



European J. of International Management

ISSN online: 1751-6765 - ISSN print: 1751-6757

<https://www.inderscience.com/ejim>

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DOI: [10.1504/EJIM.2024.10064330](https://doi.org/10.1504/EJIM.2024.10064330)

Article History:

Received: 27 April 2023

Last revised: 10 April 2024

Accepted: 18 April 2024

Published online: 05 July 2024

When the going gets tougher: international assignments, external shocks and the factor of gender

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Abstract: Job Embeddedness (JE) theory proposes that higher levels of an individual's perceived on-the-job and off-the-job embeddedness – measured using the key dimensions of *fit*, *links* and *sacrifices* – lead to stronger ties to the organisation and community. Consequently, mounting evidence from past research suggests that embeddedness has a mitigating effect on turnover intention when shocks occur. Yet, most previous insights focus on male expatriates, neglecting gender differences from female workers. With data collected from 288 expatriates in the United Kingdom (UK) and using Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA), various JE configurations are identified which reduce female/male expatriates' intentions to turnover after a significant shock experience abroad. By showing how and why the number and type of shocks and the effective pattern of JE changes between genders, the ongoing debate towards a more gender-specific understanding on what mitigates or facilitates turnover intentions is pushed forward. Implications and limitations are discussed.

Keywords: configurations; external shocks; female expatriates; gender differences; international assignments; on-the-job embeddedness; off-the-job embeddedness; turnover intentions; QCA; host country.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows: Sperber, S. and Linder, C. (2024) 'When the going gets tougher: international assignments, external shocks and the factor of gender', *European J. International Management*, Vol. 23, No. 4, pp.537–567.

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This paper is a revised and expanded version of a paper entitled 'When Does Job Embeddedness Protect Against Shocks? A Gender Perspective on Working Abroad' presented at 'AoM Annual Meeting of the Academy of Management', Boston, MA (USA), 4–8 August 2023.

1 Introduction

One defining element of the early 21st century is migration (Hajro et al., 2023; Kindleysides et al., 2013). While migration numbers have never been as high as today, forecasts predict that migration will increase further up until 2050 (Dao et al., 2021). Among those on the move is a growing number of female expatriates (i.e., highly skilled female workers who decide to go abroad (Tharenou, 2015)). To work successfully in a new cultural setting requires expatriates to adjust to a new life situation (Froese and Peltokorpi, 2013) and to settle in the new community (Chen and Shaffer, 2017). This is a complicated and fragile endeavour, which often turns out to be considerably different for female and male expatriates. Starting with the reasons to expatriate (Shortland, 2016) to the adjustment processes in the host country (Koveshnikov et al., 2014), coping with cultural shocks (Cole and McNulty, 2011), family responsibilities abroad (Rubenstein et al., 2020), dealing with work-gender-related stereotypes (Bader et al., 2018), building new identities (Janssens et al., 2006), achieving career goals abroad (Shortland and Altman, 2011), and eventually reasons for repatriation (Insch et al., 2008) – these represent only some examples of matters known to be widely different between women and men.

Yet given this distinctiveness, both women and men share a considerable turnover rate linked to their foreign work assignments (Kraimer et al., 2012; Sender et al., 2018; Tharenou and Caulfield, 2010). For provoking turnover, situations when expatriates face external shocks are especially critical. As summarised by Lee and Mitchell (1994, p.51), '(a) shock is a particular, jarring event that initiates the psychological analyses involved in quitting a job'. Such unexpected event causes individuals to reassess their life and/or work situation, often including considerations of leaving both employment and host country (Burton et al., 2010; Hussain and Deery, 2018). Hence, shocks are commonly comprehended as 'push forces' on an individual which trigger turnover deliberations (Burton et al., 2010; Maertz and Kmita, 2012).

A considerable amount of research emphasises the potential of JE to protect against repercussions from shocks and mitigate the push forces out of an assignment (Hussain and Deery, 2018; Sender et al., 2018). In a nutshell, JE captures the integrated forces that keep employees stuck or embedded in their jobs (Lee et al., 2014; Mitchell et al., 2001;

Mitchell and Lee, 2001). Hence, it is believed that JE has a contrary effect to shocks which can push individuals into turnover deliberations, by functioning as a 'pull force' on individuals, holding them in their organisation abroad (Hom et al., 2009). Consequently, research proposes that higher levels of JE should mitigate turnover intention (Crossley et al., 2007; Lee et al., 2004; Sender et al., 2018).

However, this line of research often ignores the fact that embeddedness depends on personal circumstances, subjective fit, and an individual's capacity to build links to fellow employees (Mitchell et al., 2001). Therefore, there is not only one 'right' form of being embedded. Previous research has intensively examined how career models differ for women and men, i.e., in terms of aspired leadership positions (e.g., Grove et al., 2011), career planning specificities (e.g., Jung and Takeuchi, 2016) and the motivations underlying expatriation (e.g., Shortland, 2016; Tharenou, 2008). Consequently, the underlying basis upon which expatriates construct their unique JE varies between genders. As a result, distinct patterns of JE are anticipated which best fit their individual selves. This, overall, turns embeddedness into a complex, gender-sensitive and multicausal social process: it unfolds its effectiveness relative to an individual's interaction, experience and sense of belonging to the new organisation and community abroad. While today, evidence has mounted on women's unique challenges and experiences before, during and after international assignments (e.g., Shortland, 2016, 2021; Traavik and Richardson, 2010), these insights have so far not found their way into JE theory. Instead, the dominant theory up to now ignores evidence on differences in gender-specific embeddedness, which has severe implications for the individual's feelings of being a good match with the organisation, the culture of the host country and the people abroad. Yet, these aspects are decisive in terms of how effective embeddedness can protect against shocks. When one comprehends female and male expatriates as sharing the same pattern of embeddedness, exploring opportunities to further develop the JE theory in a gender-sensitive way are missed. Conceptually, JE theory is sufficiently sophisticated to capture a plurality of meaningful forms of embeddedness. However, research often misses the possibility of crafting better explanatory theories. This is because the question of *why* (i.e., why female/male expatriates are embedded in one specific context) and the question of *how* (i.e., how different forms of embeddedness protect against different forms of shocks) cannot be answered without taking a gender-specific perspective. In result, the current state of literature presents profound knowledge on gender-specific embeddedness differences; yet we still must rely on one-fits-all theories and general Human Resource (HR) policies, which do not account for the different experiences female and male expatriates gain abroad. Moreover, a fine-grained theory could help to adjust HR initiatives according to gender needs, which would strengthen expatriates' capability to cope with shocks. Such knowledge allows businesses to retain highly qualified international workers. Similarly, a highly detailed and differentiated theorising approach would allow the development of gender-sensitive HR policies with strong support potential for those going through the actual event and the aftermath of shocks. To encourage this line of theorising, this study contributes insights by answering the following vital and to-date unaddressed research questions: *Do different JE configurations protect female versus male expatriates against the negative impact of external shocks? If so, are there any stable patterns of embeddedness that reduce female/male expatriates' turnover intentions after a significant shock experience abroad?*

To explore these questions, this configurational study adopts an interpretative approach using QCA. This method enables the identification of configurations of conditions which lead to a specific outcome. With this methodological approach, new insights are obtained by exploring distinct configurations instead of testing specific hypotheses. This combinatory research approach is decisive for this study: while for instance moderation analysis reveals net effect estimates as result, such analysis of net effects is incapable of doing the complexity of the JE construct justice. JE is frequently – and erroneously – perceived as a monolithic concept, whereas, in reality, it constitutes a synthesis of interrelated factors. Hence, a nuanced examination of its individual factors is requisite for a comprehensive understanding of JE. Moderation analysis regards one factor and suggests that elements of the JE construct are additive, are not necessary and/or sufficient, are normal distributed, and views variables in isolation, etc. All those assumptions, which apply to moderation analysis, are not mirrored by the JE theory. Consequently, the application of QCA emerges as the most suitable approach for identifying various, and more significantly, distinct patterns of JE which result (or do not result) in turnover intention after expatriates experience shocks. Overall, this method is increasingly emerging in top-tier management journals (e.g., Lewellyn and Muller-Kahle, 2022; Ribeiro-Navarrete et al., 2023; Villani et al., 2023). Specifically, it is elaborated how JE should be configured to serve as an effective buffer against external shocks. This approach allows the uncovering of similarities and discrepancies across genders, pointing out those JE patterns which are effective for women and how they differ from those of men (e.g., number of shocks, nature of the shock experience). Moreover, the generic claim that it buffers shocks – thus, mitigates their negative effect – is relativised by specifically identifying when this applies to female and male expatriates. With these findings, a long overdue gender perspective is added to JE theory. This has special relevance for HR practitioners when attempting to build and maintain a highly talented workforce, especially when supporting employees to cope with shocks.

