

# THE PERSISTENT MYTH OF HIGH EXPATRIATE FAILURE RATES

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Version April 1995

A revised version of this paper appeared in *Human Resource Management*, Vol 6 (1995), May, pp. 457-475.

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# The persistent myth of high expatriate failure rates

## Introduction

The growing internationalization of the world's markets is drawing more and more players into the international business arena. One of the results is that not only large multinational corporations, but also smaller and recently internationalized companies are encountering the problems associated with sending their employees, so-called expatriates, abroad. They may believe that their bigger brothers and sisters can provide answers to their practical problems, but in fact large multinationals are themselves coping with trends such as a changing work ethos and dual career couples, all of which has made their employees less willing to accept an assignment abroad (Shell, 1993). When the pool of candidates gets smaller, it becomes increasingly important that the expatriates who *are* sent abroad are successful in their assignments. On the one hand because a low failure rate reduces the number of candidates needed and on the other hand because a high failure rate is likely to discourage potential candidates, shrinking the pool even further.

Over the last three decades it has become almost "traditional" to open an article on expatriate management by stating that expatriate failure rates are (very) high. Virtually every publication on the topic defines and measures expatriate failure as the percentage of expatriates returning home before their assignment contract expires. Of course, premature reentry might be a very inadequate way to measure expatriate failure. One can easily argue that those expatriates who stay on their assignment but who fail to perform adequately are (potentially) more damaging to the company than the ones who return prematurely. Furthermore, successful completion of a foreign assignment does not mean that the possibility of expatriate failure has been avoided. Sometimes, returning home poses even larger problems than the foreign assignment itself (Harvey, 1982; Forster, 1994). The repatriate must face reestablishing himself within the home organization and readjusting to the home culture. Failure to do so, for whatever reason, can also be regarded as expatriate failure.

These reservations being made, in this article I will argue that there is almost no empirical foundation for the existence of high failure rates when measured as premature reentry. Unfortunately, there has been no reliable large-scale empirical work on this subject for more than 15 years. As argued at the end of this article, however, some small-scale studies suggest that we might be equally justified in claiming that expatriate failure rates are generally rather low, at least in Europe. Before launching into this discussion, however, I will first describe a chain of references in the field of expatriate failure rates - measured as the percentage of expatriates who return home before their assignment contract expires - that grew stranger and stranger as I traced back the various links.<sup>1</sup>

## A promising start

I would like to start my story by reviewing some of the recent contributions in this field, gradually working backwards through various references and taking a few detours when necessary. In their book *International Business Studies*, **Buckley and Brooke** (1992) claim that "*Empirical* studies over a *considerable period* suggest that expatriate failure is

a significant and persistent problem with rates ranging between 25 and 40 per cent in the developed countries and as high as 70 per cent in the case of developing countries (Desatnick & Bennett, 1978; Holmes & Piker, 1980; Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985)" (Buckley & Brooke, 1992: 528, emphasis added, AH). Let's take a look at the references Buckley and Brooke quote, starting with **Desatnick and Bennett**. [See figure 1 for a summary of the publications and the pattern of references in this field.] At first sight there seems to be nothing wrong with this reference. Desatnick and Bennett do indeed say that "30-50 per cent of U.S. expatriates do not complete their assignments in developed countries; and the proportion rises to 70 per cent in developing countries" (Desatnick & Bennett, 1979:173). In my opinion, however, there are two problems with this reference. First, Desatnick and Bennett refer to U.S. expatriates only, and as we will see later there is quite a big difference between U.S. expatriate failure rates on the one hand and Japanese and West European expatriate failure rates on the other. Second, and perhaps more seriously, we cannot verify the source of these figures. Desatnick and Bennett do not mention any research project conducted by themselves, nor do they refer to any other study. In fact throughout the entire book, no single reference can be found, not even a bibliography at the end, so this source can hardly be counted as empirical evidence. **Holmes and Piker** (1980) describe a number of techniques "which have been found to reduce the failure rates of expatriates to adjust and to succeed overseas from around 40 to 25 per cent" (Holmes & Piker, 1980:31). But once again, there is no indication of where these figures might originate from. As Buckley and Brooke are the only ones who refer to this article (see figure 1), I will not probe into this study further, but once again empirical evidence does not seem to have been delivered. **Mendenhall and Oddou's** (1985) article, which, as we will see later, is one of the most crucial articles on expatriate failure rates (see also figure 1), simply asserts that "It has been estimated that the expatriate failure rate from 1965 to the present has fluctuated between 25 percent and 40 percent (Henry, 1965; Misa & Fabricatore, 1979; Tung, 1981)" (Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985: 39). I will discuss the sources Mendenhall and Oddou refer to further along in this article. For now I would like to continue with a number of more recent contributions. The somewhat older study by Tung, however, will be discussed next, as this seems to be the most crucial study in this field; no less than 12 other publications refer to it (see figure 1).

