

# Development of career capital during expatriation: partners' perspectives

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the effects of expatriation on the development of career capital among the partners of expatriates.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The study draws on in-depth interviews with 30 Finnish partners of expatriates.

**Findings** – The results reflect the various learning experiences reported by partners of expatriates that developed their career capital during expatriation. The learning experiences related to the experience of living abroad itself and to the specific activities undertaken when abroad. The extent to which partners developed knowing-why, knowing-how and knowing-whom career capital was found to partly reflect their situation abroad as stay-at-home partners or as employees in less-demanding or more-demanding jobs. Though the experiences were developmental for all partners as have been reported among expatriates, the authors also identified several aspects in which partners' experiences differed from the typical developmental experiences of expatriates.

**Practical implications** – The results also highlight the influence of initiative, an active role and career self-management skills in partners' career capital development.

**Originality/value** – This paper advances the understanding of how expatriation affects expatriate partners' career capital, a topic that has not previously been studied in-depth.

**Keywords** International assignment, Expatriation, Expatriate partner, Career capital

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Expatriation is accepted to be a challenging experience for both expatriates and their partners (Brown, 2008; Rosenbusch and Cseh, 2012). In this study, we define *expatriates* as “legally working individuals who reside temporarily in a country of which they are not a citizen to accomplish a career-related goal, being relocated abroad either by an organization, by self-initiation, or directly employed within the host-country” (McNulty and Brewster, 2017, p. 46). Expatriates thus include both assigned expatriates (AEs) sent abroad by their employer and self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) moving abroad on their own initiative (Suutari and Brewster, 2000). Long-term international assignments are defined as assignments lasting over 12 months, and the partner of an expatriate and other family members would typically accompany the assignee on such assignments (Shaffer *et al.*, 2012).

To understand the challenges partners face, a large body of literature has been formed around the adjustment challenges that expatriate families face, premature return intentions following negative experiences and support practices through which companies could support the families (Ali *et al.*, 2003; Chen and Shaffer, 2018; McNulty, 2012). Because the expatriation process and experiences differ among AEs and SIEs, it is important to study the



experiences of partners of both AEs and SIEs. The challenges associated with a move abroad extend beyond overall adjustment to include work-related situations for dual-earner couples (DCCs) (those where both partners worked before the assignment) and in particular for dual-career couples (DCCs) in which both partners are committed to building their careers (Eby, 2001; Harvey *et al.*, 2009; Kierner, 2018).

The research on differing challenges has been accompanied by a growing interest in the developmental opportunities for expatriates offered by long-term international placements (Suutari and Mäkelä, 2007; Dickmann and Cerdin, 2018; Dickmann and Doherty, 2010; Jokinen *et al.*, 2008; Dickmann *et al.*, 2018; Jokinen, 2010), while research on the possible development of the skills of accompanying partners during expatriation has received little attention.

Expatriates' work is described as both highly demanding and developmental and also to require physical mobility across borders and the flexibility to interact with people and adapt to situational demands across cultures. In addition, work role requirements often interfere with life outside work (Shaffer *et al.*, 2012). Some researchers argue that partners of expatriates can access developmental opportunities too, such as acquiring cross-cultural social skills (Black and Mendenhall, 1991), adjustment skills (Suutari, 2003) and language skills (Ali *et al.*, 2003). Many partners also work when abroad, though finding a suitable job may not be easy (Bikos *et al.*, 2007). Although partners' jobs may often not be as challenging as those of expatriates (Bikos *et al.*, 2007), they still offer opportunities for learning new skills in a cross-cultural environment. Those learning experiences may enhance an individual's open-mindedness and sense of self-efficacy and self-confidence (Suutari, 2003; Krumboltz *et al.*, 2013). Living abroad has also been reported to foster overall personal growth (Kupka *et al.*, 2008) and the development of a global mindset (Mikhaylov and Fierro, 2015). Such experiences have also been found to affect partners' identity and future interests (Shaffer and Harrison, 2001). However, despite these various developmental views, research on the development of skills among expatriate partners has been limited, and the main focus has been on the challenges that partners face and that often reduce their sense of well-being when abroad. When learning-related perspectives have been applied, the focus has been on partners' adjustment and coping (Ali *et al.*, 2003; Chen and Shaffer, 2018) instead of utilizing them to examine partners' positive developmental aspects. The contrast to the recent body of research on expatriates' developmental experiences is thus clear.

One of the recent approaches to analyzing expatriates' developmental experiences during international assignments is the career capital perspective (Dickmann and Cerdin, 2018; Dickmann and Doherty, 2010; Dickmann *et al.*, 2018; Jokinen, 2010; Jokinen *et al.*, 2008). Those studies build on the intelligent career concept that incorporates the ideas of boundaryless career theory (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996) and protean career theory (De Vos and Soens, 2008; Mirvis and Hall, 1994), both of which emphasize the role of individuals in managing their own careers and their own development. Career capital consists of three interdependent dimensions: *knowing-why*, *knowing-how* and *knowing-whom*. *Knowing-why* refers to issues such as motivation, identity and values (why we work), *knowing-how* to skills, abilities and knowledge (how we work), and *knowing-whom* to the professional and social relationships that people have (with whom we work) (DeFillippi and Arthur, 1994; Inkson and Arthur, 2001; Parker and Arthur, 2004). As this approach is useful in understanding the developmental experiences of expatriates, it offers a good framework for analyzing the experiences of partners too.

In light of this background, the overarching goal of this study is to enhance our understanding of expatriate partners' career capital development by answering the following research question: Does expatriation develop expatriate partners' knowing-why, knowing-how and knowing-whom career capital, and if so, in what ways? Without denying the challenging impacts of moving abroad, this is the first empirical study to examine and to

focus exclusively on the other side of expatriation, namely the positive developmental experiences of expatriate partners from the career capital angle. To obtain as comprehensive an understanding as possible of the topic, we take into account partners and their experiences across different life and/or employment situations (e.g. stay-at-home partners, who may also do voluntary work or study concurrently, as well as partners working in a range of jobs).

We start by introducing the literature and research on expatriate partners, after which we offer a review of the literature linked to developmental experiences that expatriation offers to expatriates and their partners. Following the literature review, the methodology and findings are outlined, and the article finishes with a discussion of the findings and a conclusion.

## Literature review

### *The partner perspective on expatriation*

The experiences of expatriate partners have already been analyzed from several perspectives. First, partners' career concerns are reported to be among the main reasons expatriates refuse assignments (Brookfield, 2016). This observation has increased interest in understanding partners' *willingness and motivation to accept expatriation*. Studies have, for example, investigated the considerable importance of the partner's career role (Van der Velde *et al.*, 2017) and fears around the potential loss of close relationships and social support networks (McNulty, 2015) that raise the threshold of considerations affecting a decision to move abroad. Personality characteristics, such as adventurousness, a desire to have new experiences and learn (Harvey *et al.*, 2009), open-mindedness and emotional stability (Shaffer and Harrison, 2001), also relate to partners' willingness to undertake expatriation.

Second, partners' *adjustment* challenges have been covered in many studies (e.g. Ali *et al.*, 2003; Chen and Shaffer, 2018). The findings indicate that partners need to learn new behaviors and skills to adjust (Ali *et al.*, 2003; Kelly and Morley, 2011). Expatriation may also lead to changes in a partner's *life role and identity* (Bikos and Kocheleva, 2013; Mäkelä *et al.*, 2011) and adversely affect *subjective well-being* (Haslberger and Brewster, 2009; Kanstrén and Mäkelä, 2020). The adjustment to new roles and status may be even harder for male partners (Richardson and Zikic, 2007; Tharenou, 2008).

