

Repatriation to France and Germany: A Comparative Study Based on Bourdieu's Theory of Practice. Matthias Walther, Springer (MIR edition), 2014, 328 pages

Sophie Nivoix

Volume 20, Special Issue, 2016

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1063713ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1063713ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

HEC Montréal
Université Paris Dauphine

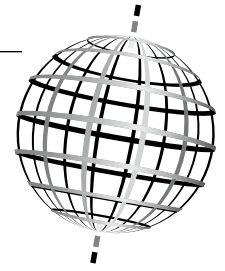
ISSN

1206-1697 (print)
1918-9222 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Nivoix, S. (2016). Review of [Repatriation to France and Germany: A Comparative Study Based on Bourdieu's Theory of Practice. Matthias Walther, Springer (MIR edition), 2014, 328 pages]. *Management international / International Management / Gestión Internacional*, 20, 179–181.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1063713ar>



Repatriation to France and Germany: A Comparative Study Based on Bourdieu's Theory of Practice.

Matthias Walther, Springer (MIR edition), 2014, 328 pages.

SOPHIE NIVOIX
Université de Poitiers

Matthias Walther¹ offers a comparative study about the repatriation to France and Germany that stems from his PhD-thesis realized as a *cotutelle de thèse* at the Universities of Bamberg (D) and Lyon 3 (F). As the author explains, many Germans and French are involved with international careers and quit their jobs upon repatriation to their home country. However, the understanding about the re-integration of repatriates into the external labor markets of their home country is limited as most of the repatriation studies were conducted from a company-internal labor market view. Matthias Walther's book being the first one published in this field of research significantly contributes to the academic literature by working out similarities and differences about the repatriation conditions to the German and French labor markets he explains by cultural and institutional factors.

Before describing the content in a more detailed way, we will outline some key characteristics of the book that strongly contribute to its quality, academic excellence and interest:

- **Style:** The first strong aspect to mention is the writing style of this book. Although the book is written using a complex Bourdieuan language, the text is pleasant to read and the content is easy to understand. Matthias Walther achieves this by actively guiding the reader through his text. At the beginning of each chapter, a pre-structure of each section is provided and at the end of every chapter, short summaries of the most pertinent insights and results are given wherefore the author makes use of summarizing tables and figures.
- **Interdisciplinary nature:** The book is situated in the field of (International) Human Resource Management. As theoretical framework, the author draws on Bourdieu's sociological Theory of Practice and reconciles the culturalist and institutionalist approaches in comparative research. This gives the book a strong interdisciplinary nature and adds value by illustrating the research problematic from different viewpoints. Bourdieu's Theory is introduced right at the beginning and applied to the French-German career mobility context whereupon the text is written rigorously using Bourdieu's main ideas, concepts and elements.
- **Multi-level analysis:** An important value of the book lies in its rich analysis at different levels. The French-German repatriation problematic is analyzed on a macro level (German and French career systems), meso level (companies) and

micro level (German and French repatriates). This leads to a real holistic understanding of the repatriation phenomenon.

- **Strong theoretical and practical contribution:** The book is written for both scholars and practitioners. From a practical point of view, this book gives recommendations for German and French repatriates regarding successful strategies to apply when re-entering their native career field. From a company viewpoint, the value of repatriates (in a sense of abroad built up knowledge, skills abilities, networks) is worked out and strategies in order to successfully attract and integrate those repatriates are suggested. The biggest contribution of this book, however, lies in its theoretical value, more specifically in the clarification of German and French career systems in an international mobility context. Based on his findings, the author challenges the validity of existing rules of the game in a national context and strongly contributes to a better understanding about how career systems work in a cross-border context.
- **Methodology:** The comparative study is conducted under the interpretivist research paradigm. The author chose a qualitative research design and selected his sample based on a qualitative sample plan that was rigorously developed based on existing knowledge from the literature. A significant value comes from this book's conceptualizing contribution. At the end of each empirical section, the author summarizes the results of his open and axial coding in a model of dependent / independent variables and moderators. Thanks to this, the reader obtains a very helpful visual overview of the research results, which eases the imagination of fruitful avenues of further research applying a more quantitative style.

In the following, short summaries of every chapter will be given. Before the introduction, Matthias Walther provides abstracts in three languages, namely English, French and German.

THEORETICAL PART – SETTING THE BOURDIEUIAN SCENE

In this part of the book, Matthias Walther introduces the research problematic (chapter 1) and presents Bourdieu's Theory of Practice as Theoretical Framework (chapter 2). Chapter 3 is already structured according to Bourdieu's main elements and ideas and serves to review the academic literature in the relevant field of research.

