because the voice is very small.

The everyday, agential enactment of career habitus played a central role in continually reproducing the career field, as salarymen acted quietly and carefully, not questioning authority or hierarchy and suppressing or neglecting any desires they might have had to influence or change practices based on what was learned abroad. Even as structures were vague and the value of their overseas experience never made explicit, the managers accepted this as part of the field and their habitus helped to sustain these conditions. These patterned behaviours and dispositions fed into the resilience and reproduction of a distinct Japanese HR system that differs from that widely espoused in mainstream HR literature about repatriation and boundaryless careers. But this is not to suggest that the field and its actors cannot experience change or that field is not a site of personal conflict. Our study also explored how the Japanese career field might be challenged, eroded or transformed. Narratives that spoke to this theme are explored in the next section.

Possibilities of future change

As the repeat interviews progressed over time, the issue of repatriation faded from the managers' accounts. In the third and fourth year of the study, interviewees instead spoke in more depth about the possibilities of change to the career field. For example, Hiroshima-san (2015), tasked with finding new technologies for his chemicals conglomerate, talked about 'the more straightforward evaluation system' in the USA, speculating that '[a]s many Japanese companies seeking their way to globalize, it would be inevitable for such companies to adopt the Western style'. He later commented (2016), 'The HR system in my company is changing with more

employees working abroad, so regardless of repatriates' demand, I believe the HR system would eventually incorporate the western style to a certain degree'. The words 'eventually' and 'to a certain degree' are pertinent: there was no real expression of any likelihood of major changes to the career field.

As explained in the prior two sections, these repatriates were major stakeholders in their firms and had good reason to act in ways that tended towards the reproduction of the field. But social reproduction also features conflict and tension, particularly as regards gender (Bourdieu, 2001). One of our female respondents, Uchiyama-san, was expecting a baby and faced huge uncertainty about how, when, and in what role she might return to work following maternity leave. She estimated that fewer than 1% of the managers of her company were women, and noted the need for female role-models in senior positions. Yet amid these tensions she continued to express traditional notions about gendered workplace norms. Rather than challenging practices of gender exclusion, she conformed to them (an example of what Bourdieu calls 'illusio'), mentioning that she 'felt sorry' for her line manager for the 'frustration' that her maternity absence will cause:

> I just feel I am sorry to my company. If I was in his position, for the rest of my lab, I, you know, I would feel frustrated, too. …I don't know anyone who is like me, who is manager-level people and have maternity leave.

Uchiyama-san's narrative reveals the intensity and resilience of gender inequalities, emanating from the structural properties of the field (poor work-life balance, a lack of female role models) and the agential properties of habitus (expressions of sorrow and guilt for parental obligations). The other female participant of the study, Kinoshita-san, was stronger in her criticism of the system, and was the only participant to leave her company during the four-year study. While she was grateful for the overseas experience ('[I]t was a great opportunity and more than I

expected'), she was also the only person to express doubts about the motives of her employer: 'I cannot fully trust this company' (2012). Expanding on this, she noted:

> I think there are still differences between men and women, how to treat them. The company says, "No, there is no difference", but still I think there are and the board members are already male … [I]t is hard for me to imagine like a career ladder in this company.

In Kinoshita-san's new company, the subsidiary of a North American pharmaceutical giant, things were different. This is consistent with the findings of Olcott and Oliver (2014: 220) linking foreign ownership with 'more equal workplaces' in Japan. Perceived gender equality had been a major reason for her decision to move: '[O]bviously, there are a lot of women at leadership position in the current company' (2015). Furthermore, she had career planning sessions with her manager, something that she felt had not happened in any meaningful way in her previous company. Kinoshita-san felt that official and unofficial practices had amounted to gender discrimination, so she moved to another company. Nonetheless, she waited almost three years to move, before going to the second company of her career, where she assumed she would remain for the rest of her working life.

Not every actor in the 'game' of the Japanese career field is equally able to possess or embody cultural capital (Wacquant, 2008: 267), and exceptions may be especially germane when considering gender (Nemoto, 2013; Vincent, 2016) given the highly exclusionary gendered patterns of this particular career field (Kondo, 1990; Gottfried and Hayashi-Kato, 1998; Nemoto, 2013). While Konoshita-san was critical of this element of the Japanese career field and advocated change to the inward-looking and gendered HR structures, Uchiyama-san was more willing to continue acing in ways informed by a career habitus that matched the field. Indeed, Uchiyama-san's (2011) perspective on future change to Japanese HR systems in general

included reflection on what her company's CEO had told her about the difference between being global and operating abroad, an account that describes 'change' within a context of continuity:

> [H]e said, "I don't want to make our company [a] global company but I plan to do business globally" … he want to expand our company, make it bigger and we'll do business globally, but want to take Japanese style, I feel.

Meanwhile, Shima-san, a long-term Japanese expatriate, commented (2016) by email:

> Even when you are frustrated with your HR system, if you are busy with your assignment and you know you are benefitted enough from the system, I don't think you are motivated to change the system with a sacrifice of your current status. I think in general, Japanese people do not like "Change" and prefer "The Status Quo" as long as it is tolerable. I also think it is not completely unrelated to the fact that we are almost imprinted that being same as others is important, and group, team or society take a priority over individual. So in my opinion and observation, culture is a lot to do with it.