Third, research has also covered partners' *career-related challenges* (McNulty, 2012). Partners' willingness to work can be undermined by difficulties in obtaining a work permit (McNulty, 2012), a lack of recognition of their professional qualifications (Permits Foundation, 2012), insufficient language skills (Mäkelä *et al.*, 2011) and the lack of networks abroad (Cole, 2011). Partners' career opportunities may also be limited by the family situation because expatriates often have extensive work demands that make it difficult for the partner to find time to work (Mäkelä *et al.*, 2011).

Similar career issues have also been studied among DCCs in which both partners are psychologically committed to their work roles, professions and careers (Harvey *et al.*, 2009; Kierner, 2018). In such studies, the focus is not so much on a single partner, but on how two career-oriented people in a family coordinate their careers and arrange their family life so that both partners can create their own careers. Those studies have covered dual-career partners' willingness to accept assignments (Selmer and Leung, 2003), partner career experiences (McNulty and Moeller, 2018), partner roles (Mäkelä *et al.*, 2011), partner career identity reconstruction (Kanstrén, 2019), adjustment (Ravasi *et al.*, 2013), career coordination strategies (Känsälä *et al.*, 2015), repatriation (Kierner and Suutari, 2018) and dual-career support practices (Harvey *et al.*, 2009). Such career challenges affecting expatriates and their partners are among the major reasons for the failure of expatriate assignments (Cole, 2011; Rosenbusch and Cseh, 2012). Despite the significance of partners' career issues, *career assistance provision*, including professional and social support offered by organizations, continues to be poorly administered (Cole, 2011; McNulty, 2012).

*Expatriate partners and the need to reestablish a career in a new environment*

In many countries, dual-earner couples in which both partners contribute an income to support the family unit are very common (Eby, 2001; Van der Velde *et al.*, 2017). Partners who find themselves abroad may want to find at least some kind of job and often face challenges in doing so. A growing number of expatriate couples also face a dual-career challenge, also referred to as the “two-body problem” (Wong, 2017, p. 171). The expatriate couple faces a situation associated with work relocation that demands joint decision-making and negotiating on career-related options (Känsälä *et al.*, 2015; Wong, 2017). While the expatriate population remains male-dominated, it is usually female partners whose careers are put on hold, perhaps for many years. Previous research has shown that expatriating DCCs face both general and specific challenges. General challenges include issues such as adjustment to a new and unfamiliar environment, a foreign culture and navigating different education, daycare and healthcare systems (Cartus, 2016; Mäkelä and Suutari, 2011; Rosenbusch and Cseh, 2012; Shaffer and Harrison, 2001). Specific challenges experienced especially by career-oriented expatriate partners concern their limited opportunities to continue their careers during the assignment (Cole, 2011; McNulty, 2012). While the partners in dual-earner couples may be satisfied with lower-level jobs that are easy to obtain or even with a period spent at home, they may not be satisfied with such work situations if they jeopardize their future careers.

Several studies have indicated that the majority of partners who had a career prior to relocating do not work when they move abroad (Brookfield, 2016; McNulty, 2012). This can significantly affect expatriate partners’ life roles, and they can experience significant role transitions (Lauring and Selmer, 2010; Mäkelä *et al.*, 2011). A typical role transition partners experience is to that of a traditional stay-at-home partner, who is financially dependent on their spouse (Mohr and Klein, 2004). Consequently, long-term international relocation may strengthen traditional gender roles (Känsälä *et al.*, 2015). That said, for partners with high career role salience (see Van der Velde *et al.*, 2017) the situation may spur a drive to reestablish their career in a new environment or at least to maintain their professional skills and knowledge to enhance their employability. Reestablishing a career in a new environment demands partners demonstrate self-management skills, personal initiative and personal agency. Engaging in a range of activities, such as salaried work, volunteering, studying and/or hobbies, may help in this process (Kanstrén, 2019).

In light of the above, although research on expatriate partners has covered a wide range of topics, examples investigating how expatriation affects the development of partners’ career capital are absent.

*Development of career capital during expatriation*

As mentioned earlier, one of the recent approaches used for analyzing career-related development during expatriation is the intelligent career model. The model incorporates the ideas of both boundaryless career and protean career theories (DeFillippi and Arthur, 1994; Dickmann and Cerdin, 2018; Parker and Arthur, 2004). The intelligent career model posits skills development in relation to three interdependent dimensions of career capital, called knowing-why, knowing-how and knowing-whom. Skills and knowledge are portrayed as key personal assets acquired over time. Career capital theory with its three forms of *knowing* can provide a framework for understanding how changing conditions affect individuals’ knowledge and skills and their career options (Inkson and Arthur, 2001). The framework has previously been applied in studies focusing on the components of career capital of knowledge workers in the global economy (Lamb and Sutherland, 2010), on aspects of career capital required by business leaders to facilitate their organizational role transition (Brown *et al.*, 2020), on senior women managers’ transition to entrepreneurship (Terjesen, 2005) and on the complexities of women’s career transitions (Cabrera, 2007). Accordingly, career capital theory

can also be applied to accompanying partners, who must also address transition issues concerning their roles, employment and careers, and, consequently, their career-related skills and knowledge.

The focus of intelligent career-related expatriation research has been on understanding the development of expatriates' professional skills and knowledge while the perspective of partners has not received similar levels of attention. This despite research confirming that expatriation can be a life-changing experience for both partners (Brown, 2008; McNulty *et al.*, 2019; Mäkelä *et al.*, 2011; Rosenbusch and Cseh, 2012). Prior studies among expatriates indicate that expatriation can offer opportunities for self-reflection, learning and development and can have an extensive developmental effect on career capital (Cappellen and Janssens, 2008; Dickmann and Cerdin, 2018; Dickmann and Doherty, 2010; Stahl *et al.*, 2002; Suutari *et al.*, 2018; Suutari and Mäkelä, 2007). Expatriates are also aware that the career capital acquired will be useful in their future job roles (Jokinen, 2010; Dickmann and Cerdin, 2018).

There are both similarities and differences in the experiences of expatriates and partners that can be expected to affect the development of their career capital when abroad. First, both partners share the experience of moving abroad and adjusting to a new cross-cultural context. In turn, in some areas, the experiences of the expatriate and those of the partner differ depending on what the partner does abroad. If partners work, they can also have developmental work experiences abroad, although the development opportunities may not be as extensive as for expatriates. That is because expatriates typically have very challenging jobs (Grant-Vallone and Ensher, 2001; Mäkelä and Suutari, 2011) while partners can face issues finding similarly engaging jobs abroad on their own initiative (Bikos *et al.*, 2007). Working partners may thus face different levels of work challenges and, as an outcome, also different work-related development opportunities. Given the lack of prior research on the career capital development of partners, we will next examine the existing information on the development of expatriates' career capital. Subsequently, we will discuss the extent to which both partners might share similar experiences.

### *Knowing-why*

Knowing-why career capital reflects the energy, sense of purpose, motivation, identity, values, interests and work-family issues (DeFillippi and Arthur, 1994; Inkson and Arthur, 2001; Parker and Arthur, 2004) that enhance commitment and improve performance and learning (Dickmann and Harris, 2005; Haslberger and Brewster, 2009). Expatriation can challenge people's established beliefs, norms and values and encourage self-reflection, which often leads to self-development, strengthening of career identity and the development of self-understanding and self-confidence (Dickmann and Doherty, 2010; Suutari and Mäkelä, 2007). Expatriates who have experienced multiple assignments report that the first assignment, in particular, is a journey inward that develops strong self-awareness and interpersonal skills. Expatriates also view these skills as highly transferable (Jokinen, 2010; Lamb and Sutherland, 2010).