2 Job embeddedness theory and shocks

2.1 Job embeddedness theory

JE is often compared to strands in a ‘web’ or ‘net’ in which a person can become ‘stuck’ (Mitchell et al., 2001). In its core assumption, individuals with a more significant number of strands become more enmeshed in this web of embedding forces and, thus, experience more difficulties in leaving their job (Zhang et al., 2012). On the question of why one remains in a specific job, Mitchell et al. (2001) proposed a dual focus on an individual’s professional embeddedness (e.g., relationships with supervisor and co-workers, and good career prospects) and social environment embeddedness (e.g., relationships with local friends and participation in local communities). This so-called *on-the-job embeddedness* and *off-the-job embeddedness* combines psychological, social and financial factors in three key dimensions – that is, *fit*, *links* and *sacrifices* – which binds an individual to a job and an organisation (Hom et al., 2009; Mitchell et al., 2001). The *fit* dimension expresses the perceived compatibility of an individual’s personal skills, knowledge, values, culture and career goals with the requirements of the organisation and the community. JE theory proposes that the better the perceived on-the-job and off-the-job fit, the stronger the ties to the organisation and the community (Lee et al., 2004). *Links*

represent an individual's connectedness to other people; such ties describe the social web of attachments, which differs in the number of relationships, their strength, and emotional quality. The more an individual is bound to colleagues, principals, friends and other groups, the more likely it is for this person to remain in the organisation (Friedman and Holtom, 2002). Finally, *sacrifices* represent the psychological and material costs of leaving the organisation and community abroad – that is, giving up habits, a familiar environment, friends and regular contact with colleagues and peers. High (expected) sacrifices increase the likelihood for one to stay in an organisation and community (Zhang et al., 2012). With these properties, the JE theory consists of a 2×3 matrix: on-the-job and off-the-job factors, each with three underlying dimensions of fit, links and sacrifices. Researchers have repeatedly used this theory to explain the sudden unplanned reaction of international assignees after sudden events, such as (unexpected) shocks (Chen and Shaffer, 2017; Froese et al., 2021; Tharenou and Caulfield, 2010).

2.2 Buffering effect of job embeddedness on shocks

Leaving a specific job's social, psychological and financial situation is a crucial strategy for coping with shock experiences. This claim has been supported by prior research which widely suggests that (high) JE can be an effective measure against the (negative) impact of shock experiences (Burton et al., 2010; Holtom et al., 2005; Kraimer et al., 2012). With the 'unfolding model of voluntary employee turnover', Lee and Mitchell (1994) introduced a fundamental approach for understanding the effect of shock events on employees' decision to leave. In fact, this model and the JE theory complement each other: while the first describes a net or web of shocks which lead to a decision process that potentially results in (voluntary) turnover, JE theory helps to explain the net or web of forces that embeds employees in their organisations and communities. Prior research has already jointly applied both concepts to explain how JE buffers shocks (e.g., Burton et al., 2010; Holtom and Inderrieden, 2006); this has, however, predominantly occurred in regression-based approaches, not with a configurational method.

In terms of shocks, two dimensions can be evaluated: the individual's direct experience with the shock event and the impact(s) arising from external comparisons. This pertains to individuals' tendency to compare their own circumstances with those unaffected (i.e., pondering, 'Why did this shock event impact me and not others?'); this dimension is important as the sense of inequity stemming from being affected often extends beyond the immediate impact of the shock event itself. Overall, shocks provoke psychological analyses of the status quo (Kulik et al., 2012) and commonly occur on three different levels: *collective shocks* concern a wider population. As a collective phenomenon, an individual shares the shock experience with the organisational members and community, though it affects individuals in unique ways (Koveshnikov et al., 2022). Hence, one's personal shock experience can differ significantly from someone else's, depending on how the shock is perceived. This type includes events such as environmental disasters, disease outbreaks, financial crises (e.g., recession, inflation, political instability, terrorism), crime rates or hostile situations abroad and other safety or health-related risks (Gannon and Paraskevas, 2019; Kim et al., 2022; McNulty et al., 2019). Eventually, it is irrelevant whether the shock occurs in the expatriates' host or home country; decisive for the shock event is that it provokes major distress for the expatriate. However, it is important to note that collective shocks apply to a larger group of the population, but not the whole (meaning there remains a part of the population

which is not affected – and shocked – by this event). Individuals still hold the chance of escaping the affected group (i.e., by changing the group within the overall population; e.g., by escaping a war zone).

On a meso-level, *private shocks* are conceptualised as unexpected negative events taking place in an expatriate's private life, including events concerning family members, relatives and/or close friends (e.g., financial issues, health issues, relationship issues or problems in the family situation, criminal acts on family members or close friends, negative ramifications through unemployment). In consequence, these shocks induce a significant amount of distress for the expatriate as well. Private shocks differ from collective shocks as they concern one or more individuals in an expatriate's network to whom close emotional ties exist, but they leave the wider social surroundings untouched. Finally, *individual shocks* take place on a micro level, exclusively affecting the respective individual exposed to the shock event. These shocks include, among others, personal health issues, personal financial crises, cultural shocks, work-related negative events (e.g., unexpected negative performance evaluation, lower-than-expected raise or missed promotion), crime or personal loss (Burton et al., 2010; Caligiuri and Lazarova, 2002). These shock events leave the individual to suffer in relative isolation, as the expatriate needs to cope with them on her or his own. While combinations of JE are capable of mitigating against shock experiences, variance in embeddedness should alter its effectiveness. This raises questions about roots and dimensions of variance in embeddedness.

2.3 *Female and male expatriates' work identity abroad*

While JE theory considers some aspects of individuality in idiosyncratic embeddedness perceptions which can be subject to individual and contextual variations (e.g., one expatriate's fit and sacrifice perceptions might deviate from another's), a large amount of research still treats expatriates as a 'homogeneous entity' (Suutari et al., 2018). There is long-standing critique on this perception as this treatment leads to inappropriate assessment of variance in embeddedness. Whereas a stream of expatriate research on gender-related issues has continually been developed further (for instance, on fit- and link-related issues; e.g., Caligiuri and Lazarova, 2002), studies on gender effects in JE remain rare. One stable observation demanding further attention is that expatriates face gender-specific challenges when embarking on an expatriation journey (Selmer and Leung, 2003; cf. Haslberger, 2010). These challenges are likely to affect how one is embedded, as they can have direct impact on the dimensions of perceived fit, links and sacrifices. Hence, these gender differences can alter the JE construct as well as how effective it protects against shock experiences. Yet, also from an individual view, reactions to shocks might not only differ on a gender basis, but also on a personal basis – that is, what can be a shock for one person might not be a shock for another. Hence, we must view the identity perspective on an individual level and must not treat women and men as a coherent, homogeneous group by default.