1. Matthias Walther is a leading employee in the Japanese company 'KEYENCE'.

In **chapter 1**, Matthias Walther works out the research problematic and pertinence of his topic. Although there are many German and French expatriates in the international business world and though it is widely known that numerous repatriates quit their jobs shortly upon return, repatriation to France and Germany has not sufficiently been investigated from an external labor market perspective. The objective of the study is to identify the rules of the game on the German and French labor markets from an international career mobility perspective and to identify key mechanisms that determine a successful professional repatriation. The aim is to create two international career models that explain the re-entry mechanisms to France and Germany and to analyze if existing national career models also fit into an international career mobility context. From a practical point of view, Matthias Walther's study aims at giving recommendations to repatriates regarding fruitful strategies to apply for the repatriation to France and Germany, whereas for companies, the study aims at deducing recommendations how to attract repatriating talent and to identify their worth from a human (career) capital perspective.

In **chapter 2**, Bourdieu's Theory of Practice as theoretical framework is introduced and applied to a Franco-German repatriation context. The chapter starts with a basic description and its classification as a Grand Theory that can be applied to different research contexts. Bourdieu's theory reconciles the notions of *structure* and *agency* by the interplay of its major elements *field*, *capital* and *habitus*. Applied to a career context, *career fields* are characterized as playground for careers where rules apply and where capital is the major cause of distinction. *Career capital* exists in four forms: Economic capital, cultural capital, social capital and symbolic capital. While economic capital (e.g. the salary of an employee), cultural capital (e.g. a diploma in its institutionalized form or knowledge and competences in its incorporated form) and social capital (e.g. a person's network) are independent forms of capital, the fourth form, symbolic capital, represents the value of the independent forms of capital on a specific field. The last element, the *habitus* as central component in Bourdieu's theory is explained as psychosomatic mind that ensures that career agents act in accordance with the rules of the game of the career field and invest the appropriate structure and amount of capital. The chapter ends with the application of Bourdieu's theory to the Franco-German research context and a critical discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the theory. Matthias Walther explains his choice for Bourdieu's Theory instead of alternative frameworks (e.g. Giddens's theory) and argues that Bourdieu provides a stronger structural orientation. This represents the more appropriate framework in the Franco-German research context as the objective is to understand the rules of the game of the German and French career fields – hence to understand structure.

In **Chapter 3**, the author reviews the pertinent academic literature and works out the innovative nature of the study. This is done under a Bourdieuan angle as the literature is discussed following Bourdieu's main elements field, capital and habitus.

The chapter starts with a reflection about the relationship between the Bourdieuan elements (figure 8; p. 30). The author leads a theoretical discussion of different approaches in comparative research and explains that under a Bourdieuan perspective, the study aims at reconciling the structuralist approach that

explains cross-country phenomena by field characteristics and the culturalist approach that focuses on habitus-related aspects lying in the person. In his reflections, he especially outlines the relationship between field and habitus and their circular and mutually reproducing relationship to each other that is valuable to understand careers in a cross-national context.

As first Bourdieuan element pertinent, Matthias Walther introduces the pertinent literature about the *habitus* that is developed during primary and secondary socialization and that seems strongly influenced by the national culture. He draws on existing frameworks from etic and emic research approaches and works out that in a career context, the German and French habitus show some similarities, but also important differences. For example, it is outlined that while the German *habitus* is more performance oriented, the French *habitus* is more human oriented. In the discussion section, those cultural differences will be used to explain the re-entry mechanisms into the German and French career fields.

When introducing the field notion, the author concentrates on the German and French economic and career fields in order to highlight the rules of the games of return. While the French economic system is determined by a State-enhanced Capitalism with economic activities highly centralized around Paris, the German economic system is characterized by a decentralized Rhine Capitalism with small and medium sized companies playing an important role. The author also compares the career systems and works out that the basic rules and mechanisms differ significantly. While in Germany, we can find a functional career model with a high importance of specialized knowledge for being recruited from the external labor market, in France the Latin career model is characterized by an importance of the diploma and social networks for the entry into a company.

Finally, from a *career capital* point of view, Matthias Walther works out that during expatriation, the capital basis of German and French career agents develops, which counts for both assigned and self-initiated expatriates. For example, expatriation has a positive effect on the *cultural capital* in a sense of knowledge, skills and abilities. Regarding the *symbolic capital* (value) of international work experiences, the results are mixed and seem to depend on the rules of the *career field*, which underlines the relevance of the empirical repatriation study undertaken in this book. At the end of the chapter, Matthias Walther gives a summary of the major insights from the literature, works out the shortcomings and develops his research questions.

EMPIRICAL PART – THE FRANCO-GERMAN REPATRIATION STUDY

The empirical part consists of a description of the research design (chapter 4) whereupon the empirical results are reported (chapter 5).