During expatriation, both partners share the experience of adjusting to a new cultural context, a process that demands self-reflection and reconsideration of the self, one's identity and values. Therefore, expatriation presents varying degrees of challenge to expatriate partners' core identity and leads to redefinitions of identity across social, cultural and personal domains (Collins and Bertone, 2017; McNulty, 2012). Experiences abroad can affect partners' perceptions of how they value their careers (either past, current or future) and professional choices (Bikos and Kocheleva, 2013) and how they can maintain their self-esteem in changing situations (Brown, 2008). Therefore, international experience may also influence future career interests. Partners' self-reflection can be assumed to result in improved overall self-awareness and also in increased self-confidence, especially when a person copes successfully in an unfamiliar environment. Additionally, if a partner has paid work abroad,

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he/she can acquire new work experience in a new cultural context that will later benefit him/her professionally.

### *Knowing-how*

The knowing-how dimension of career capital consists of the skills, abilities, expertise and both tacit and explicit knowledge that accumulate along career paths (DeFillippi and Arthur, 1994; Inkson and Arthur, 2001). In particular, boundaryless careers involving the crossing of borders (of both organizational and country types) facilitate the accumulation of a portfolio of skills and knowledge (DeFillippi and Arthur, 1994).

Research among expatriates has indicated that the highly demanding nature of global work assignments has a strong developmental effect on knowing-how career capital in areas such as general business understanding and social and managerial skills (Cappellen and Janssens, 2008; Dickmann and Doherty, 2010; Dickmann and Harris, 2005; Jokinen, 2010; Jokinen *et al.*, 2008; Suutari and Mäkelä, 2007). These skills are flexible and transferable across different cultures, functions and organizational boundaries (Cappellen and Janssens, 2008; Jokinen, 2010). In addition, expatriation develops cultural sensitivity and intercultural competence, communication skills and the ability to see other viewpoints (Dickmann and Doherty, 2010; Suutari and Mäkelä, 2007).

Among expatriate partners, skills such as those relating to language, communication and intercultural knowledge have already been recognized as being important in helping partners adjust and cope (Ali *et al.*, 2003; Kupka *et al.*, 2008; Shaffer and Harrison, 2001). Following social learning theory, Caligiuri and Tarique (2009) suggested that in cross-cultural settings individuals can also learn and develop themselves through interacting with other people or by observing their behaviors. When partners need to find ways to cope with the challenges the environment poses, whether as individuals and/or as a family/couple (Chen and Shaffer, 2018; Rosenbusch and Cseh, 2012) they may also learn skills to cope with all kinds of uncertainty. Knowing-how career capital development might be more clear-cut for working partners who can develop their professional skills and international business understanding in organizational settings. Furthermore, the level of development opportunities naturally relates to the level of the job expatriate partners have when abroad.

### *Knowing-whom*

Knowing-whom career capital reflects the intrafirm and interfirm relations, professional and social relationships, attachments, reputation and sources of information (DeFillippi and Arthur, 1994; Inkson and Arthur, 2001). Expatriates develop extensive networks when working abroad (Mäkelä and Suutari, 2009), but also find creating social capital is challenged by cultural differences (Taylor, 2007). In addition to professional networks consisting mainly of superiors, colleagues and clients, knowing-whom career capital can be gained from personal networks that stretch beyond business, such as relations, friends and acquaintances (Cappellen and Janssens, 2008; Dickmann and Doherty, 2010). Contacts are established both in the workplace and outside it, for example, through participating in social activities organized by the children's schools (Jokinen, 2010). Different networks increase the expatriate's awareness of external career opportunities and reinforce the boundaryless character of global careers (Mäkelä and Suutari, 2009).

Considering knowing-whom career capital from the point of view of partners, the situation differs from that of expatriates (and especially from that of AEs) because it is harder for the partners to access professional networks. If the partners do not obtain work, they will be more dependent on other kinds of networks. Any kind of network may still lead to new career opportunities. Cole (2011, p. 1,519) found that for partners, networking is "how most jobs are found," and that in particular, networking with other expatriate partners was a good way to

promote employment opportunities. Cole also states partners report that they need additional information to assist them in networking activities. In turn, a study by [Shaffer and Harrison \(2001\)](#) appears to indicate that building a wide-ranging set of social connections, especially with host-country nationals, was important. The willingness to continue the career might thus even impel partners to embrace or create networks more consciously than they had previously. Working partners can discover career opportunities through professional networks in addition to personal ones. The quality of such networks from a career perspective may depend on the nature of the job the partner finds (e.g. employee-level connections versus higher-level management networks). With regard to life after an assignment, the main challenge might be that knowing-whom career capital is not a particularly transferable form of career capital ([Jokinen, 2010](#)) and international networks might not compensate for weakened home-country connections. Expatriate partners who know that, however, might invest greater effort into maintaining important home-country connections when abroad. Furthermore, expatriates and their partners may decide to pursue international careers and thus be more able to make more use of their international networks ([Mäkelä and Suutari, 2009](#)).

Having reviewed the literature relating to the developmental nature of expatriation and discussed how the experiences of expatriates and partners may be similar from the developmental perspective, we suggest that adopting the role of *career capitalist* may be necessary among expatriate partners who want to find new career paths both abroad and in the repatriation phase. Next, we discuss our research methodology and then report our research findings.

### Methodology

This study can be positioned in the area of qualitative research, and the philosophical and methodological standpoints that guide the research process are mainly associated with the constructivist paradigm. We adopted a qualitative approach because quantitative methods do not necessarily offer sufficient tools to illuminate peoples' subjective experiences and how they make sense of and interpret them (see [Angen, 2000](#); [Guba and Lincoln, 1994](#)). In terms of methodology, qualitative research incorporates various means of collecting data ([Denzin and Lincoln, 2018](#)). Of these, the interview method is recognized as a particularly significant means through which to explore the personal viewpoints and experiences of the research subjects ([Gubrium and Holstein, 2012](#)). Drawing on these arguments, the present study relies on semi-structured interviews because they are well suited for a study aiming to acquire a comprehensive understanding of partners' experiences and interpretations of their career capital development. In-depth interviews also allow for the complexity of partners' experiences to emerge ([Richardson, 2006](#)). An additional advantage of choosing the interview method is its suitability to examine topics about which little is known ([Strauss and Corbin, 1998](#)) as was the case here. All interviews followed an interview agenda rather than a restrictive set of specific questions, which allowed the interviewees to freely relate their experiences. Following some background questions, the interviewees were asked to recount their motives for moving abroad, their general experiences of living abroad and finally their developmental experiences. In addition, the interviewees were asked about their careers and current employment situation.

### Sample

The majority of the participants were identified via a survey conducted among the expatriate members of the professional and labor market organization TEK (Academic Engineers and Architects in Finland). The participants provided their partners' contact information, and

they were then invited to participate in the study. In addition, the snowball method was applied to find more participants; therefore, a proportion of the interviewees were selected based on the contact information given by the other participants. The final dataset consists of 30 interviews of which 29 were face-to-face interviews (23 using Skype) and one was a telephone interview. Skype proved an adequate tool for online interviews and data collection since the research participants were globally dispersed and in different time zones (James and Busher, 2012). The duration of the interviews varied between 46 and 140 min. The participant group comprised 26 female partners and four male partners between 29 and 55 years old, with 27 of the partners having children. The participating partners were quite highly educated: 18 of them to master's degree level and nine to bachelor's degree level. They all considered their careers to be important and had built those careers for years before the relocation. We would therefore characterize most of the interviewed partners as part of an expatriate dual-career couple in which both partners are committed to creating their own careers (Mäkelä *et al.*, 2011).

Over half (16) of the partners were working or had been working abroad (including both part-time and full-time work and remote work), and all of them expressed their interest in having a job in the host country; however, for various reasons including work permit issues, qualifications and the family situation, 14 participants were doing volunteer work or studying. Those ten partners who had already recently repatriated had returned to their previous jobs, had a new occupation or were seeking work. In terms of the type of expatriate assignments, there were both partners of AEs (50%) and SIEs (50%). The demographics of the interviewees and the more detailed descriptions of the partners' main activity while abroad are shown in Table 1 below.