[Figure 1 about here]

## Tung's research on expatriate management

**Tung** (1981,1982,1984,1987,1988)<sup>2</sup> is one of the very few researchers up till now who has conducted empirical research on expatriate management. In a sample of 80 American, 29 West European and 35 Japanese multinational firms with subsidiaries in Western Europe, Canada, Middle/Near East, Eastern Europe, Latin/South America, Far East, Africa and the United States, she has conducted survey research on the following subjects:

- Staffing policy. To what extent and at which levels are the subsidiaries of the multinational company (MNC) in question staffed by parent country nationals, host country nationals and third country nationals;

- Selection criteria for overseas assignments;
- Procedures used to determine the suitability of a prospective expatriate for a foreign position;
- The type and extent of predeparture training; and
- The success rate and the reasons for success.

The last subject is, of course, highly relevant for this article. Respondents were asked to indicate the percentage of expatriates who had to be recalled before the end of their assignment. Table 1 summarizes the results.

Table 1: Recall rates in American, European and Japanese companies

Recall rate %	% of Companies
U.S. Multinationals	
20-40	7
10-20	69
<10	24
European Multinationals	
11-15	3
6-10	38
<5	59
Japanese Multinationals	
11-19	14
6-10	10
<5	76

Generally speaking, the recall rate of American multinationals is considerably higher than that of their European and Japanese counterparts. While 76% of the U.S. multinationals in Tung's study have recall rates above 10%, this goes for only 3% and 14% of the European and Japanese multinationals respectively. The group of Japanese multinationals included the highest percentage of companies with recall rates below 5%. Still, we can conclude from this study that there are in fact very few companies with recall rates above 20%. Only 7% of the U.S. multinationals fall in this category, and there are no European or Japanese firms in this group at all.

## Referring to others: How (not) to do this?

Before continuing with our chronological search backwards, I would like to take a look at the most recent contribution to mention expatriate failure rates, a book entitled *Human Resource Strategies for International Growth* by Chris **Hendry** (1994). Hendry correctly refers to Mendenhall and Oddou (1985) when he states that they "estimate the expatriate failure rate to have varied between 25 and 40 per cent in the period 1965-1985", to Desatnick and Bennett who "put it up to 70 per cent in developing countries" and to Tung when he quotes the percentage of U.S., West European and Japanese MNCs that have expatriate failure rates above 10% (Henry, 1994:91). He also mentions two recent British surveys by Scullion and Brewster, which will be discussed in the final section of this article. Apart from the fact that he gives credence to two studies whose empirical content is not beyond doubt, there seems to be nothing wrong with his references.