Shima-san's notion of the *imprintment* of cultural forms onto Japanese people highlights the embodied elements of habitus and capital (see Coupland, 2015). While recognizing some limitations and frustrations of white-collar careers, especially in terms of the limitations placed on women, these repatriates are the beneficiaries of a system of employment that continues to bestow wealth, security, and respectability. They are employed at the confluence of structural and agential forces that provide forms of employment security that mainstream HRM on repatriation and careers largely ignores (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Cox, 2004; Dickmann and Doherty, 2010; Florida, 2012; Hall, 1996; Tahir and Azhar, 2013; Tungli and Peiperl, 2009). Our analysis highlights the structural and agential elements that generate a durable social context into which the employment relationship is embedded.

Conclusion

Using a career narrative approach, this paper has demonstrated the importance of habitus, capital and field in the social reproduction of Japanese white-collar careers. HRM literature that takes a reductionist, scientistic, pro-market orientation (see critiques by Dundon and Rafferty, 2018; Harley, 2015; Thompson, 2011) is poorly-equipped to understand the contextual complexities into which careers are situated. In spite of the all-encompassing HRM narrative that internal labour markets and stable employment are impossible, our paper demonstrates and explains powerful forms of social reproduction of the Japanese career field.

The qualitative accounts of the Japanese expert workers are replete with examples that concern agency: personal decisions, viewpoints, reactions and feelings relating to individuals' varied experiences of work inside and outside of Japan. But the overall picture they provide strongly demonstrates the role of structural conditions that limit, legitimate and give meaning to forms of action and disposition that reinforce the traditions of distinctly Japanese employment conditions. In collecting narratives that have unfolded over four years, our paper provides important insights into continuity and reproduction rather than the dominant portrayal of disruptive market forces. Recent scholarship on Japanese work, society and identity has tended to break apart the post-war truisms and assumptions about a monolithic, conformist, gendered and highly-organized Japan, pointing instead to notions of liquidity, insecurity (Allison, 2013; Dasgupta, 2013; Gill, 2003) and 'dislocations' of the 'salaryman doxa' (Roberson and Suzuki, 2003). Dislocations have certainly taken place in rhetorical realms, such as in academic writings that seek to revise our understandings of Japanese society, or in neoliberal proclamations about the inevitability of portfolio careers and flexible labour markets. But our analysis suggests that such a picture of change and disruption is exaggerated. There are – clearly – sections of the Japanese political economy that are increasingly characterized by precarity and insecurity

(Genda, 2003; Gottfried, 2014; Keizer, 2008). But the habitus and the forms of capital associated with the distinct career field of corporate internal labour markets remain vitally important notions in Japanese society (Dasgupta, 2013). Employers are continuing to offer 'lifetime' security to attract and retain expert white-collar workers. For example Japan Post Group announced it would hire 6,500 fresh graduates from 1 April, 2016 (*Nikkei Shimbun*, 2015).

Standing (2014: 29) asserts that the salaryman role itself has become precarious. Allison (2013: 21-42) claims that employment in Japan has gone 'from lifelong to liquid'. Our analysis challenges such assertions. We are skeptical that change will come from within this career field itself, even when individuals acting in that field are exposed to Anglo-Saxon working arrangements. In the 1990s and early 2000s many speculated that the traditional Japanese career field would be eroded by the retrenchment of graduate recruitment under weak economic conditions. In today's tight labour market the speculation surrounds Japanese workers voluntarily quitting secure white-collar jobs as they look to increase earnings (Fujikawa, 2018). But in both periods the career field has shown remarkable persistence. The institutional structures associated with fields (labour laws, employment contracts) are essential in providing the possibilities for internal labour markets and employment security. But the agential practices resulting from career habitus are also highly relevant in the social reproduction of Japanese white-collar employment. We would be well-advised to account for the logics of habitus as well as field if we are to properly understand the persistence and reproduction of various systems of employment that differ from the market-dominated assumptions of prescriptive and Anglocentric HRM (for example Dickmann and Doherty, 2010; Tahir and Azhur, 2013; Tungli and Peiperl, 2009).

While the present paper has provided insights into the distinct elements that structure a particular career field, further qualitative inquiry could identify other elements of importance to

career fields, such as ethnicity, disability and technology, as part of continual scholarly efforts to develop more sensitivity to the social context of working worlds. Our paper suggests two potential ways in which HRM could move beyond the limitations of its pro-market ontology and positivist preoccupation with technical issues such as the 'HRM-performance link'. One is to engage in more depth with conceptual traditions drawn from across social science and humanities disciplines; traditions that allow for less economistic conceptions of human behavior and where the focus and purpose of the analysis need not be influenced or constrained by the privileging of managerialist concerns. Another is to embrace varied forms of qualitative inquiry such as in-depth, open-ended, narrative-based methods that evolve over time and afford research participants the space to account for the complexities and contradictions of action and thought (see Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Frank, 2010). If researchers 'let stories breathe' (Frank, 2010) then these narratives can potentially provide rich portrayals of the various social complexities and entanglements bound up in life and career.

This implies a rejection of positivism and 'evidence-based' management (Cascio, 2007; Rousseau, 2006) that might be an unwelcome move for some researchers. But we suggest that the HRM 'evidence base' is systematically constrained by the limitations of Anglophone and neoliberal assumptions around global labour markets and boundaryless careers. If we are serious about the need to understand context, then we require close-up and sensitive investigation of the complex ways in which human actors understand and account for their decisions in situations where agency is always constrained and partial.

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