#### *Data analysis*

The data were analyzed by employing Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis with systematic coding and categorizing of transcripts. From the first reading of the transcripts, they were annotated with observations and comments (i.e. codes). The codes identified through that open coding process were then collated into potential themes and inserted into separate files. Themes were compared against each other and in relation to the entire data set. Based on those comparisons, they were further integrated into the three dimensions of career capital. While writing the report, the originally Finnish verbatim quotes were translated into English.

In relation to research quality, the usual concepts applied in assessing research results are validity, reliability and generalizability. Here, the aforementioned criteria for evaluating research quality are replaced with credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018; Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln *et al.*, 2018). The use of those terms can be justified because positivist criteria are not considered suitable to judge the quality and trustworthiness of qualitative research that follows constructivist assumptions (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018; Korstjens and Moser, 2018). In this study, credibility was ensured by reading and reflecting on the data several times, cross-checking findings across multiple interviews and comparing the findings to observations on the development of the expatriates' career capital (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). In terms of transferability, the context of research, including the sample size, cultural background and demographics of the participant group, as well as the interview procedure and analysis process are clearly described to permit a reader to assess if the results could apply to other contexts (Korstjens and Moser, 2018). To ensure dependability and confirmability of the findings, the research steps taken are described from presenting the theoretical choices, identifying the research gaps, gathering the data and through analyzing the data. The interview process was guided by a semi-structured interview agenda with open-ended research questions, and all interviews were recorded and transcribed in full for analysis. Furthermore, the extracts of the



Pseudonym	Age	Education level	Host countries	Years abroad in total	Assignment type	Employment situation and/or other activity while abroad
<i>Living abroad</i>						
Emma	43	Master's degree	Germany, USA, Germany	5	AE	Working
Anita	35	Bachelor's degree	Germany, USA	5	AE	Volunteer work, work-related hobbies
Oliver	37	Master's degree	Belgium	1.5	AE	Remote working (part-time)
Thomas	42	Other <sup>a</sup>	China, Great Britain	8	AE	Remote working, entrepreneur
Katie	38	Master's degree	China, USA	4	AE	Not working, studying
Eva	41	Other <sup>b</sup>	Chile, Canada, USA	5	AE	Not working
Maria	36	Bachelor's degree	USA	2	AE	Both remote work and local work, pursuing hobbies
Jack	46	Other <sup>c</sup>	France	4	AE	Remote part-time project working
Emilia	36	Master's degree	UK, France	4	SIE	Not working, studying
Sofia	48	Bachelor's degree	Sweden, The Netherlands, Canada	12	SIE	Has worked previously, pursuing hobbies
Joanne	36	Master's degree	Germany, The Netherlands	6	SIE	Not working, studying
Amelia	37	Master's degree	The Netherlands	1.5	SIE	Working (entrepreneur), pursuing hobbies
Julia	50	Bachelor's degree	UK, Germany, Canada	11	SIE	Working
Nina	37	Master's degree	UK, The Netherlands, Switzerland	9	SIE	Not working, studying, starting her own business
Sandra	37	Master's degree	The Netherlands	8	SIE	Working, volunteer work, studying
Olivia	37	Master's degree	The Netherlands	6	SIE	Working (entrepreneur)
Katrina	46	Master's degree	Canada	7	SIE	Working
Ava	35	Master's degree	Switzerland	2	SIE	Remote part-time working, volunteer work
Heidi	37	Master's degree	Switzerland	1.5	SIE	Volunteer work
Hannah	35	Master's degree	The Netherlands	1.5	SIE	Remote working during the first year, studying
<i>Repatriated</i>						
Erin	41	Bachelor's degree	USA	3	AE	Volunteer work, language studies

**Table 1.** Description of the participants' employment situation and/or other activity abroad

(continued)

Pseudonym	Age	Education level	Host countries	Years abroad in total	Assignment type	Employment situation and/or other activity while abroad
Ella	39	Bachelor's degree	USA, Canada	6	AE	Working, studying
Isabel	46	Master's degree	Argentina, Spain, Mexico, Mexico	9	AE	Volunteer work, studying
Kate	42	Bachelor's degree	China, China, India	9	AE	Not working
Daniel	55	Master's degree	India	1.5	AE	Volunteer work
Suzan	41	Master's degree	The Netherlands	2	AE	Volunteer work
Amanda	43	Bachelor's degree	India	3	AE	Not working
Sara	44	Master's degree	Poland, Austria, Vietnam	7	Both	Working
Lydia	35	Master's degree	The UK	2	SIE	Not working
Laura	29	Bachelor's degree	Canada	2	SIE	Not working

**Note(s):** AE – assigned; SIE – self-initiated

<sup>a</sup>Postsecondary education

<sup>b</sup>Vocational upper secondary qualification

<sup>c</sup>Master's degree studies (not graduated)

**Table 1.**

data are presented in the final report to illustrate the analytical claims and researchers' interpretations. These extracts assist in showing that the interpretations that the researcher makes are grounded in the data and are not merely the researcher's own viewpoints (Korstjens and Moser, 2018). Finally, to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, the participants were offered an opportunity to check the accuracy of the interview transcripts and give feedback and also subsequently to contact the researchers to add further descriptions of their experiences. The transcriptions were collated to form a database for evidence and to facilitate later checks. Below we present the main findings related to each of the three dimensions of career capital and complemented with brief illustrative interview excerpts.

## Results

A generally held perspective that emerged from the interviews was that the experience of living abroad was developmental and transformational. All our participants recalled both positive and negative effects, but their accounts emphasized the former more strongly. While some learning-related experiences such as coping in an unfamiliar environment were shared by all partners, some were more connected to the partner's activities abroad: many had work experience of different forms and in jobs of different levels and involving different responsibilities (e.g. full-time or part-time work/less demanding or highly demanding work) while others were doing voluntary work or studying. For the interviewed partners, these experiences were opportunities to develop new career capital that they could utilize in their future careers. In some cases, international experience also inspired partners to reconsider their careers from a wholly new perspective. Overall, partners expressed how international relocation provided many potential opportunities for learning new skills or developing

existing skills. Therefore, we will now move on to present more detailed findings concerning the three areas of career capital.

*Development of knowing-why career capital*

Several components of knowing-why career capital, such as motivation, (career) identity, values, self-awareness and career interests, could be identified in the participants' accounts. Based on how the partners described their experiences, it seems that knowing-why career capital developed to some extent among all partners, not only among those who were in paid work. Above all, time spent abroad was seen as a journey into oneself through self-reflection and self-examination that strengthened the partners' views of themselves while increasing their *self-awareness*. The partners described how expatriation offered the possibility to learn, not only about themselves but also about others, and this led to personal growth and the reconstruction of identity. Therefore, it offered the respondents insights into what kind of person they were and their personal values, strengths and weaknesses, what motivated them to act and what is important for them in life. This aspect was summarized in the accounts of Katie and Sara:

Probably I have learned about myself most. I have had time to reflect on what kind of a person I really am. What am I good at, and not just job performance or work-related tasks? What are my strengths in personality, and where do I have weaknesses? Perhaps also, what do I find interesting and important. (Katie, stay-at-home mother)

I learned about myself, what is important for me in life. (Sara, repatriated lawyer)

Among many partners, international experience and the opportunity for self-reflection helped to build *self-confidence*. This was mainly due to coping successfully in an unfamiliar environment:

I think it has maybe improved my self-confidence in such a way, as I have had to survive. Survival has been a must, and I have noticed, I can do it. . . this has brought self-confidence. (Joanne, former doctoral student)

Self-reflection also helped Isabel, who was doing volunteer work in her host country, to build her self-confidence that in turn improved her capabilities. Consequently, after repatriation she felt well-equipped to apply for more challenging jobs:

I gained confirmation that I have really good social skills. . . I believe I can use this to my benefit also in my future working life. (Isabel, recently repatriated job seeker)