This is not true for **Scullion** (1991), the next author in our chronological search backwards. According to him "An earlier study of American multinationals showed that between 25 and 40 per cent of all international assignments ended in failure" (Scullion, 1991:32). To substantiate this statement, he refers to Tung (1982). As we have seen above, in Tung's study only 7% of the American MNCs had expatriate failure rates between 20 (not 25) and 40%, which is very hard to reconcile with Scullion's statement. Two pages later Scullion attributes the statement "Research suggests that the estimated expatriate failure rate in American multinationals has fluctuated between 25 and 40 per cent over the last 20 years" to Mendenhall and Oddou (1985). However, by converting Mendenhall and Oddou's "from 1965 to the present" (Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985:39) to "the last 20 years" in an article published in 1991, Scullion effectively excludes two of the three references which Mendenhall and Oddou's article was based on (Henry, 1965 and Misa & Fabricatore, 1979) and only just includes the third: Tung, 1981.

Scullion is not the only one to make this kind of mistake, however. **Dowling and Schuler** (1990:59) claim that "Mendenhall and Oddou report that the estimated expatriate failure rate from 1965 to the present has fluctuated between 25 and 40%". They do, but by citing this in a book published in 1990 the suggestion is raised that the present is 1990, especially because the year of publication of Mendenhall and Oddou's article (1985) can only be found in a note 15 pages later at the end of the chapter. Apart from this, Dowling and Schuler correctly refer to Desatnick and Bennett (for the 70% expatriate failure in developing countries) and Tung.

## Alternative ways to substantiate claims of high failure rates

**Adler and Ghadar** (1990) refer to the 25-40% range of Mendenhall and Oddou (1985) to substantiate their statement that American expatriates have high failure rates. Mendenhall and Oddou, however, did not reserve this percentage for American expatriates alone. For expatriate failure figures on West European and Japanese expatriates, Adler and Ghadar refer to Tung (1982). Of course Tung does mention these failure rates (see above), but in the same article (in fact in the very sentence before the section dealing with West European and Japanese expatriate failure rates) she also mentions that only 7% of American MNCs had expatriate failure rates between 20 and 40%.

**Hamill** (1989) states that "There is an extremely high failure rate amongst expatriate employees, at least in U.S. multinationals, with between 25 and 40 per cent of all foreign assignments ending in failure" (Hamill, 1989:18). To substantiate this claim he refers to Tung (1981,1982) and a newcomer in the field: Harvey (1985). We have already seen that Tung's research can in no way be interpreted as claiming 25-40% expatriate failure rates (even for American MNCs). Harvey (1985) states that "depending on the source, 25% to 40% of all expatriates from the United States fail", claiming the source of these figures to be: Tung (1981, 1984)!

**Black** (1988) presents us with yet another, slightly different version. He also refers to Tung, but puts the expatriate failure rate at 20%-40%. This is indeed one of Tung's categories, but - as we have seen above - only 7% of the American companies fall in this category. Black's second reference, substantiating his statement that "... between 20 to 40% of the expatriate managers do not successfully make the transition and return early" (Black, 1988:277), is even stranger. He refers to Baker and Ivancevich (1971), who have

indeed written an historic article on the inadequate way in which American firms handle(d) foreign assignments. There is one thing they don't do, however: mention figures on expatriate failure rates, making this indeed one of the strangest references of all.

## New leads and loose ends

**Kobrin** (1988) takes a fresh approach to the field by providing two new leads: **Harvey** (1983), who notes that "depending on the source, from 33 to 80 percent of expatriated families return to the United States before their contract expires", and **Zeira and Banai** (1985), who are said to "summarize eight studies of failure rates of expatriates abroad that range from 30-70 per cent" (Kobrin, 1988:66). But before tracking down these new leads, I would like to tie up three loose ends, shown in figure 1 as having a limited number of links with other articles.