From an identity perspective, gender-specific challenges differently force female and male expatriates to strive for fit, to build links and to consider sacrifices they must make for their career. Associated challenges are commonly based on (1) *gender-constructed differences*, (2) *organisational hierarchy* and (3) *culture* (Adler, 1984, 1987), which build the main ground for establishing gender identities in international settings. Such settings are predominantly male-dominated (Baruch et al., 2016), which shapes category

expectations for expatriates (Zuckerman, 1999). Al Ariss et al. (2014) outlined several categories that attract discriminatory practices when an individual deviates too far from the category expectations. In this regard, categories raise expectations on a prototypical expatriate in international settings. In such settings, female expatriates must construct themselves by drawing attention to or away from the prototype. Hence, being a woman, a manager and a foreigner within the local context is the result of a permanent discursive process in which categories create stereotypical demands; these demands force a female expatriate to decide on how distinct she can, wants to or should be (Janssens et al., 2006). More specifically, categories impose imperatives on how one should look or behave, and which properties, experiences and skills one should display (Al Ariss et al., 2014). Female and male expatriates establish their individual identity within a dialectical relationship and the discursive structure in which they are situated. As the general structure is not gender-neutral but carries a male Bias, it forces women to position themselves in terms of similarity/distinctiveness in relation to the male prototype. Even though men similarly develop an expatriate identity abroad, this process looks significantly different than women's as men can (more) easily expose their similarity to the category standard of a male expatriate (Negro et al., 2011; Zuckerman, 1999). This dialectical relationship with male-dominated prototypes both constrains and enables the construction of the individual self – both for women and men – abroad (Janssens et al., 2006). However, this very identity severely affects the perceived fit to foreign norms, values and culture, as well as the links and sacrifices. Hence, it potentially affects JE in a significant way.

In the domain of *gender-constructed differences*, female expatriates must navigate through stereotype-filled contexts (Stangor, 2009), facing generalisations about their skills, capabilities and potential based on their distinctiveness from the prototypical male expatriate (Fischlmayr, 2002). Such environments provoke fear of discrimination, associated with a sense of lacking acceptance and limited career progression (McPhail et al., 2016). This fear has effects on women's experiences abroad: for instance, female expatriates tend to accommodate for potential negative ramifications by downgrading their personal career aspirations to lower organisational positions. As Selmer and Leung (2003) found, this is despite having similar profiles concerning organisational tenure and work experiences, both in international and domestic terms. Fear of constant stereotyping forces women to build their identity by avoiding adjusting to or accepting existing stereotypes. This dialectical relationship to an audience's expectations abroad provokes distinct emotional bonds towards an organisation and a community for women as it does for men (Koveshnikov et al., 2014). Since men are more likely to fit into the prototypical expatriate category, they face different – and mostly lower – challenges in dealing with stereotypes.

Regarding the *organisational hierarchy*, Harris and Brewster (1999) concluded that expatriates' networks are mostly male-dominated and, thus, reflect a male bias for network membership. Being part of a network results from the quantity and quality of links to other members (Shortland, 2011), while network strength is directly connected to embeddedness. The JE construct measures the degree of embeddedness as a function of strong on-the-job and off-the-job links to network members (Crossley et al., 2007). Prior evidence shows that male-dominated networks are the norm and tend to favour male members (Kollinger, 2005). As the dominating practice of selecting and promoting foreign managers takes place through closed informal systems, women often face unsubstantiated but persistent bias when pursuing global careers (Forster, 1999). Consequently, a female expatriate's identity results from positioning herself in reference

to male-dominated hierarchical structures, as she must navigate through those structures to gain access to (relevant) networks abroad. A female identity embedded in a male-biased network is – to some extent – an alien element with distinct embeddedness characteristics compared to male expatriates within the same network.

Research on *culture* and female expatriates has debunked the myth that culture per se limits the effectiveness of female expatriates (Adler, 1984, 1987; Janssens et al., 2006). In some cultures, advantages are seen in being a woman, including higher visibility (Taylor and Napier, 1996) or gains through – as Napier and Taylor (2002) call it – ‘using femininity’ to reach specific goals. For JE, culture means that women and men enjoy unique and distinct opportunities abroad to position themselves, find gender-specific strategies to deal with hurdles and to obtain goals. Hence, culture not only provides the necessary norms and values (Stoermer et al., 2021) but also the grounds on which expatriates experience fit, the kind of links they can establish and the sacrifices they must accept when leaving their host country. In summary, these considerations support the notion that a one-fits-all embeddedness pattern, independent of gender, does not exist. Rather, embeddedness is context-dependent and consequently emerges based on how one defines the personal identity abroad. Therefore, we must expect different gender-specific patterns of JE which can potentially serve as protection against shocks in unique and distinct ways.

3 Method

3.1 Qualitative comparative analysis

As today’s predominantly used methodologies are not applicable to account for relations of causal complexity, ‘(the) introduction of the Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) configurational approach has led to a reinvigoration of configurational theory that embraces causal complexity explicitly’ (Misangyi et al., 2017, p.255). For this study, the application of QCA rests on the assumption that in order to compare gender-specific patterns, the relationship between the 2×3 JE dimensions are ‘frequently better understood in terms of set-theoretic relations rather than correlations’ (Fiss, 2011, p.395). On-the-job and off-the-job embeddedness are interconnected and affect each other; hence, assessing one JE dimension detached from the other five dimensions is inappropriate and not expedient. The result of the set-theoretic approach identifies embeddedness configurations (i.e., combinations of embeddedness dimensions for both women and men under the condition of three different types of shocks). Clearly, the focus is not on testing net effects or proposing a nomological model with cause-effect chains. Instead, QCA allows us to uncover patterns of embeddedness and to compare those based on gender in order to identify the necessary conditions, sufficiency and distinct and joined elements between women’s and men’s embeddedness abroad. Methodologically, retention or turnover deliberations due to a shock experience are neither conceptualised as having one single cause (namely, being mono-causal), nor do embeddedness dimensions operate in isolation from each other (Fiss, 2007; Misangyi et al., 2017). Since non-linear effects are anticipated, it is expected that a specific embeddedness pattern which bounds one person to the job can trigger turnover for another (Furnari et al., 2021). By using the fuzzy set approach, which allows partial membership, we acknowledge that different degrees of embeddedness can exist that are equally meaningful.

3.2 Sampling strategy and sample characteristics

Sampling strategy: Following a common approach in related studies (e.g., Bader et al., 2018; McPhail et al., 2016), data was collected by drawing contact details from expatriate networks (e.g., ExpatInfoDesk, London Expat Network, ExpatNations, ExpatNetwork, ExpatFocus and two Meetup groups) and social media groups on LinkedIn. The search was limited to expatriates located in the UK (mainly in its capital London) to ensure similar context conditions. The participants took part in the survey study between May and June 2021. In total, 288 usable questionnaires were collected, with 106 (36.8%) being conducted from women and 182 (63.2%) from men.

Sample characteristics: The participants for this study hold 31 different nationalities, with German ($n = 34$, 11.8%), Italian ($n = 31$, 10.7%) and French ($n = 17$, 5.9%) nationality being the largest groups. The participants' age was 36.2 years ($SD = 8.23$) for female expatriates and 38.5 years ($SD = 11.26$) for male expatriates.¹ Group variation (i.e., the total variation between female and male expatriates), means, and the overall mean were measured. Women were significantly better educated in terms of education length (female mean = 17.82 vs. male mean = 15.65) and level (female mean = 6.00 vs. male mean = 5.55). A considerable difference existed in the tenure with the organisation abroad (female mean = 0.93 vs. male mean = 0.99). Male expatriates tended to have more co-workers (female mean = 12.31 vs. male mean = 18.32) and teams to oversee (female mean = 2.76 vs. male mean = 3.77). The results of this analytical step suggest that the motivation of moving to a foreign work destination indeed differs between genders. While considerable discrepancy was found in the motive of avoidance of unemployment risks (female mean = 2.09 vs. male mean = 1.54), no difference in career advancement intentions was detected (female mean = 3.67 vs. male mean = 3.67). The level of JE over all six dimensions shows only minor and no significant differences (see Table 1).