Many partners could not take paid work due to work permit restrictions or having the main responsibility for domestic work and taking care of young children. In addition, due to expatriates' demanding jobs, the partners were left with few opportunities for paid work and related development opportunities:

Sometimes, when I am doing the laundry or filling the dishwasher, and my spouse is working and building a career, I feel like I could do something different myself. Right now, I feel like I would want to work on building my career, study something, anything. (Sandra, a former occupational therapist, who worked in a special education school while abroad)

My situation is pretty much that I run this household, and the kids run between home and school. I have two-hour slots where I can do something. . . It is distressing that I am in a golden cage. (Heidi, a former language teacher, now doing part-time volunteer work)

Surprisingly, despite these barriers to employment, partners still thought that the various profession-related hobbies, volunteer work they did and/or working in less demanding jobs could be beneficial to their future careers. Further, in terms of career and profession,

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self-examination enabled the partners to better *understand their career interests* and their attitude toward work and their profession. Living abroad thus led to the reconstruction of career identities and reevaluation of both personal and professional values. This self-reflection process assisted with finding new meanings in both working and personal life:

Being abroad has changed me as a person, and even though I do not have work experience abroad, it gives me so much. . . life in India among the mess of cultures and religions changed me. Somehow it just changed my thinking and view of the world so much, I no longer felt my previous job was suitable for me. (Amanda, now export entrepreneur)

In addition, getting a more demanding job seemed to develop partners' professional self-confidence, global career identity, willingness to take on even more challenging work and to develop their expertise in their field:

I have a nice place in the company, and I believe I can rise in the hierarchy. . . I'm ambitious. I still hope to become a manager. (Katrina, Sales and Marketing Specialist in an MNC)

Coping with a new situation and unfamiliar environment strengthened partners' *tolerance of uncertainty*, and this, in turn, developed their resilience and courage to face new challenges. For example, Olivia felt that the courage to work in uncertain environments had helped her to succeed both in her personal life and in her new entrepreneurial career, while Suzan has, after repatriation, been able to take advantage of her newly acquired courage in her new job role and especially in work tasks that require decision-making:

I have found this new kind of courage. (Olivia, music business entrepreneur)

When I had to start from scratch and get to know new people. . . it has really helped a lot in my current job. In particular, I have gained courage. Courage to make decisions, to act how I see best. (Suzan, works in sales and marketing after repatriation)

Finally, several partners perceived changes in their cultural attitudes. Living abroad broadened their ways of thinking and helped them acquire an *international mindset*. Interacting with people from different cultures deepened partners' understanding that things can be done in many different ways compared to the home country. This developed the partners' empathy and their ability to put themselves in another person's position, for example, understanding the challenges of being a foreigner in a new country. These learning experiences were again mentioned by both working and nonworking partners. Partners also wanted to utilize these skills in their future work as Eva mentioned:

. . . different viewpoints on things between countries. . . cultural differences and tolerance, I have learned a lot. If I were to return to Finland, I would likely try to find a job where I could make use of this experience. (Eva, stay-at-home mother)

#### *Development of knowing-how career capital*

To some extent, the data analysis suggested that the development of knowing-how career capital was shared by all partners while in some cases it depended more on whether or not the partner was working and how demanding their jobs were. A common theme appeared to be the development of some *cross-cultural competences*.

I have met many people from many places and countries, people with different styles. . . It has helped me to be more analytical about why people act differently. (Nina, former HR professional, now studying new profession and starting her own business)

The interviewees' comments suggest another competence they all developed was *people skills*, including general *cross-cultural communication skills*. Respondents also considered the people skills they developed would be transferable to their work in the future:

Those people skills and skills related to the personal self, there has been my biggest development that I believe is useful for me as an employee. It is another thing whether a company or the recruiting management will understand this, but I personally feel it is of benefit to me. (Katie, stay-at-home mother)

Furthermore, all the partner respondents developed their *language skills*. Perceived language skills included learning the local language or improving their English. Improving language skills was also a major developmental task, especially among those partners who were working or were trying to find a job. Some partners felt that their language skills were not good enough to continue in the same profession they had in their home country:

Even though I learned Dutch, I still feel somehow stupid. . . the professional skills. . . feel myself more stupid. Sometimes I think, if I could do it all in Finnish, I would be so much more confident and skilled. (Sandra, a former occupational therapist, who worked in a special education school in the host country)

Just as a successful adjustment to an unfamiliar environment affected partners' self-confidence and self-esteem, it also developed their *coping skills*. Accordingly, partners reported that their *self-management skills* in everyday situations had been improved. Partners also hoped that these important skills would somehow be recognized and rewarded in their current or future careers:

Somehow surviving there, controlling my nerves, knowing I can operate also in an environment such as this (Mexico), makes me feel I am not entirely worthless! (Isabel, repatriated job seeker)

I have learned to be more kind of systematic and to organize things, and perhaps even more, from doing my job (as an entrepreneur). Perhaps improving my work management skills even further, something related to almost any kind of job, where you can apply this (skill). (Amelia, former HR manager, now a personal trainer in the host country)

In addition to those competencies that all the respondent partners seemed to have developed, there were skills developed that were more typical for working partners. For example, those partners who were working remotely had the opportunity to extend their existing *professional skills and expertise*. Remote work allowed partners to allocate more time to information searching and learning on their own initiative:

Actually, I have had a chance to develop my job skills even more in the area of my job responsibilities as I have been able to focus only on that now. . . In fact, I see my skills have improved during this time. (Ava, part-time distance consultant)

Of course, as my days are not as hectic here, as they at the factory (at home), where everything has to be done within eight hours. I have more time to focus on the specific tasks . . . to find professional information. (Thomas, works remotely as a project manager and a board member)

Partners working in lower-level jobs, including Emma who was working as a school assistant, also found their work was a good way to *learn new job skills in a cross-cultural work environment*:

I think I have a pretty much broader perspective on many things than before. It will definitely help. I have seen different styles how to teach (both in the USA and Germany). (Emma, a former special needs teacher, now working as a school teaching assistant)

Those partners, such as Julia and Katrina, who worked in demanding jobs abroad had a great opportunity to develop their *general management skills* and their *international business skills*, including their knowledge of the local business environment, their practical international business skills and their understanding of the distinct organizational characteristics of different cultural contexts:

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... the global working of the banking sector is really interesting. Naturally, I learned a lot about this domain in this position. (Julia, senior manager in the bank sector)

I have gained job experience, and I have learned immensely by doing it. I see things differently. I have work experience in an American and a Canadian company, and now I work in a Finnish company whose main office is in Finland. The management culture, the company culture, and related ethics are completely different. (Katrina, Sales and Marketing Specialist in an MNC)

Interestingly, some of the partners, despite not being in salaried work, argued that they had also gained valuable knowledge of the host country's business environment and markets. For instance, volunteer work was perceived to be a good way to learn new skills and maintain employability:

... I was a secretary and financial manager in the Finnish school. ... I believe this volunteer work was one of these merits and a step for my career and CV. (Suzan, repatriated, now working in sales and marketing)

#### *Development of knowing-whom career capital*

In terms of knowing-whom career capital, the analysis suggested that partners' social networks ranged from nonwork-related personal relationships and social networks to work-related social networks. Typically, *personal networks* encompassed both local people and expatriate communities while among those who were also working abroad, *work-related networks* involved colleagues and other business stakeholders.

Personal social networks were developed through various social events and participation in study groups or by having a hobby. In addition, many networks found by taking part in nonwork-related events (such as those organized by children's schools or hobby groups or playgroups for small children) subsequently proved professionally beneficial. Those who already had experience of expatriation had learned that they needed to actively build their social networks from scratch in each country. Such experiences developed both networking skills and motivation.