**Lane and DiStefano** (1988), for instance, simply refer to **Mendenhall and Oddou** (1985) when they state that "Estimates of expatriate failure run between 25 and 40%." **Murray and Murray** (1986) refer to **Tung** (1984) in citing differences in expatriate failure rates between American and Japanese companies. However, the way in which they present **Tung's** data, although in principle correct, might easily lead to a gross overstatement of American expatriate failure rates. According to **Murray and Murray**, more than three-quarters of American multinationals have expatriate failure rates between 10 and 40%. If we look back at **Tung's** original figures, we do indeed see that 76% of American multinationals had expatriate failure rates between 10 and 40%. Crucial, however, is that the vast majority of these firms had expatriate failure rates *below* 20%. We are equally justified in saying that 93% of the total American sample had expatriate failure rates below 20%, which puts the American expatriate failure rate in a much more favourable light. Finally, **Copeland and Griggs** (1985) write that "Data suggest that somewhere between 20 and 50 percent of international relocations end with premature return. In developing countries the expatriate failure rate has been as high as 70 percent" (Copeland & Griggs, 1985:xix). Unfortunately they do not tell us precisely which data suggest these expatriate failure rates. We can assume that the 70% can be traced back to **Desatnick and Bennett**, because they are the only writers who mention it. Perhaps the 20-50% is just a misreading of **Desatnick and Bennett's** 30-50%? But even **Copeland and Griggs** have their followers, as we will see later.

## Two new leads!

We promised to come back to **Harvey** and **Zeira & Banai**. We already encountered the first above in a publication (1985) in which he incorrectly attributes the 25-40% expatriate failure rates to **Tung**. Two years earlier (**Harvey**, 1983), he had held another view, already using the words "depending on the source" but claiming that "33 to 80 percent of expatriated families return to the United States before their contract expires" (**Harvey**, 1983: 72). This time his source was **Lanier** (1979), who says "*Current studies* put actual failures - i.e. returns - at about one-third of all personnel; *some companies* have had 79% returns" (**Lanier**, 1979:160, emphasis added AH). Quoting this as a 33-80% expatriate failure rate can be considered a rather liberal presentation of these data, which in and of themselves already did not contain any verifiable empirical information.

**Zeira and Banai** (1985) reviewed no less than nine (and not eight as Kobrin claimed) studies on expatriate failure rates. Two of them, however, only say that expatriates are less successful than in their home country and do not mention expatriate failure rates at all. Two of the remaining seven studies have already been dealt with above, namely Desatnick & Bennett and Lanier, and have been criticized for not substantiating their claims. A study by Business International (1970) - Zeira and Banai refer to the citation of this study in a book by Robinson (1979) - states that "it has been estimated that the rate of turnover of expatriate executives of U.S. firms may be as high as 30%" (Business International Research Report, 1970:1). No indication is given in this report as to where these estimates originate from. (In view of the year of publication of the report, it could well be Henry's article, which is discussed below). Besides in my opinion an *estimate* of the turnover of *American* expatriates *in the sixties* can hardly be considered a valid source of *present* general expatriate failure figures. A second study mentioned by Zeira and Banai, Edwards (1978), quotes Gary Lloyd, director of the Business Council for International Understanding: "Lloyd tells of one firm with a hospital management contract which experienced a failure rate of 120% that by last January had jumped to 142%" (Edwards, 1978:42). How can we explain an expatriate failure rate above 100%? It turns out that in this article expatriate failure rates are annualized. Edwards comes up with a second example where more than half of the expatriate construction team in Saudi Arabia had returned within two months, resulting in an annualized expatriate failure rate of 368%!! Of course, we cannot compare these figures with studies that measure expatriate failure rates as the percentage of expatriates returning before their contract expires. Quite apart from this, however, these examples are too idiosyncratic to base general statements on about expatriate failure rates. Indeed, the same goes for Harris and Moran (1979), who discuss two multinational corporations working in Iran in the late seventies that reported premature return rates of 50 and 85% respectively of the Americans they had sent to Iran. In later editions of the same book Harris and Moran no longer refer to these studies. The fourth reference mentioned by Zeira and Banai, Prasad and Shetty (1976:113), claims very high expatriate failure rates (approximately 80%) for American executives in Japan in the early sixties, without however mentioning the source of these claims. Finally, Torbiörn (1982:44) states that 25% of the expatriates in the (Swedish) companies he studied returned home before the end of their contracts. Interestingly, Zeira and Banai ascribe to Torbiörn the statement that 257 - perhaps a misreading of 25%? - of the 639 expatriates returned prematurely.