Chapter 4 contains the research design of the study. It starts with a theoretical discussion of research paradigms and an argumentation of his choice of interpretivism as epistemological position. Matthias Walther applied a qualitative research approach as the objective of the study is to understand repatriation mechanisms in France and Germany. He used semi-structured interviews as technique and applied a qualitative sample plan as sampling method (N=20 German and N=20

French repatriates), which ensured an appropriate variety and information-rich cases within the sample. The sample was in the first instance detected using social networks, such as LinkedIn, Viadeo or Xing. The obtained interview transcripts were analyzed applying a qualitative content analysis that combines quantitative and qualitative elements. The chapter ends with a discussion about the quality of the results (validity, transferability, intersubjective confirmability) and ethical considerations that were respected in the study.

In **chapter 5**, the empirical results are reported. Having given a descriptive overview of the sample, the research results are illustrated around the two phases of expatriation and repatriation. The study shows that during their time abroad, German and French expatriates develop their economic, social and cultural capital basis. While there seems to be no differences regarding German and French expatriates, assigned expatriates develop a stronger economic capital basis than self-initiated expatriates. The results also show that expatriation has an influence on the habitus (adjustment and assimilation).

The main objective being to understand repatriation mechanisms in France and Germany, those re-entry prices to pay (in capitals) in order to re-enter the German and French labor markets and the transformation mechanisms of these independent types of Bourdieuan capitals into symbolic capital are outlined in two repatriation models to France and Germany. In order to quantify the re-entry price, Matthias Walther calculated coefficients that stem from the quantitative part of the content analysis completed by qualitative elements. The results are reported in two equations of capitals that are necessary to re-enter into the German and French labor markets. While the most valuable element on the German labor market is the fact of having International Work Experiences, re-entering the French labor market requires solid social capital in the form of networks.

CONTRIBUTION TO THE ACADEMIC LITERATURE AND PRACTICAL VALUE

In the last chapter of the book (**chapter 6**), the empirical results are discussed in a broader context and put in relationship to already existing literature. While the biggest value of the book surely lies in its theoretical contribution, its value for practitioners must not be underestimated.

The most interesting contribution comes from the insight that existing national career models are not suitable to understand the re-integration of German and French repatriates into their home-country career field as the rules of the game in an international career mobility context differ to those in a pure national context. Based on the empirical results, Matthias Walther develops two models (figure 36, p. 279) for careers in a Franco-German repatriation context and thereby contributes to the development of the Latin career model (for France) and the functional career model (for Germany). The author uses existing knowledge from the literature outlined in chapter 2 in order to explain re-entry mechanisms to France and Germany by a mix of cultural and institutional factors whereby he is able to reconcile the culturalist and institutionalist approach in comparative research. This creates a clear understanding about the transformation mechanisms of the Bourdieuan capitals into

symbolic capital in each country. The book also offers a valuable discussion of borders of career fields, as Matthias Walther's research has shown that career fields cannot be considered detached from neighboring fields, e.g. the economic field or the educational field (figure 37, p. 284) in order to fully understand the rules of the game in an international career mobility context.

Practical recommendations are given on an individual and organizational level. For French repatriates, Matthias Walther recommends to always stay in contact with the existing network during their time abroad since social capital was found to be the most important Bourdieuan element in the French repatriation game. For young expatriates, he also suggests to favor the VIE as form of international work mobility instead of moving abroad as a self-initiated expatriate as in France, the VIE has a stronger symbolic capital. For German repatriates, the author recommends to supply their workforce to companies from the German *Mittelstand* as medium-sized companies that play an important role in the German economy accord a high value to international work experiences. On a company level, the suggestion is to consider repatriates as a valuable talent pool in times of international business activities as expatriates were found to develop their incorporated cultural capital and can therefore contribute to the business success of multinational companies. Furthermore, recruiting companies can benefit from the abroad-developed social capital of repatriates as this can potentially lead to the creation of new business contacts and e.g. increase the international sales-volume.

The book ends with limitations of the study and avenues for further research. One limitation stems from the fact that interviews with 40 repatriates do not allow generalizable results. However, Matthias Walther formulates propositions that can be transformed in hypotheses in a further study and then empirically tested applying a quantitative research approach. Furthermore, the author suggests enlarging the study to more countries than just two in order to get a more complete understanding of international careers in different countries.

CONCLUSION

As detailed above, this book is of high interest, not only for people working in the human resources or intercultural management field, but more generally for all researchers and practitioners of international management. The in-depth analyses presented by Matthias Walther in the 3 chapters of his theoretical part give many comprehensive and clear viewpoints about Bourdieuan notions. This study is the first one published in the research field of the repatriation conditions including both cultural and institutional factors, and applied to the German and French labor markets. While the empirical part of the book can help the scholar to understand the human and managerial implications of repatriation, it will surely be a precious help for executives in their human resource strategy at the international level.

Such a work shows all the qualities of a high standard research as well as a real concern about the practical implications of the results found. The author gives us the keys of complex theories with an accurate and always clear and accessible writing style. These are some of the numerous qualities of this book we warmly recommend.