I believe that an absolute requirement for a successful expat life is the ability to go forward and present yourself. ... This I have learned abroad; you have to open your mouth about what you want. ... how to figure out things and how to make things progress. ... that is the meaning of networking. (Ella, recent repatriate and job seeker)

Partners who had stayed in the host country longer-term had started to expand their social networks outside expatriate communities toward local networks. This was mainly done to maintain stability in social relationships. Overall, the adoption of an active attitude to the development of social networks which are important professionally was regarded as an important learning point. Once again, partners emphasized the role of *personal agency and using their own initiative* while abroad:

At some point, there was a phase where I just started to push myself everywhere. ... And through this, I got contacts elsewhere. ... networking is hugely important here, knowing someone and getting to places/somewhere through this connection. (Julia, senior manager in a bank)

I have learned to appreciate in myself the ability to build such incredible networks (from scratch and which have been important for the success of her business). (Olivia, music business entrepreneur)

Additionally, for those who were working locally in highly demanding jobs, intraorganizational relationships acted as sources of information regarding new professional opportunities. These jobs also provided opportunities to join prestigious associations, such as chambers of commerce. Overall, building relevant social relationships and knowing the right people were seen as central to career advancement:

One of the employees in my group was a girl, whose mother worked in company X. She hinted to her mother, who hinted at a job for me at the company. I received the hint, but I applied for the job myself and got it. . . If they do not know you in a company, you generally cannot make it into a management position. . . Nobody wants to hire Ms. Unknown directly as a manager. (Katrina, Sales and Marketing Specialist in an MNC)

Then, luckily, I found my current position through networking. I am very satisfied with my current position. (Julia, senior manager in a bank)

The typical expatriation-related challenge in this area of career capital concerns the extent to which these forms of social capital can be utilized outside the host country (Jokinen, 2010). At the same time, the ties and connections to the home country typically weaken or disappear as a consequence of distance (Mäkelä and Suutari, 2009). This was the case with Maria (a TV producer): losing important face-to-face contacts ultimately made working remotely impossible for her. The extent to which the connections abroad can be useful later depends also on the nature of such contacts (job-related vs informal friendship connections) and the nature of jobs the partners have after expatriation. Existing research indicates that international networks are important among international professionals with international responsibilities (Mäkelä and Suutari, 2009) while in purely domestic jobs such networks are less useful, which was the case for our respondent, Sara, who did not benefit from her excellent foreign work experience and the networks she had built during her first stay in Poland. It was only the local Finnish networks that were recognized in her subsequent job search:

When we arrived back from Poland, I was interviewed by a law firm. I had been working for a Finnish law firm in Warsaw, founded a legal practice there, acquired all the customers. . . They told me that since I had not worked in Finland, it is like I have no work experience at all. . . I had no networks built within the Finnish business circles. . . I was left speechless.

Learning from this experience, Sara ensured she maintained her professional networks in Finland during her second and third relocation spells.

Amanda started a business selling Indian textiles and decorative items after repatriation and had a totally different experience. Despite having been a stay-at-home mother during the relocation, social networks she had built in the host country (India) were crucial for the business she started. Instead of socializing with only other expatriate partners, she became acquainted with the local culture and people. Therefore, she personally knew all the stakeholders of her business, including silk weavers and sewers. By starting her business, she could maintain these relationships and help those people earn a living. The transferability of her knowing-whom career capital was hence particularly high.

## Discussion

This paper reflects the experiences of Finnish partners of expatriates who have chosen to accompany their partners on international assignments. The study contributes to the expatriation literature by providing new knowledge and insights into the development of partners' career capital during expatriation. The findings also offer an alternative and more positive image of the partners' experiences than does earlier research with a primary focus on the negative challenges they face. The study also indicates that while some developmental experiences are shared by all partners, in other areas the career capital development of partners depends on their situation abroad. The paper thus also highlights the diversity of partner experiences from the development angle. Additionally, the findings contribute to the increasingly topical themes of expatriate dual-earner and dual-career couples.

The accounts of expatriates confirm career capital theory—with its concepts of knowing-why, knowing-how and knowing-whom—offers a useful theoretical framework within which

to examine and extend the understanding of the impacts of international experience on partners. The results indicate that developments that relate to the overall experience of moving abroad and adjusting to a new culture were shared by all partners. In these areas, the experiences can be seen as similar to those of expatriates, as all individuals moving abroad share this necessary general adjustment process. In addition, those partners who worked abroad in less demanding jobs at lower organizational levels developed some work-related knowledge and competencies. Finally, some partners managed to obtain more demanding jobs at a higher organizational level, which developed their career capital further in a way that would not be possible without such job experience. Overall, such situations were still found to be rare among partners. In contrast, such highly demanding jobs are common among expatriates who often work in controlling, coordinating and knowledge sharing business management roles across borders in multinational companies. These results resonate with Suutari's (2003) notion that expatriation can offer some quite similar developmental opportunities to both partners while adding a more comprehensive understanding of the kind of career capital partners develop in different kinds of situations abroad.

In addition to the finding that *partners rarely worked in highly demanding jobs*, other specific features of the partner situation that distinguish the development experiences of the partners from those typical of expatriates could be identified. The findings indicate that one of the unique differences between expatriates and partners relates to *the number of different domains partners are involved in*, which include those for work, voluntary work, the family and other social relations and various other environments (hobby centers, children's daycare facilities, schools, clubs, etc.) (Haslberger and Brewster, 2009), and the *diversity of roles* they undertake. The respondent partners interviewed for this study had roles that varied during a single assignment or multiple assignments directly following one another or had roles that were interspaced with intervals in the home country. The roles were often temporary, and the partners might have periods of being unemployed, doing volunteer work, studying, being a salaried worker and as a homemaker. Some partners performed several roles simultaneously, so the roles were layered upon each other. Such situations might not disturb all partners but particularly for career-oriented partners in DCCs they were disturbing.

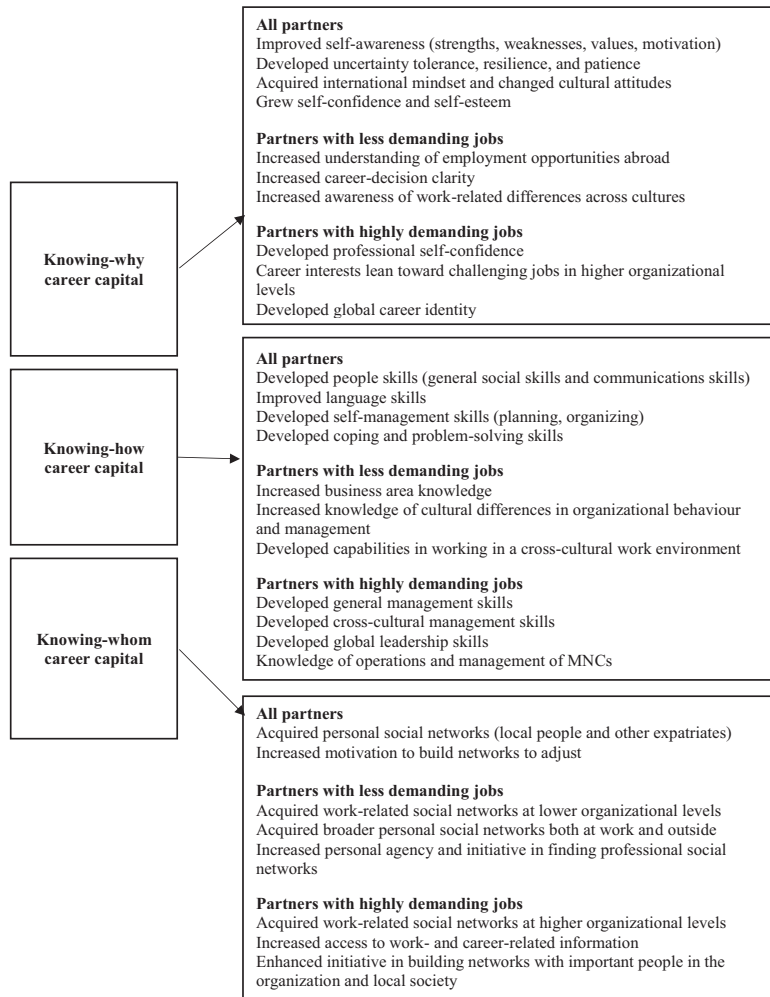
Overall, the expatriates' life situation remained more stable owing to their work environment, whereas *partners faced a distinctly unstructured situation* (Harvey and Wiese, 1998). Expatriates land in an existing organizational unit with defined tasks, and in the case of AEs, the unit is even part of a familiar organization. Expatriates typically receive organizational support and training and can access social circles within the organization, while their *partners are still commonly not supported* as significantly. In turn, expatriates often have very challenging jobs in which the job role dominates their life due to long working hours and the overall level of responsibility. Partners, in contrast, typically have to create their own lives and networks from scratch with little assistance. The diversity of roles, the lack of clarity of the situation and lack of external support create a need for self-initiative and self-management, but at the same time, prompt partners to develop such competencies. The variety of roles also enables partners to have new learning experiences and opportunities to enhance self-awareness through trying different options.