## Diving back into the sixties

To summarize: so far we have not found any solid empirical foundation for the claim that expatriate failure rates lie in the region of 25-40% or even higher, except for the modest support provided by Torbiörn's study, which puts the failure rate of *Swedish* expatriates at 25%. The only study that provided solid empirical and verifiable results was Tung's, which suggests that 93% of American multinationals have expatriate failure rates *below* 20%, with expatriate failure rates in West European and Japanese firms being even lower. But I haven't yet traced back all the sources of the article by Mendenhall and Oddou (1985), cited by so many other researchers. There are two references I have not dealt with yet: Misa & Fabricatore (1979) and Henry (1965). I will start with the latter.

As far as I have been able to trace **Henry's** (1965) article on "What Business can Learn from Peace Corps Selection and Training" is the first piece to mention expatriate

failure rates. It is an important one, as the two most crucial articles in this field (Tung, 1981 and Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985) both refer to it. It is the reason that quite a number of articles (most of them with Mendenhall & Oddou's article as an intermediate) claim that expatriate failure rates have fluctuated between 25-40% *since 1965*, the year Henry's article was published. Henry states "It has been estimated that about 30 percent of the people sent overseas by American companies are mistakes, and have been - *or should have been* - sent home" (Henry, 1965:17, emphasis added, AH). In a footnote Henry admits that "I have no precise, comprehensive statistical basis for this 30 percent figure, but from the more or less informal data I have been able to obtain it seems to be a conservative estimate." More or less informal data can hardly be considered solid proof for an expatriate failure rate of 30% in 1965. For our purpose, however, there is one additional and rather serious problem associated with using this estimate as a source when discussing expatriate failure rates. The 30% given by Henry includes not only employees who have been sent or who have returned home (the way expatriate failure is measured in all other publications) but also employees that *should have been* sent home (but were not). So the "actual" expatriate failure rate as it is measured in all other articles (premature reentry) might lie anywhere between 0 and 30% in Henry's article.

**Misa and Fabricatore**, two employees of an American firm of management consultants, published a short article on "Return on investment of overseas personnel" in *Financial Executive*. In this article they say that "A recent review of the overseas operations of 245 multinational corporations concludes that 'the adjustment problems of Americans abroad are severe'" (Misa & Fabricatore, 1979:42). Unfortunately the authors do not provide any clues as to which review they are citing (it could even be the one by Tung, the results of which were presented in 1978). However, a second quotation from this article is far more important: "Even when things were going right for expatriate managers overseas in the glorious days prior to the devaluation of the dollar and closing of some of the beneficial tax advantages, the premature return rate on foreign assignments ranged from 25 to 40 percent." The glorious days Misa & Fabricatore are referring to are probably the days before the collapse of the Bretton Woods system in 1971. This collapse led to a downwards fluctuating dollar, which did not stabilize until 1978/1979 (Samuelson, 1985: 885). The period Misa & Fabricatore are referring to with respect to their expatriate failure rates is therefore most likely the sixties. Could this then be the source of all of these references on expatriate failure rates, both for U.S. companies and in general, right through to 1994? Two management consultants claiming, out of the blue, that in the glorious past (the 1960s) American expatriate failure rates were 25-40%? It seems unbelievable, and yet this is the earliest publication that comes up with these percentages and the only one that does not refer to others to substantiate them.

Evidence that this figure is generally and unquestioningly accepted can be found in the large number of references to it via Mendenhall and Oddou's (1985) article. This general acceptance is nicely illustrated by Borg (1988), who mentions, without references, in a commercial edition of his dissertation that "The general opinion among American writers is that the failure rate, i.e. premature return of expatriates, fluctuates between 25 and 40%" (Borg, 1988:31).