Table 1 Descriptive statistics and mean between female and male expatriates

	<i>Mean (women)</i>	<i>Mean (male)</i>	<i>Sum of squares between groups</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
<i>Personal characteristics</i>						
Age	38.780	39.930	41.553	1	0.486	0.487
Education years	17.820	15.650	147.734	1	8.164	0.005
Education level	6.000	5.550	6.351	1	6.519	0.012
Full time employment	0.930	0.990	0.101	1	3.862	0.051
Part time employment	0.070	0.010	0.101	1	3.862	0.051
Temporary employment	0.000	0.000	0.000	1	0.000	0.000
Trainee / apprenticeship	0.000	0.000	0.015	1	2.287	0.133
<i>Employment</i>						
How long have you been in your present job position?	3.516	2.590	26.726	1	1.551	0.215
How many co-workers do you interact with regularly?	22.822	23.039	1.470	1	0.002	0.965
How many co-workers are highly dependent on you?	12.311	18.324	1128.740	1	0.336	0.563
How many work teams/committees are you on?	2.756	3.765	31.799	1	2.881	0.092

Table 1 Descriptive statistics and mean between female and male expatriates (continued)

	<i>Mean (women)</i>	<i>Mean (male)</i>	<i>Sum of squares between groups</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
<i>Reasons for expatriation</i>						
Future career opportunities	3.670	3.670	0.000	1	0.000	1.000
Fear of restricted career opportunities	2.690	2.690	0.000	1	0.000	0.991
Normal career advancement pattern in my profession/job	2.670	3.120	6.351	1	4.637	0.033
Risk of unemployment in home country	2.090	1.540	9.434	1	6.739	0.010
Higher salary abroad	2.600	2.590	0.004	1	0.003	0.960
Professional development	3.980	4.130	0.699	1	0.617	0.433
Opportunities to realise own values and ideas	4.020	3.970	0.083	1	0.085	0.771
Thirst for adventure	4.330	3.930	5.045	1	5.520	0.020
Importance of the job itself	3.510	3.550	0.045	1	0.036	0.850
Personal challenge	4.110	4.240	0.482	1	0.451	0.503
Geographic location of the assignment	3.380	3.200	1.031	1	0.626	0.430
Family considerations	2.710	2.700	0.007	1	0.003	0.957
Encouragement from spouse or partner	2.640	2.580	0.136	1	0.054	0.816
Higher quality of living	2.980	2.690	2.653	1	1.399	0.239
Tax advantages	1.580	1.630	0.077	1	0.069	0.792
Other reasons (if applicable):	0.400	0.440	0.053	1	0.037	0.847
<i>Job embeddedness</i>						
On-the-job: Fit	5.417	5.444	0.024	1	0.016	0.900
On-the-job: Links	4.822	4.828	0.001	1	0.001	0.972
On-the-job: Sacrifices	4.022	4.314	2.653	1	1.266	0.262
Off-the-job: Fit	4.600	4.574	0.022	1	0.008	0.930
Off-the-job: Links	5.233	5.230	0.000	1	0.000	0.989
Off-the-job: Sacrifices	4.422	4.078	3.690	1	2.303	0.131

While attempting to target an equal gender distribution, fewer female than male responses were collected. However, the sample gender distribution was more balanced than the overall gender distribution of expatriates in the UK, which demonstrates an even higher male rate.

3.3 Measures

Outcome condition: Turnover intention is commonly defined as an individual's subjective probability to change the job – or leave a foreign assignment – within a certain period of time (Davies et al., 2019; Friedman and Holtom, 2002; Yuan et al., 2024). A validated scale was adopted (Valentine et al., 2006) which assesses thoughts on the subjective probability of leaving a foreign assignment. Hence, the withdraw intention was measured on a 7-point Likert scale using three items: 'I plan to leave this organisation as soon as possible' (mean = 2.49, SD = .56); 'I would be reluctant

(unwilling) to leave this organisation’ (reverse coded) (mean = 2.71, SD = .66) and ‘I often think about leaving this organisation’ (mean = 3.01, SD = .71) (Hussain and Deery, 2018). This self-reported measure sets the standard for turnover research as it is widely regarded ‘as [a] direct antecedent to and proxy for actual voluntary turnover behaviour’ (Wong and Cheng, 2020, p.1174).

Conditions: Job embeddedness: JE was measured in the dimensions of on-the-job embeddedness (i.e., the degree to which an individual is enmeshed in the organisation) and off-the-job embeddedness (i.e., relating to how entrenched an individual is in the community), both in the components of fit, links and sacrifices (Lee et al., 2004; Lee et al., 2014; Mitchell et al., 2001). Clinton et al.’s (2012) validated scale was adopted as it covers all relevant dimensions for the theorising and simultaneously ensures that the initial theory is holistically considered. Table 2 shows the items used, the construct dimensions and the scores per item.

Table 2 Job embeddedness items and construct validity

<i>Dimension and Items</i>	<i>Loadings</i>	<i>Cronbach’s Alpha</i>	<i>CR</i>	<i>AVE</i>
<i>Organisation-Fit</i>		0.719	0.865	0.764
[The organisation] provides me with a way of life that suits me	0.940***			
Overall, I fit very well in [the organisation]	0.848***			
<i>Organisation-Links</i>		0.698	0.857	0.752
My closest friends are in [the organisation]	0.854***			
Overall, I have strong ties with people throughout [the organisation]	0.754**			
<i>Organisation-Sacrifices</i>		0.654	0.744	0.619
I would miss the excitement that this job brings if I left	0.629ns			
There would be many things about [organisational] life that I would be sad to lose if I left	0.790**			
<i>Community-Fit</i>		0.893	0.934	0.824
The area where I am based right now is suitable for my family and friends	0.947***			
There is plenty to keep me happy off duty around here	0.779***			
<i>Community -Links</i>		0.778	0.894	0.810
Even if I decide to leave [the organisation] I would still live in the area where I am based at the moment	0.844***			
My family/partner has strong ties around the community where I am currently based	0.941***			
<i>Community-Sacrifices</i>		0.663	0.788	0.648
Leaving the area where I am currently based would mean many personal and/or family sacrifices	0.701**			
I would be very sad to leave the general community where I am based right now	0.549ns			

Notes: Scale adapted from Clinton et al. (2012); Responses were recorded on a 7-point scale with: 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree. Significance level ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < .0001$, ns = not significant. Factor loadings shown are standardised factor weights from CFA via robust weighted least squares estimation. CR = composite reliability. AVE = average variance extracted.

Shocks: Shocks are measured in the dimensions of collective, private and individual shocks as unexpected events that cause individuals to consider leaving the host country (Burton et al., 2010; Holtom et al., 2005). The time reference for the experienced shocks was set to five years prior to the data collection, meaning between May 2016 and April 2021. Existing standards were followed in coding the shocks (Burton et al., 2010; Maertz and Kmitta, 2012; Yang et al., 2020). For all events coded, the participants a) had to indicate if they have experienced any of these shocks (coded as 1 or 0), and b) had to qualify them on a 7-point Likert scale (anchored at 1 = ‘event has an extremely positive effect on my life situation’ and 7 = ‘event has an extremely negative effect on my life situation’). Similar to Burton et al. (2010), only negative shocks were considered. While evidence from prior research on turnover effects of positive shocks exists (e.g., new job offers as ‘pleasant’ shock event leading to voluntary turnover), both types of shocks are different in nature (i.e., we often aim for positive events, but try our best possible to avert any negative events). Also, negative events are more salient to individuals than positive ones (Oishi et al., 2007). The shock measure was created following Burton et al.’s (2010) suggestion. Additionally, the total number of negative events one had experienced was classified into the three dimensions listed above.

