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Expatriate partners

Career identity, career capital and subjective well-being perspectives

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Julkaisun nimike
Ekspatriaattipuolisot: uraidentiteetti-, urapääoma- ja hyvinvointinäkökulmat

Tiivistelmä

Tämän väitöskirjan tavoitteena on tarkastella ekspatriaattipuolisoiden uraidentiteettejä, urapääoman kehittymistä ja subjektiivista hyvinvointia. Väitöskirja koostuu kolmesta artikkelista sekä niiden pohjalta laaditusta yhteenvedosta. Tutkimusaineisto kerättiin yhteensä 30 suomalaiselle ekspatriaattipuolisolle tehdyillä puolistrukturoiduilla haastatteluilla. Aineiston analyysissä käytettiin kahta laadullista analyysimenetelmää (narratiivinen analyysi ja temaattinen analyysi).

Tutkimuksen tulokset osoittavat, että kansainvälisellä työliikkuvuudella on huomattava vaikutus ekspatriaattipuolisoiden uraidentiteettien uudelleenrakentumiselle. Heillä on myös useita urapääomaa kehittäviä oppimiskokemuksia. Lisäksi liikkuvuus saa aikaan merkittäviä muutoksia puolisoiden hyvinvointiin vaikuttavissa resursseissa. Resurssien saavuttamisella näyttää puolestaan olevan voimakkaampi vaikutus hyvinvoinnille kuin niiden menettämisellä. Tulokset myös korostavat puolisoiden oman uran johtamisen taitojen, aktiivisen toimijuuden ja itseohjautuvuuden merkitystä.

Teoreettisesta näkökulmasta väitöskirja tarjoaa uutta tietoa kansainvälisen henkilöstöjohtamisen ja puolisotutkimuksen alueelle. Se myös osoittaa, että narratiivinen lähestymistapa, urapääomateoria ja Conservation of Resources -teoria tarjoavat hyvät viitekehykset puolisoiden tutkimiseen. Käytännön HR-toimijoille väitöskirja tarjoaa näkemyksiä puolisoiden ja heille tarjottavan tuen tärkeydestä.

Asiasanat
Ekspatriaattipuoliso, uraidentiteetti, urapääoman kehittyminen, subjektiivinen hyvinvointi

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Expatriate partners: career identity, career capital and subjective well-being perspectives

Abstract

This dissertation aims to deepen the understanding of expatriate partners' career identities, career capital development and subjective well-being (SWB). The dissertation consists of three individual articles, and draws on semi-structured interviews with a total of 30 Finnish partners of expatriates. Two different qualitative approaches were applied in the analysis (narrative analysis and thematic analysis).

The findings of this research show that expatriation has a considerable impact on expatriate partners´ career identity reconstruction, and partners share several learning experiences that develop their career capital. International relocation also causes significant changes in the expatriate partners' condition resources that lead to changes in SWB either directly or through affecting their energy and personal resources. Additionally, resource gain spirals seem to have a more powerful effect on partners' SWB than resource loss cycles. The results also highlight the importance of partners' career self-management skills, personal agency, and self-directed activity whilst abroad.

The contribution of this dissertation is twofold. First, in terms of theoretical and methodological contributions the study brings new knowledge to the international HRM literature and partner research. Also, the narrative approach, Career Capital theory, and Conservation of Resources theory proved to offer a useful theoretical tool to study partners. Second, as a practical contribution the study offers insights for international HRM professionals who plan, execute and assess their organizations' global mobility practices by identifying and highlighting the importance of partner issues.

Keywords

Expatriate partners, career identity, development of career capital, subjective well-being

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Never would I have imagined what a journey I was about to begin when my doctoral studies started almost ten years ago. A journey filled with ups and downs, emotions ranging from despair to happiness and success. But even in the darkest moments I never thought of giving up. During this journey, my own experience of living abroad and meeting expatriate partners with different backgrounds gave me even more motivation to bring this dissertation to a successful conclusion. I wanted expatriate partners' voice to be heard and it came true in this work. However, I would not be here without the support, guidance, and encouragement of many people along the journey.