## Mendenhall and Oddou revisited

Amusingly, while almost every author who has contributed to the literature on expatriate management since 1986 has referred to "Mendenhall and Oddou's" 25-40% expatriate

failure rate, Mendenhall & Oddou themselves came up with different figures in later publications. An article which they wrote in 1987 with Dunbar puts the failure rate of American expatriates at 20-50%. The reference to Henry has been omitted, but Misa & Fabricatore and Tung were retained, the latter inappropriately. Other references were added. The first was their own article from 1985, which simply duplicates the references to Misa & Fabricatore and Tung and adds an indirect reference to Henry. We have already criticized three other references -- Copeland & Griggs (1985), Desatnick & Bennett (1978) and Lanier (1979) -- for mentioning completely unsubstantiated figures. The reference to Torbiörn can be considered useful, as he indeed mentions an expatriate failure rate of 25%. But the reference to Zeira and Banai only duplicates another three references and on top of that adds some very doubtful and country-specific studies that for the most part do not even mention expatriate failure rates in the 20-50% range.

So we see that Mendenhall and Oddou themselves gave up the idea of 25-40% expatriate failure rates, while still claiming that these rates were very high. Or at least they did so until their next article, in 1988: "The Overseas Assignment: A Practical Look". In this article they claim that "It has been estimated that approximately 20 percent of personnel sent abroad return prematurely from an overseas assignment" (Mendenhall & Oddou, 1988:78). In a footnote they refer to Tung, which can still be considered inappropriate. Even stranger in this case, however, is their reference to Misa & Fabricatore, Copeland & Griggs and Torbiörn, who put expatriate failure rates at 25-40%, 20-50% and 25% respectively, all of these above and mostly way off the approximate 20% Mendenhall and Oddou now embrace. It looks as if they have changed their ideas without, however, changing their references. Finally, in a book written in collaboration with Black and Gregersen in 1992, Mendenhall retained this 20% expatriate failure rate, still referring to Tung and Misa & Fabricatore. The authors do, however, come up with one new reference, namely Baker & Ivancevich (1971), which is probably a remnant of one of the first author's previous publications (Black, 1988). We already noted above that Baker and Ivancevich do not mention expatriate failure rates at all in this publication.

## Brewster's explanations

There is one publication in this field, Brewster (1991), which I did not include in figure 1 because it refers to more than half of the other publications mentioned in the figure, making it too complicated and difficult to read. As has become "traditional" in this field, Brewster's book contains some incorrect references (e.g. citing Tung, 1981, as mentioning 20-50% expatriate failure rates) and a very large number of duplicate references (e.g. Robinson and Business International; Murray & Murray -who are also misquoted- and Tung; Kobrin and Lanier; Mendenhall & Oddou and Henry, Misa & Fabricatore, and Tung, etc.). Brewster is the *first one*, however, to note that "in most cases it is unclear where the figures originate" (Brewster, 1991:85) and states that "in general more solidly research-based studies show that the situation might not be quite that bad" (ibid.). Brewster cites a number of recent research-based estimates on expatriate failure rates (Hamill, 1989; Tung, 1982; and Brewster, 1988), see my conclusions for a description of the first and last of these studies) that suggest that expatriate failure rates may be much lower than previous estimates have indicated. He offers a number of explanations for this difference:

- First, expatriate failure rates may have declined over time. We would expect MNCs to learn from their mistakes and to pay more attention to careful selection and training,

which might reduce expatriate failure rates. However, since Tung - who conducted the only solid empirical study in this field - already found very low expatriate failure rates for European and Japanese multinationals in the late seventies, this explanation can hardly be sufficient.