3.4 *Data calibration*

QCA requires data to be transformed into set membership values, which allow a decision on whether an observation fulfils the criteria of full non-membership that equals 0, or full membership that equals 1. The fuzzy set approach provides a further cross-over point for maximum ambiguity (Schneider and Wagemann, 2012). Two direct techniques to determine the qualitative anchors for scale measures were applied (Ragin, 2008). First, we draw on revalidated scale anchors as the threshold values using ordinal Likert scales for the six JE dimensions. The qualitative anchors were used (e.g., ‘strongly agree’, ‘neither agree nor disagree’ and ‘strongly disagree’) conceptually and directly to inform the calibration process (Chen and Tian, 2022; Fiss, 2011; Misangyi et al., 2017). To ensure robustness of the calibration process, we conducted a supplementary variation of threshold analysis (see Online Supplement A)² which suggests sufficient robustness within the range of 15% variation. It is further recommended that the conceptual anchors with the actual distribution of the sample are reconciled (Furnari et al., 2021; Misangyi et al., 2017). Hence, proper calibration values combine theoretical knowledge and empirical evidence (Schneider and Wagemann, 2012). The second calibration technique was a binary or crisp-set approach for the three levels of shocks. It was coded 1 (0 otherwise) when expatriates experienced at least one shock per category after controlling for the level of the shock’s negative quality. Table 3 summarises the calibration results.

Table 3 Set-membership calibration

Type of condition	Specification	Content	Set membership score	Calibration rule	Std. Deviation	Variance	Skewness (Std. Error)	Kurtosis (Std. Error)
Outcome	Turnover intention	Thoughts about subjective probability of leaving a foreign assignment	Fully in ≥ 7 Cross-over = 4 Fully out ≤ 1	Using 7-point- Likert scale anchors	0.057	0.623	-1.997 (0.175)	7.744 (0.347)
Organisational embeddedness	On-the-job: Fit	Perceived compatibility of an individual's personal skills, knowledge, values, culture, and career goals with the requirements of the organisation	Fully in ≥ 7 Cross-over = 4 Fully out ≤ 1	Using 7-point- Likert scale anchors	0.088	1.509	-1.456 (0.175)	3.465 (0.347)
	On-the-job: Links	Connectedness of an individual to other people in the organisation	Fully in ≥ 7 Cross-over = 4 Fully out ≤ 1	Using 7-point- Likert scale anchors	0.078	1.188	-0.576 (0.175)	0.523 (0.347)
	On-the-job: Sacrifices	Psychological and material costs of leaving the organisation	Fully in ≥ 7 Cross-over = 4 Fully out ≤ 1	Using 7-point- Likert scale anchors	0.105	2.140	-0.460 (0.175)	-0.242 (0.347)
Community embeddedness	Off-the-job: Fit	Perceived compatibility of an individual's personal skills, knowledge, values, culture, and career goals with the requirements of the Community	Fully in ≥ 7 Cross-over = 4 Fully out ≤ 1	Using 7-point- Likert scale anchors	0.116	2.593	-0.516 (0.175)	-0.530 (0.347)
	Off-the-job: Links	Connectedness of an individual to other people in the organisation	Fully in ≥ 7 Cross-over = 4 Fully out ≤ 1	Using 7-point- Likert scale anchors	0.086	1.442	-1.074 (0.175)	2.422 (0.347)

Table 3 Set-membership calibration (continued)

Type of condition	Specification	Content	Set membership score	Calibration rule	Std. Deviation	Variance	Skewness (Std. Error)	Kurtosis (Std. Error)
	Off-the-job: Sacrifices	Psychological and material costs of leaving the community	Fully in ≥ 7 Cross-over = 4 Fully out ≤ 1	Using 7-point- Likert scale anchors	0.096	1.771	-0.168 (0.175)	-0.069 (0.347)
Shocks	Collective	Collective shocks are shocks that are subsequently faced by a wider population	Fully = 1 Fully out = 0	Binary coded, if one event occurred that qualified as collective shock experiences, full membership was coded (1, 0 otherwise)	0.006	0.008	-0.245 (0.175)	2.745 (0.347)
	Private	Private shocks negative events which happen in the private life of an expatriates only	Fully = 1 Fully out = 0	Binary coded, if one event occurred that qualified as private shock experiences, full membership was coded (1, 0 otherwise)	0.006	0.008	-1.344 (0.175)	6.213 (0.347)
	Individual	Individual shocks are all those negative events that hit an expatriate alone	Fully = 1 Fully out = 0	Binary coded, if one event occurred that qualified as individual shock experiences, full membership was coded (1, 0 otherwise)	0.009	0.016	-0.777 (0.175)	6.016 (0.347)

3.5 Results of QCA

The self-identified binary-coded gender was used to separate female from male expatriates in the data. Based on this, four different sets of configurations were assessed: two sets for female expatriates (see Table 5) and two sets for male expatriates (see Table 6) to explain high turnover intention versus low turnover intention (i.e., retention) within one gender and across genders. This approach allows for the comparison of all four sets of configurations in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. All calculations were executed using the fsQCA 3.0 software.

3.5.1 Necessity condition analysis

A necessity logic implies that an outcome can only be achieved if a specific JE dimension is given (Hauff et al., 2021), either solely or in combination with shock event(s). The necessity of a condition is conventionally given if the consistency coefficient exceeds 0.9 (Greckhamer et al., 2018). Table 4 shows consistency coefficients that exceed this threshold for the *absence of off-the-job sacrifices* ($\square S_Sac$) on the *Low Turnover Intention* for female expatriates (consistency = 0.915) and *absence of private shocks* ($\square S_Private$) on the *Low Turnover Intention* for male expatriates (consistency = 0.931). As the absence of the necessary condition cannot be compensated for by other factors, it conversely must be assumed that a high sacrifice for female expatriates and a shock in male expatriates' private life triggers high turnover intentions. The necessity logic further entails that no embeddedness pattern exists which mitigates high sacrifices and shocks in one's private life. Interestingly, these necessary effects only appear when separating the complete data set between genders. This indicates that there is no condition necessary for *Low Turnover Intention* existing on the global level, while both genders in fact react differently to sacrifices and shocks.

3.5.2 Sufficient configurations

The sufficiency analysis was started from the truth tables. We followed the conventional approach and set the minimum case frequency benchmark ≥ 2 to rule out idiosyncratic cases (Fiss, 2007; Furnari et al., 2021; Schneider and Wagemann, 2012) and the minimum threshold for raw consistency to ≥ 0.8 (Furnari et al., 2021; Misangyi et al., 2017). Proportional reduction in inconsistency (RPI) was tested by setting the minimum requirement for RPI to the conventional ≥ 0.5 (Ragin, 2008). Configurations with lower RPI scores indicate inconsistency (Greckhamer et al., 2018, see Online Supplement B – Table A for the RPI statistics). Based on these comprehensive settings, we assessed truth table rows that met basic requirements and ran the configurational analysis (for truth tables, see Online Supplement B – Tables A and Table B).

Sufficient configurations for low turnover intention under the condition of three types of shocks: Under the condition of three types of shocks, four pathways to low turnover intention for female expatriates and six pathways for male expatriates were identified (see Table 5). The overall solution consistency was 0.871 for female and 0.869 for male expatriates. The solution coverage was 26.3% for female and 34.5% for male expatriates. Both values are conventionally seen as appropriate to comprehend the overall solution as significant and meaningful as both exceed the critical threshold of 0.8 (Ragin, 2008); thus, they are covering a sufficient percentage of the outcome (Schneider and Wagemann, 2012).