Other issues that differentiate the partners' situation from that of expatriates relate to their employment options and the opportunity to develop their career capital. For some partners taking up paid work was impossible due to *work permit restrictions*, *lack of recognition of the partner's professional qualifications* or *insufficient language skills*. Many partners also have the main *responsibility for domestic work and taking care of young children* because expatriates must focus on work-related coping. Further, partners *lacked important networks* that could otherwise contribute to their efforts to find work. Finally, the *expatriates' demanding jobs sometimes* restricted their partners' opportunities to work full-time. These findings resonate with the results of earlier studies and reports identifying partners' career-



related challenges (see [Cartus, 2016](#); [McNulty, 2012](#); [Mäkelä et al., 2011](#); [Permits Foundation, 2012](#)). Nevertheless, although paid work was not an option for all partners, various career-capital-related developmental experiences were identified. We illustrate these findings on the development of expatriate partners' career capital dimensions in [Figure 1](#).

With regard to the three aspects of career capital, the findings indicate that *knowing-why career capital* develops to some extent among all partners while broader changes take place among those finding new kinds of job experience abroad. The findings also support the view that expatriates and partners share some developmental experiences related to moving abroad and adjusting to a new culture and family situation. That process developed partners' self-awareness, resilience, cultural awareness and self-confidence as has also been reported to happen among expatriates ([Dickmann and Doherty, 2010](#); [Dickmann and Harris, 2005](#); [Jokinen, 2010](#); [Suutari and Mäkelä, 2007](#)). Time spent abroad was seen as a journey of self-discovery and as an opportunity for self-reflection. This journey provided an opportunity for



**Figure 1.**  
Development of  
expatriate partners'  
career capital

personal growth and sometimes even led to the reshaping of the respondent's identity. Expatriation and the related adjustment process can thus be perceived as potentially increasing a person's self-awareness by providing insights into their strengths and weaknesses, values and motives. Participants also talked about developing a tolerance of uncertainty, alongside resilience and patience, which have sometimes been described as attitudinal strategies for coping (Bikos *et al.*, 2007). Based on our findings, expatriation also seems to develop partners' cultural empathy, social initiative, open-mindedness and flexibility. Among those qualities, open-mindedness in particular describes attitudes toward a new culture and its values and members (Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven, 2000). Each of the partners interviewed also demonstrated that they had acquired an international orientation and had altered their cultural attitudes. Successful adjustment to an unfamiliar context was seen as a source of improved self-confidence and self-esteem, which the respondents hoped would help them in their future careers.

Those partners who worked on lower organizational levels and in less demanding jobs also developed an awareness of the impact of cultures on organizational behavior and management. They also learned about job markets in the host countries, which helped in finding a new job when necessary. The most extensive learning took place among those few partners who had jobs involving broader and more demanding tasks at higher organizational levels. In that case, the partners' jobs closely resembled those of the expatriates. As an outcome, these partners' professional self-confidence developed, which increased their interest in working at a higher organizational level in the future. International experience developed the partners' identity toward becoming an international or global employer one (Suutari and Mäkelä, 2007). Those forms of identity would include elements such as a global job market perspective, a strong career identity, a willingness to accept new work challenges and an overall global orientation to life and the career.

Although personal professional development was not usually the partners' main motivation to relocate, self-examination led some partners to revise their professional values and career identities. Additionally, it affected partners' professional interests and career plans (see also Harvey *et al.*, 2009). These findings echo the findings of earlier studies stating that living abroad leads to self-concept clarity and career-decision clarity (Adama *et al.*, 2018) and that expatriation can lead to partners' career identity reconstruction (Kanstrén, 2019). In line with career capital theory, partners believed the self-awareness, self-confidence and recognition of personal strengths, values and career interests they developed would help them in their future careers.

Moreover, in terms of *knowing-how career capital*, the findings demonstrate that in some areas of this particular form of career capital the development experiences were similar among all partners, while in other areas there were clear differences. People skills, including general social skills and cross-cultural communication skills, were regarded as significant areas of development by all partners. Such skills were mainly advanced through interaction with diverse groups of people with various cultural backgrounds. The need to replace lost personal and professional networks and the need to deal with the challenges of everyday life abroad push partners into situations that demand flexibility. Although these situations may initially feel uncomfortable and induce some stress, they assist the development of the ability to understand culturally driven behaviors. Such experiences lead to the development of social skills and cultural competencies as is also reported to be the case among expatriates (see Dickmann and Doherty, 2010; Jokinen *et al.*, 2008). Echoing Bikos *et al.*'s (2007) study results, here the development of language skills was shared by all partners as well.

There were also widespread comments about improved self-management skills (covering planning, organizing and problem-solving skills) regardless of whether the partner was employed. Merely taking care of everyday life chores that demand familiarity with the local culture and local education, healthcare and banking systems seems to advance the

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development of those skills. Additionally, partners are likely to assume the role of chief organizer of family affairs when expatriates have demanding jobs and long working days.

It should be noted that further studies and volunteer work were also considered valuable ways of maintaining skills or developing new ones. Particularly, partners who had done volunteer work or had been unemployed recognized that their language skills had developed. Volunteer work also offered local work experience in the host country and thus enhanced some partners' employability. For some, voluntary work also enhanced their employability upon repatriation by adding new skills and experiences to their resume.

Those partners who were working in less demanding jobs also developed specific business area knowledge, knowledge of organizational behavior and of management styles in different cultural contexts. That knowledge strengthened their competency in working in cross-cultural environments. All partners who worked full-time emphasized the practical skills related to the knowing-how dimension and their development. Regardless of the type of work they did, partners could always benefit from working in a new business environment. Some partners had even changed their profession and thus had acquired even broader developmental experiences, such as when partners started a business that offered new developmental opportunities.

As mentioned above, only a few of the partners interviewed had highly demanding jobs abroad. Accordingly, the job-related learning opportunities for most partners did not equate to those for expatriates and thus in general, the knowing-how dimension might be professionally less significant for partners than for expatriates. Those who worked in more demanding jobs, such as specialist and/or managerial roles, benefited from additional learning opportunities that were not available to most partners. They were able to develop their general management skills, cross-cultural management skills and overall global leadership skills in practice while working in multicultural teams. Working in an multinational corporation (MNC) also offered opportunities to learn about the operations and management of MNCs that use globally integrated systems, transfer knowledge across borders and suchlike. These forms of learning were seen to offer significant future career opportunities.