- Second, different industries and different nationalities may have different expatriate failure rates. Many of the studies referred to in this article deal with American companies (although this is not always stated explicitly). From Tung's research we have learned that expatriate failure rates of American companies are probably higher than those of European and Japanese companies. Recent studies that focusing on European companies should therefore find lower expatriate failure rates than older studies that involving American companies. However, Tung's research also suggests that even American companies have much lower expatriate failure rates than claimed by other publications. Unfortunately, I cannot assess the influence of industry, because the vast majority of earlier studies do not in any way indicate the origin of the figures, let alone state in which industry these figures were found.
- This leaves us with a third, and possibly far more important explanation: methodological differences. The vast majority of publications discussed above do not present any original data at all. The authors simply refer to other publications which in a large number of cases, also do not mention research results, referring in turn to yet other publications. Except for the studies by Tung and Torbiörn and a few very idiosyncratic studies (Harris & Moran, 1979 and Edwards, 1978), those studies that do provide us with "original" figures either state these figures *without any* foundation or say something like "current studies suggest" or "it is estimated". These figures might just as well be based on very rough estimates or on only one respondent. Furthermore, I consider it very likely that estimates such as "about one-third", "about a quarter" and "between one-fifth and half of the group" have been converted into 33%, 25% and 20-50% respectively, giving these figures a precision not present in the original estimate. [An actual illustration of this process is given in the publication by Harvey, who refers to Lanier's "about one third" as 33%.] All in all, I can heartily agree with Brewster's suggestion that "It may be that failure rates have never been as high as the earlier estimates" (Brewster, 1988:87)

## Conclusions

In view of the *very, very* limited number of solid empirical studies in this field, my suggestion would be to refrain from any exact figures on expatriate failure rates - measured as premature reentry - in American and Japanese MNCs until at least one solid large-scale empirical study has been conducted on this subject. The only thing we can say with respect to Tung's study is that failure rates among American expatriates are generally higher than failure rates among West European and Japanese expatriates. But then, this study dates back to the late seventies and I would expect some changes to have occurred in the last 15 years.

Although not overwhelming, there is some empirical evidence with regard to expatriate failure rates in West European and notably British firms. Tung's assertion that the majority (59%) of West European firms had expatriate failure rates below 5% is supported by three recent studies. Brewster's (1988) study of 25 West European (British, Dutch, German, Swedish and French) firms showed that 18 of them (72%) had expatriate

failure rates below 5%, nine even below 1%. Of the remaining seven, only one had more than a 7% failure rate. Hamill (1989) reports that all seven (British) firms in his survey had expatriate failure rates below 5%. Scullion's (1991) survey of 45 companies (40 British, 5 Irish) found that only 10% of these firms had expatriate failure rates above 5%. So we can state with some confidence that West European and notably British expatriate failure rates lie somewhere around 5% on average, which is actually very reasonable. Although I do not have any material on failure in domestic assignments to serve as the basis of comparison, I can hardly imagine that domestic failure rates are much lower than 5%. So may we please see an end to the claim of high expatriate failure rates except when backed by solid empirical evidence.

This article revealed that there is very little empirical proof for the persistent claim of high expatriate failure rates when measured as premature returns. The discussion above, however, does not imply that expatriate failure is not a subject worthy of further attention. I must emphasize the importance of research on expatriate failure and international mobility in a broader sense. With regard to expatriate failure, such research would involve using a much broader definition of failure, including underperformance and repatriate failure as defined in the introduction. It would also mean paying more attention to the *reasons* for failure, which then draws in variables such as selection & recruitment procedures, cross-cultural training, cultural novelty and family situation (a.o. dual-career couples). In my opinion, the model presented by Forster in this journal (Forster, 1992) would be a very good starting point for this kind of research.