Table 4 Necessity condition analysis

	<i>Female expatriates</i>						<i>Male expatriates</i>					
	<i>High turnover intention</i>			<i>Low turnover intention</i>			<i>High turnover intention</i>			<i>Low turnover intention</i>		
	Consistency	Coverage		Consistency	Coverage		Consistency	Coverage		Consistency	Coverage	
O_FIT	0.664	0.445		0.637	0.658		0.731	0.626		0.637	0.459	
~O_FIT	0.490	0.467		0.463	0.680		0.368	0.547		0.481	0.600	
O_LINK	0.604	0.456		0.538	0.627		0.599	0.659		0.488	0.451	
~O_LINK	0.506	0.416		0.533	0.674		0.501	0.538		0.632	0.570	
O_SAC	0.574	0.431		0.551	0.639		0.611	0.635		0.532	0.464	
~O_SAC	0.519	0.429		0.509	0.648		0.484	0.551		0.582	0.557	
C_FIT	0.556	0.451		0.503	0.629		0.597	0.606		0.598	0.510	
~C_FIT	0.543	0.415		0.561	0.661		0.517	0.605		0.538	0.529	
C_LINK	0.576	0.484		0.441	0.572		0.648	0.651		0.496	0.419	
~C_LINK	0.491	0.363		0.602	0.686		0.421	0.499		0.586	0.583	
C_SAC	0.498	0.450		0.458	0.638		0.561	0.624		0.527	0.492	
~C_SAC	0.600	0.418		0.915	0.650		0.544	0.577		0.598	0.534	
S_GLOBAL	0.615	0.435		0.619	0.675		0.605	0.623		0.511	0.443	
~S_GLOBAL	0.540	0.479		0.481	0.658		0.459	0.528		0.565	0.546	
S_PRIVAT	0.233	0.640		0.175	0.739		0.251	0.813		0.207	0.563	
~S_PRIVAT	0.805	0.416		0.605	0.648		0.865	0.565		0.931	0.511	
S_INDIVc	0.551	0.444		0.518	0.642		0.574	0.657		0.457	0.439	
~S_INDIVc	0.556	0.428		0.552	0.654		0.510	0.528		0.643	0.559	

Table 5 Configuration for low intention to turnover under the condition of three types of shocks

		<i>Configurations</i>					
<i>Female Expatriates</i>	<i>Conditions</i>	<i>I(w)L</i>	<i>II(w)L</i>	<i>III(w)L</i>	<i>IV(w)L</i>		
<i>Organisational embeddedness</i>	On-the-job: Fit	○	●	●	○		
	On-the-job: Links	○	○	●	●		
	On-the-job: Sacrifices	○	○	●	●		
<i>Community embeddedness</i>	Off-the-job: Fit	●	●	●	●		
	Off-the-job: Links	○	○	○	●		
	Off-the-job: Sacrifices	○	○	○	○		
<i>Shocks</i>	Collective	●	●	○	○		
	Private	○	○	○	●		
	Individual	○	○	●	○		
Statistics	Raw coverage	0.083	0.062	0.102	0.084		
	Unique coverage	0.060	0.033	0.074	0.058		
	Consistency	0.875	0.864	0.923	0.834		
	Solution coverage	0.263					
	Solution consistency	0.871					
<i>Male Expatriates</i>	<i>Conditions</i>	<i>I(m)L</i>	<i>II(m)L</i>	<i>III(m)L</i>	<i>IV(m)L</i>	<i>V(m)L</i>	<i>VI(m)L</i>
<i>Organisational embeddedness</i>	On-the-job: Fit	●	●	○	○	○	●
	On-the-job: Links	●	●	○	●	○	●
	On-the-job: Sacrifices	●	—	●	○	○	○
<i>Community embeddedness</i>	Off-the-job: Fit	●	○	○	●	○	○
	Off-the-job: Links	●	●	●	●	●	●
	Off-the-job: Sacrifices	●	●	—	○	●	○
<i>Shocks</i>	Collective	—	○	●	●	●	●
	Private	○	○	○	○	○	○
	Individual	●	●	○	○	○	○
Statistics	Raw coverage	0.178	0.146	0.046	0.043	0.047	0.109
	Unique coverage	0.047	0.021	0.024	0.022	0.023	0.063
	Consistency	0.865	0.881	0.960	0.958	0.862	0.867
	Solution coverage	0.345					
	Solution consistency	0.869					

Notes: Central conditions are represented by ● (presence) and ○ (absence); indifference, i.e., either presence or absence of a condition, is denoted with —.

Following Ragin’s (2008) logic scheme to summarise the four (female) and six (male) pathways from a theoretical perspective, it can be stated that off-the-job fit is present in every female expatriate configuration. This indicates that while off-the-job fit is not required on a global level, it is indeed necessary when JE is differentiated according to gender. It is interpreted that low turnover intention after a shock is only observed when

female expatriates experience a good fit to their community. Only two configurations ($I(m)L$ and $IV(m)L$) out of six male pathways to low turnover intention depend on off-the-job fit, indicating that JE seems to play a less important – or at least not as necessary – role for mitigating shocks for male expatriates.

A further interesting finding is that male expatriates *need links, not fit*. Without off-the-job links, none of the different types of shocks can be mitigated by a male expatriate’s JE. It was found that off-the-job links are gender-specific prerequisites for low turnover intention. Links to the community are different than an individual sense of fit to the community (Mitchell et al., 2001), mainly when close ties to one or few individuals within the host country community exist but without the feeling of overall community fit. Hence, even though one might be an outsider in the community, some close ties already reduce men’s turnover intention after a shock experience.

For both genders, a) a relatively comprehensive embeddedness and b) the on-the-job dimension buffer individual shocks. Essentially, this necessitates more JE dimensions for both female and male expatriates to be protected against individual shocks than collective shocks. For example, $I(m)L$ requires all six JE dimensions to be given and $III(w)L$ at least four out of six dimensions to be effective. Moreover, individual shocks are mitigated by *the organisation, not by community embeddedness*. This is a constant finding across both genders.

Both genders share that JE can only buffer one shock, not two or more simultaneously occurring shocks. While in theory, female expatriates’ JE can protect against all three types of shocks, male expatriates’ JE is only effective against collective shocks and individual shocks but not against private shocks (see, e.g., configurations $III(w)H$ and $II(m)H$ in Table 6 for high turnover intention, which support this claim). A shock experience in the private life of a male expatriate is a prerequisite for the absence of low turnover intention.

Table 6 Configuration for high intention to turnover under the condition of three types of shocks

		<i>Configurations</i>				
<i>Female Expatriates</i>	<i>Conditions</i>	$I(w)H$	$II(w)H$	$III(w)H$	$IV(w)H$	$V(w)H$
<i>Organisational embeddedness</i>	On-the-job: Fit	○	●	○	●	●
	On-the-job: Links	○	○	●	○	○
	On-the-job: Sacrifices	○	○	○	○	○
<i>Community embeddedness</i>	Off-the-job: Fit	○	○	○	○	○
	Off-the-job: Links	●	●	●	●	●
	Off-the-job: Sacrifices	●	●	●	–	○
<i>Shocks</i>	Collective	○	●	●	●	–
	Private	●	○	●	○	●
	Individual	●	●	●	●	●
Statistics	Raw coverage	0.058	0.054	0.043	0.034	0.072
	Unique coverage	0.039	0.034	0.024	0.019	0.059
	Consistency	0.980	0.949	0.881	0.947	0.919
	Solution coverage	0.199				
	Solution consistency	0.943				

Table 6 Configuration for high intention to turnover under the condition of three types of shocks (continued)

		<i>Configurations</i>		
<i>Male expatriates</i>	<i>Conditions</i>	<i>I(m)H</i>	<i>II(m)H</i>	<i>III(m)H</i>
<i>Organisational embeddedness</i>	On-the-job: Fit	○	●	○
	On-the-job: Links	○	○	○
	On-the-job: Sacrifices	●	●	○
<i>Community embeddedness</i>	Off-the-job: Fit	○	○	–
	Off-the-job: Links	○	○	●
	Off-the-job: Sacrifices	○	●	●
<i>Shocks</i>	Collective	●	○	●
	Private	●	●	○
	Individual	–	●	●
Statistics	Raw coverage	0.152	0.051	0.098
	Unique coverage	0.083	0.018	0.037
	Consistency	0.782	0.792	0.895
	Solution coverage	0.208		
	Solution consistency	0.795		

Notes: Central conditions are represented by ● (presence) and ○ (absence); indifference, i.e., either presence or absence of a condition, is denoted with–.

Sufficient configurations for high turnover intention under the condition of three types of shocks: Under the condition of three types of shocks, five pathways that lead to female expatriates' high turnover intention and three pathways for male expatriates were identified. The results in Table 6 show an overall solution consistency of 0.943 for female and 0.795 for male expatriates. The solution coverage is 19.9% for women and 20.8% for men. While solution consistency for female expatriates' configurations is relatively high, it performs solidly below the commonly suggested threshold for male expatriates. However, all values indicate that an appropriate basis for interpreting the results is given (Ragin, 2008).