With regard to *knowing-whom career capital*, the findings reflect the importance of partners' diverse social relationships. Partners' social networks ranged from work-related social networks with colleagues and other stakeholders to personal social networks based around locals and expatriate communities. Often, partners acted as initiators of social interaction that benefited expatriates too. Research on expatriates' networks highlights the importance of personal agency and taking the initiative to find social networks that can benefit the individual professionally (Dickmann and Harris, 2005). The expatriates' partners interviewed shared that perception but also viewed the task as challenging (Taylor, 2007). Nevertheless, as partners' cross-cultural networking skills develop over time, acquiring new social capital might become easier. However, partners' starting points for building networks are very different from those of expatriates because the latter can benefit from their work-related networks and corporate support from the outset.

Those who were working remotely spoke of professional networks, usually from the perspective of losing access to them. However, some partners who were working remotely were able to maintain some home-country contacts, although they felt that the quality of work-related social relationships started to deteriorate slightly owing to distance. In turn, they had smaller professional networks since they could not incorporate local work-related contacts.

Almost all of those who were currently working abroad, had worked full-time when abroad or who had started their own business highlighted the significance of networking. It is noteworthy that especially those planning to start their own business and those who were in more demanding full-time jobs often mentioned professional networks, how important they considered the new networks they had built and how those networks benefited them

professionally. Those partners working at a higher organizational level also had access to networks at higher levels of organizations and local society, which provided opportunities to utilize these networks at work and identify future career options (Mäkelä and Suutari, 2009; Cole, 2011).

In general, knowing-whom career capital seems to be more significant for partners than for expatriates because it has a key role in identifying skill-building opportunities and entering the workforce. Additionally, it seems that the more demanding are the tasks accompanying partners have or desire while abroad, the more important knowing-whom career capital becomes. Our results indicate that partners are forced to invest considerable effort into networking, whereas for expatriates, networks are often made available as a byproduct of the work context.

It is notable that while knowing-whom career capital is regarded as important and new networks are developed, such networks are not as easily transferable across borders as other types of career capital (Jokinen, 2010). Therefore, the value of such networks depends very much on the nature of the future work partners obtain. As a result, those whose future jobs involve international responsibilities can naturally better utilize their previous and/or existing international networks (Mäkelä and Suutari, 2009). In comparison, for those partners who repatriate, the weakening of home-country networks and contacts may be problematic, while AEs can benefit from their networks within organizations as well as from career-related repatriation arrangements. In light of career capital theory, the findings indicate that networking activity can boost partners' future careers, and as partners realize how important networks are, their resolve to build such networks is also likely to strengthen.

Comparing the findings from the current research with those from expatriate studies, it appears that *expatriate partners are more concerned than expatriates about their practical level professional skills and networks*, owing to diminished employment opportunities. This may be especially pertinent for female Finnish expatriate partners who are generally highly educated and have their own careers. The female participants in this study regarded a Finnish woman as an independent individual who earns her own money. Earning one's own money and having professional skills may even be part of the identity, as Heidi stated: "I notice that the Finnish woman's identity and self-esteem are partly built on the professional identity. . . I feel it (work) was a big part of my identity, that I had some skill and used it to earn money." Finally, this leads to another surprising finding; contrary to expectations, the career capital development experiences of male partners who contributed to this study were similar to those of the female partners, which meant our results were not fully aligned with those of earlier studies stating that relocation is more challenging in career terms for accompanying male partners (see Richardson and Zikic, 2007; Tharenou, 2008). This may also relate to high levels of gender equality in the Nordic context where gender differences are not as pronounced as in some other geographical contexts.

If we consider assignment types, research among expatriates identifies some differences between AEs and SIEs, mainly in terms of the development of their knowing-why career capital (Dickmann *et al.*, 2018). Previous research has also argued that for SIEs, the timing of a move and selection of the destination is more likely to be under their personal control (Selmer and Lauring, 2011), and they can devote more attention to the host location's characteristics (Doherty *et al.*, 2011). This suggests that career-oriented SIE partners can also better plan their job-related arrangements and career coordination strategies to maintain or develop their career capital during expatriation. An unexpected finding of this study is that *there were no differences between the career capital development experience of partners of AEs and SIEs*. This finding clearly diverges from the aforementioned findings among expatriates. Similarly, participants in both partner groups shared concerns over being left behind professionally and losing important home-country career-related networks and contacts. The data did reveal a slight difference between the groups, in that *SIE partners were slightly more*

concerned about their professional skills development and the possible negative effects of relocation on that development. This is also a surprising finding and warrants further research taking into account SIE partners presumably having better options than AE partners to plan around their career-related issues.

In terms of the transferability of career capital, our results show that partners can carry some of their accumulated skills with them (see Inkson and Arthur, 2001) and utilize those skills in subsequent jobs in their home country or abroad (Bikos *et al.*, 2007). This was the case with the three partners (Kate, Amanda and Suzan) who had repatriated more than two years before the interviews and who stated that they were in better professional positions when interviewed than before their relocation. The other seven repatriated partners had repatriated far more recently (less than six months previously) and were in the process of settling back into their home country, so it was too early to draw any strong conclusions about how they would be able to utilize the career capital they had acquired. For many partners, international assignments provide opportunities for learning and skills development and encourage them to take the opportunity to be proactive with their careers and explore all the options that the international context offers.

Overall, our results suggest that when choosing to accompany an expatriate, the partner becomes largely responsible for the development of his/her own career capital. The reported findings provide various examples of the importance of a partner's own active role. Consequently, our findings also direct attention to a partner's career self-management skills. As a result, partners' careers, similarly to expatriate careers (Suutari and Mäkelä, 2007), can be regarded as boundaryless careers characterized by uncertainty and flexibility (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996) and the crossing of national and organizational borders. Partners also need to adopt the role of career capitalists and absorb the ideas of the intelligent career, where individuals take greater responsibility for the development of the three forms of knowing (Lamb and Sutherland, 2010; Stahl *et al.*, 2002).

Finally, the practical contribution of this study for organizations lies in highlighting the importance of designing specific and more personally tailored support practices for partners and, in particular, expatriating DCCs. Employers should consider partners of DCCs first and foremost as a potential source of talent, not merely as partners of their expatriate employees. We further suggest that companies could take greater account of each partner's career life cycle, comprising the partner's career history, current career stage and desired future career path. Taking account of these factors would help in assessing the kind of support and guidance that partners may require. Potential support practices might include companies providing partners with career counseling and cross-cultural and language training to support their job search efforts. In addition, support could include providing more information on the host country's job markets, advice on building personal networks and finding (volunteer) work in the new host country that could help develop career capital that would also be useful after repatriation. Companies could also provide support in identifying further professional training or other education and learning opportunities. We suggest that organizations would benefit from providing more support for partners, especially to minimize the risk of costly and unfortunate assignment failures and/or premature returns.

#### *Limitations and future research*

This study has its limitations, which are common to those adopting a qualitative research methodology. One such limitation relates to the small sample size; hence, broad generalizations cannot be made based on its results. Another limitation relates to the fact that all participants were highly educated Finnish expatriate partners. Therefore, the background cultural context of the participants is particularly homogeneous, and the findings are also specific to this population group. More studies with larger and more diverse participant populations would help to increase the understanding of career capital

development and provide more generalizable results. In addition, longitudinal/follow-up research would be welcome. For instance, further research with the same participants several years after repatriation would offer valuable insights in terms of whether expatriation has long-term effects on career capital. It would also reveal the possible limitations related to the transferability of partners' career capital and thereby signpost the long-term impacts of expatriation on partners' employability and future career paths. It would also be interesting to know whether the personal agency and career self-management skills developed affect partners' future career activity. One future research stream might also focus on how the COVID-19 situation is affecting expatriate partners' experiences abroad. For example, has remote work become common among partners, or has it made it even more difficult to find jobs abroad? Could it also be that we will see fewer accompanying partners following their partners abroad while short-term assignments and virtual assignments start to replace traditional international assignments? As an outcome, the impacts of global mobility on partners would become less significant than previously. Finally, while this study focused on partners' development experiences, it was not able to expose whether employers value and are able to recognize such developments when even expatriates with superb CVs have problems integrating back into their home country job markets.

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