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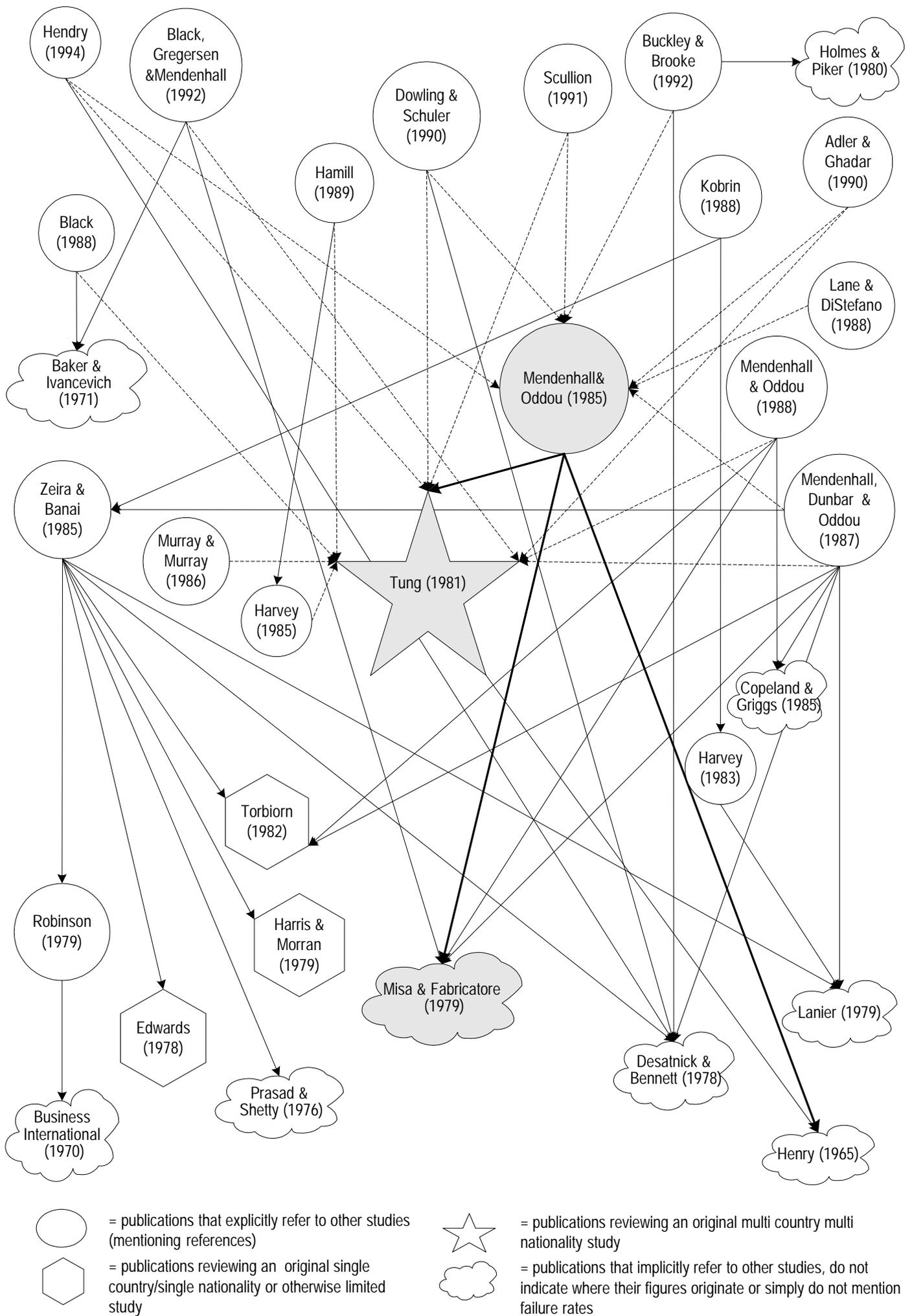
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<sup>1</sup> Please note that my criticism below only concerns the way in which the various authors handle data and references with regard to expatriate failure rates. It **does not** extend to their research efforts as such, which are - in some cases - extremely valuable.

<sup>2</sup> All these publications refer to the same study, the results of which are summarized in table 1 with regard to expatriate failure rates .



The figure shows the various publications in more or less chronological order, with the most recent publications at the top.

The size of the symbols is adjusted to the names within and does not have any special significance, except in the case of Tung (1981), Mendenhall & Oddou (1985) and Misa & Fabricatore (1979) where size indicates importance.