The configurations in Table 6 are the result of the negated outcome analysis. A contrarian case analysis respects the fact that within the same data set, a condition may relate to the outcome positively, negatively or not at all. In consequence, claiming a primary relation between two conditions does not necessarily mean that all observations affect the outcome. For this very reason, researchers often call for testing opposite relationships that might occur in some cases. As high turnover intention is the opposite of low turnover intention in the operationalisation, this analytical step was used to identify boundary conditions of JE. One boundary condition is the number of shock experiences that can be buffered. JE is *essentially inefficient if any two shocks appear simultaneously*, confirming the findings on low turnover intention and claiming that it is a useful measure against shock experiences in the international context.

Furthermore, two additional necessary conditions were identified from a gender-specific perspective: for female expatriates, on-the-job sacrifice plays a decisive role in high turnover intentions. In all configurations, women who have nothing to sacrifice tend to leave their employment. However, while they indeed have sacrificed in the community

and their private life as expatriates, these expected sacrifices were not strong enough to prevent them from serious considerations of leaving. Interestingly, high turnover intentions go hand in hand with off-the-job links, but not with off-the-job fit. While female expatriates have numerous meaningful ties to community members, they lack the feeling of overall community fit. Hence, links alone do not protect against turnover considerations after experiencing shocks. Furthermore, when comparing the findings on low and high turnover intention, it was revealed that *the opposite of what leads to high turnover intention does not automatically lead to low turnover intention*.

3.5.3 Robustness tests

As for every empirical analysis, the robustness of the findings is critical for the reliability. In recent years, robustness has gained increasing attention among scholars using configurational analysis (Maggetti and Levi-Faur, 2013). Following the important suggestions of this debate, the relationship between the conditions was explored by performing multiple robustness checks, such as altering the calibration threshold values (Online Supplement A), the proportional reduction in inconsistency (Online Supplement B), set coincidence and subset analysis (Online Supplement C).

4 Discussion

The initial question of whether JE differentially protects women versus men against the negative impact of shock experiences can clearly be confirmed. Yet, the more interesting question is on the pattern of embeddedness as well as *how* and *why* it alters female and male expatriates' turnover intentions after a shock experience (i.e., the specific configurations). On this, the findings suggest that both genders share certain JE dimensions, although it is a highly gender-sensitive concept with non-identical configurations for women and men to effectively buffer shocks. Hence, the specific configurations which lead to turnover differ according to gender.

4.1 Gender and job embeddedness

For both genders, JE protects against shocks. However, there are only a few and very specific patterns that are effective. This means that claims like 'individuals with a greater number of strands become more enmeshed in the web and thus have greater difficulty leaving their job' (Zhang et al., 2012, p.221) do not do justice to the complexity of the expatriate situation.

This study's findings are consistent with prior research (Burton et al., 2010; Holtom et al., 2005; Hussain and Deery, 2018) and support the notion that highly embedded individuals can (easily) withstand the push forces that shock experiences naturally induce. However, this conclusion is not as clear as it seems at first sight: researchers often argue that JE can be a double-edged sword as it increases employees' sensitivity to what is happening in their organisational and social environments, which can strengthen turnover intentions (Mitchell et al., 2001). Extensive links to the community can provide individuals with greater access to information on job opportunities and can facilitate the search for alternative jobs after shock experiences (Hussain and Deery, 2018). Ramesh and Gelfand (2010) observed that greater community links indicate greater network size

and higher quality. Being well connected in the network provides degrees of freedom to react to shock experiences, including leaving the organisation and finding a more suitable workplace or place to live. This is especially the case for shocks that originate on the job (Holtom et al., 2005).

Our findings contribute to this discussion by explaining conflicting and ambivalent previous findings on JE (Hussain and Deery, 2018; Ramesh and Gelfand, 2010). When following the notion that a higher level of JE provides better protection, individuals who score high in all six dimensions would be best protected. However, these cases do not exist in this study's data, neither empirically nor – given the properties of QCA – logically. This implies that criticism on the sensitivity for alternative job offerings in case of high organisational and community embeddedness (Mitchell and Lee, 2001), or the size and quality of social networks (Ramesh and Gelfand, 2010), might be correct. For maximal embedded individuals, JE's positive effects are counterbalanced by negative effects. The non-existence of maximal embedded individuals – neither among the female nor the male expatriates – shows that low turnover intentions are possibly explained by the following: individual embeddedness patterns consist of elements that have positive effects in relation to the kind of shock the expatriate experiences, but simultaneously mitigate the negative or counterproductive impact of another embeddedness dimension. As embeddedness is context-specific (Yao et al., 2004), any of the six dimensions needs to be assessed in relation to each other. Both genders share that no 'simple' solution exists to achieve optimal embeddedness abroad.

4.2 Female- and male-specific patterns of job embeddedness

Figures 1 and 2 present flow charts with configurational pathways on the buffering effects of organisational and community embeddedness for both female and male expatriates. Gender-specific singularities emphasise, e.g., that female expatriates show higher versatility in dealing with shock experiences. Overall, the path situation to low turnover intention is more complex for female expatriates, both in terms of shocks and the means to buffer them. While the shock experience itself and the community explore more complex pathways to low turnover intention, organisational configurations show high complexity for male expatriates. These differences result from women's more complex and difficult development of expatriate identities, resulting from gender-constructed differences (Janssens et al., 2006), organisational hierarchies and culture (Adler, 1984). Admittedly, coping with these challenges has downsides as the compensation for category dissimilarities and potential misfit with audience expectations abroad necessitates resources, time and effort (Negro et al., 2011; Zuckerman, 1999). However, important opportunities also result from it. The pressure to satisfy gender-specific expectations and stereotypical ascriptions, as well as to position themselves in relation to male-biased networks, opens doors for women to design identities which are embedded in specific ways. This equips female expatriates well to handle all sorts of shocks (Napier and Taylor, 2002). Male expatriates might enter a career step in which managerial roles appear as being designed for them; this eases access to networks and the settling in the identity of a foreign expert. However, it also deprives them of the opportunity to build multiple, robust identities that protect them in cases of shocks.

explain turnover intention as men can substitute fit with links to specific locals in the network. Links represent the connection to individuals in the community, but do not necessarily imply fit to it. An expatriate life as an outsider in the host country community is possible for men. Hence, a few good friends without any fit to the community – or in other words, living the expatriate life – as a functioning protection against turnover intentions after experiencing shocks is possible for male but not for female expatriates.

5 Conclusion

5.1 Implications for research and practice

For decades, understanding international assignments and their specificities has been one core research focus. However, we genuinely believe that there is important value in understanding gender-based differences when working abroad. We also firmly believe that a gender-specific lens allows us to rethink theories. Hence, greater effort is needed in terms of testing the main theories to investigate whether they hold for both genders. Specifically, our field has mounting evidence that work experiences differ in terms of gender. While past research has collected considerable knowledge on this, it so far was not sufficiently incorporated in the theories to develop them further in a gender-sensitive manner. Yet, meeting this obligation is crucial to ensure that our theories can be justifiably applied to both women and men – or otherwise need to be rethought and/or adapted. A further important research gap is the understanding of how different elements in female and male expatriates' personality, experiences, and skills and capabilities affect embeddedness, so that its protective power eventually increases or decreases. From a research perspective, there is still a long way to go to align JE theory with the individual's personal characteristics.

The most apparent practical implication of this research is that a one-fits-all solution for HR practices to protect expatriates does not exist. Essentially, what is helpful for female expatriates might be detrimental for their male counterparts. Support cannot stop at organisational boundaries, as community embeddedness plays a decisive role for both genders. However, questions on, for instance, the fit of potential expatriates are misled if gender is not considered, as – according to our findings – fit is more important to female than male expatriates. The same applies to sacrifices: for male expatriates, firms need to offer some value that is perceived as a sacrifice when leaving employment, while this does not have the same importance for female expatriates. This study provides first indications on what gender-specific HR programmes could look like and eventually could initiate more gender-sensitive HR policies.

5.2 Limitations

Like any research, this study has some limitations. First, and most notably, the data were collected during globally – and for the UK nationally – extraordinary times, with both the COVID-19 pandemic and Brexit taking place. Concerning COVID-19, the data collection took place at a time when restrictions were widely lifted in the UK, but living conditions were still far from 'normal'. While the pandemic was experienced as a collective shock, it subjectively was perceived in different ways by any expatriate. For some, COVID-19 at that time was still present as a factor in their turnover

considerations, while others have made the decision to stay abroad and no longer consider COVID-19 as a push force out of their assignment. In this study, we opted to not explicitly focus on the pandemic and its consequences on JE and turnover intentions as the main research topic, but rather have accepted the 'new normal' in which COVID-19 is a persistent health issue in all our future lives. Further, it needs to be noted that COVID-19 was not assessed as collective shock and therefore not included in the data collection as this disease outbreak not only concerned a wider population, but the whole population universally. Hence, it did not allow for any escaping strategies, which is one requirement to be classified as collective shock. Brexit, UK's official withdrawal from the European Union in February 2020, and its related developments within the country could also potentially have an impact on both on-the-job and off-the-job embeddedness among expatriates.

Second, this study does not distinguish between organisational and self-initiated expatriates (or other forms of expatriation). Prior research, which has examined both forms comparatively, has found differences regarding their embeddedness-related factors (e.g., Froese and Peltokorpi, 2013), as well as their personal inherent and acquired demographics (e.g., Dickmann et al., 2018). Hence, admittedly, there might be unique effects depending on the specific expatriation modalities which, as well, vary based on gender. This requires future investigation to account for potential gender differences between organisational and self-initiated expatriates. Moreover, migration is a special form of working abroad; this work situation has not been taken into consideration here. A more detailed investigation of different work situations abroad as well as their motivations should be addressed in future research. The large possible variety of assignments (e.g., organisational versus self-initiated expatriates, short-term versus long-term assignments, financial motivation versus career-related motivation) and the potential effects on the configurations deriving from this variety requires further research. Third, it is worth mentioning that this study focused on turnover intention, not actual turnover behaviour. Even though turnover intentions are the strongest predictor of turnover behaviour (Griffeth et al., 2000), some employees who initially had intended to leave the job do end up staying in their organisation (Allen et al., 2005). Hence, as previous scholars have already called for greater attention to the transition of turnover intention into turnover behaviour (e.g., Allen et al., 2005), addressing this distinction more directly in future research is recommended. Importantly, however, the here applied unfolding model on the effects of shocks (Lee and Mitchell, 1994) indeed focuses on the intention to leave, which then in further consequence may or may not lead to actual turnover behaviour. It further should be noted that this study uses self-reported data; while this is the common approach for measuring turnover intention in previous studies, the possibility of alternative explanations for the collected data remains.

Fourth, regarding the method applied, it requires mentioning that – since QCA's main interest is on exploring sufficiency and not necessity – its necessity analysis is limited as it encounters fewer necessary conditions in comparison to other approaches. For instance, opting for a diagonal instead of a ceiling technique, as employed by Necessary Condition Analysis (e.g., Dul, 2020; Linder et al., 2023; Vis and Dul, 2018), would have possibly led to slightly different levels of necessity. Hence, other methods beside QCA could have been applied as well in this study context. However, the basic message of this research would be left unchanged, which is more decisive than the singular measure: different gendered configurations of JE exist and non-identical configurations for female and male expatriates effectively buffer shocks. Fifth, in terms of the sample, the focus was on

UK-based expatriates, mainly located in London. While this approach was chosen as higher similarity of working and living conditions are expected among expatriates in the capital (compared to rural areas), it does hold some limitations: since it can be assumed that workers in London are more similar in terms of fit, links and sacrifices in comparison to their counterparts in more rural areas, these expatriates might not be representative of the overall expatriate population in the UK. In addition, while the sample was collected from 31 nationalities, this study does not account for differences in the cultural background of the individual's nationality and/or home country. For instance, expatriates from individualistic versus collectivistic cultures might have different weights associated with different factors of embeddedness. Further, it is worth mentioning that the host country language in the UK is English, the predominant global business language. This could potentially have an effect as the same analysis on expatriates in another country (e.g., China), where not all foreign workers are fluent in the host country's language, could show different results (e.g., organisational embeddedness might differ if one does not speak the native language on-site). Additionally, the overall distribution of nationalities, age and education level in the sample must not be taken as representative of the total expatriate population in the UK. The choice of networks for this sample, in which the expatriates interact, could have led to a disproportional inclusion of high-qualified workers and, thus, the exclusion of low-qualified workers. Further, also regarding the expatriates' networks, a difference between expatriates in seeking out social interactions could potentially play a role: while those foreign workers who engage in expatriate networks might be more proactive in seeking interactions, less engaging individuals might not be part of those expatriate communities which aim to foster interpersonal exchange. Further, expatriates who have already established strong network ties abroad may not be part of those networks (due to missing necessity for further exchange) from which the data was collected. Sixth, the analysis was limited to the two identified genders of women and men only, ignoring all other forms of gender identity. The study should not be misunderstood as a reductionist approach as the limitation to women and men as gender forms was solely methodologically driven. However, this study admittedly holds possible limitations in capturing various gender identities.

5.3 Future outlook – moving job embeddedness research forward

While JE protects against shock experiences, the main concern is that this claim is very generic because it a) treats JE as a one-dimensional construct in which individuals score on a continuum between two extremes (i.e., no embeddedness at all and maximum embeddedness) and, consequently, b) this claim neglects that JE theory assumes combinations of embeddedness which differ according to accentuation, the balancing of on-the-job and off-the-job dimensions and the relative importance of one dimension in relation to other dimensions. Additionally, and c), there is no right or wrong way (and certainly no best way) of being embedded, but there are effective and ineffective ways. Hence, any research approach built on an assumption of causal relations between JE and outcome in terms of 'more X leads to more Y' – as, for instance, in regression analysis – is incapable of exploring the full depth and breadth of the theory (Hauff et al., 2021). This has far-reaching implications on how we frame individuals working abroad and, consequently, on the theories that are crafted to explain why they stay in or leave the host country. Indeed, JE theory explicitly assumes equifinality, and this study's empirical

results confirm this notion. Hence, the very core of JE is holistic (i.e., capturing ‘all’ facets of being enmeshed in a social web) and configurational. This has d) a severe consequence for theorising turnover or retention. A defensible claim on a general level regarding the relevance of JE turns incorrect when being applied to subgroups or individual cases. The findings show that no necessary conditions exist on a global level; however, when the set is separated into female and male expatriates, there indeed are necessary conditions. This finding indicates that a methodological lens incapable of modelling the full scope of the theory might be misleading when aiming to put the theory to use and to subscribe all expatriates (i.e., women and men) to the same HR support programmes.

In terms of prospects on how the JE theory and research can move forward, one answer is to alter the conceptual framing of JE abroad. Current methodological developments and modern configurational thinking (Fainshmidt et al., 2020) allow for the establishment of new and, for some purposes, better-suited causal relations between explanandum and explanans, which potentially break with the strong tendency to mainly – and erroneously – perceive JE in terms of causal relations (such as linear relationships). Specifically, more/less JE leads to more/less of a specific outcome, and symmetry, which implies that the opposite of what keeps an expatriate in the foreign assignment explains the expatriate’s turnover. Unifinality means that there is only one optimal degree of embeddedness instead of several different degrees but equally relevant ways of being embedded (Fiss, 2011; Furnari et al., 2021; Misangyi et al., 2017). The explanatory power depends on the methodological lens that the respective researcher uses when investigating the subject of interest. Hence, the explanatory power of the findings can be increased when rethinking international assignments in gender-specific terms in order to deal with theoretical and methodological challenges.

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Notes

- 1 As reference value, according to the European Central Bank, the average age of the European workforce in 2022 was 45.2 years (<https://www.ecb.europa.eu/>).
- 2 Supplementary materials are available on request from authors.