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Oulu, 26th of October 2021

Kaisu Kanstrén

Contents

Tables

Abbreviations

AEs	Assigned expatriates
SIEs	Self-initiated expatriates
IA	International assignment
HR	Human resources
HRM	Human resources management
HRD	Human resources development
IHRM	International human resources management
COR	Conservation of Resources theory
SWB	Subjective well-being

Publications

This dissertation is based on three appended papers:

[1] Kanstrén, K. (2019). The career transitions of expatriate partners and the effects of transitions on career identities. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*. Advance online publication. doi: 10.1080/09585192.2019.1674356. Reproduced with the kind permission of Taylor & Francis.

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 3rd HR Division of the Academy of Management International Conference 2019, Dublin, Ireland.

[2] Kanstrén, K. & Suutari, V. (2021). Development of career capital during expatriation: Partners' perspectives. *Career Development International,* 26(6), 824–849. Reprinted with the kind permission of Emerald Publishing Limited.

An earlier version of this paper was presented in Työelämän Tutkimuspäivät 2020 (Work Research Days 2020), Tampere, Finland.

[3] Kanstrén, K. & Mäkelä, L. (2020). Expatriate partners' subjective well-being and related resource losses and gains. *Community, Work & Family*. Advance online publication. doi: 10.1080/13668803.2020.1801582. Reproduced with the kind permission of Taylor & Francis.

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 6th Workshop on Expatriation 2016, Catania, Italy.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the study

The globalization of economies has increased the need for an international mobile global workforce. Attracting and hiring international talent is vital for the success of companies and international organizations (Brookfield 2016; Cartus 2016; Shaffer, Kraimer, Chen & Bolino 2012; Stahl, Miller & Tung 2002). Although global mobility has been recently under pressure due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, in the long run it still seems that the need for international mobility will continue. At the same time, the number of accompanying partners and other family members affected by this development has been increasing. The recent changes have mainly implied that the complexity and number of various types of international assignments (IAs) has become more common.

But who is an expatriate and what are the long-term international assignments? In this study, 'expatriates' refers to: "legally working individuals who reside temporarily in a country of which they are not a citizen in order to accomplish a career-related goal, being relocated abroad either by an organization, by self-initiation or directly employed within the host-country." (McNulty & Brewster 2017: 46). Long term expatriate assignments usually have a duration of over 12 months. Moreover, these long-term international assignments can be further categorized into two larger groups encompassing assigned expatriation (AE) and self-initiated expatriation (SIE) (Shaffer et al. 2012). Based on this division, expatriates themselves can be grouped as assigned expatriates (AEs) and self-initiated expatriates (SIEs). The expatriates of this dissertation include both AEs and SIEs employed by either private companies or by public sector/non-governmental organizations (see McNulty & Brewster 2017).

In addition to long-term international assignments, there are also a number of short-term international assignments of various types. Although short-term assignments (Demel & Mayerhofer 2010; Mayerhofer, Hartmann & Herbert 2004; Mayerhofer, Hartmann, Michelitsch-Riedl & Kollinger 2004; Mayerhofer, Müller & Schmidt 2010; Mäkelä & Suutari 2011; Starr & Currie 2009; Suutari & Taka 2004; Welch, Welch & Worm 2007; Westman, Etzion & Chen 2009; Westman, Etzion & Gattenio 2008) are becoming more frequent, it is quite likely that long-term assignments will continue to be an important part of global mobility. They will also continue to offer one of the best ways to fulfill companies' business objectives (Cartus 2016). However, recent changes in the ways people work (e.g.

due to technological changes and the COVID-19 pandemic) has forced companies to reconsider their mobility issues and to reduce the amount of long-term assignments (KPMG 2019), and even implement virtual assignments (Caligiuri, De Cieri, Minbaeva, Verbeke & Zimmermann 2020; Minbaeva 2020). According to the aforementioned KPMG survey, over the next years, 56% of organizations will rely on shorter duration assignments including extended business trips, 75% on short-term assignments, and 46% on developmental/training assignments, and an expected 51% reduction in the use of traditional long-term assignments (KPMG 2019). On the other hand, the need for long-term expatriate assignments continues since there are more global firms emerging, and even small companies aspire to go international (Bonache, Brewster, Suutari & Cerdin 2018). All in all, some of these changes will eventually impact family members and probably decrease the number of accompanying expatriate partners. From an academic perspective, such changes will also offer new directions for current and future expatriation research, as well.

Internationally mobile employees often relocate with their partners (Brookfield 2016; Brown 2008; Cole 2011), thus impacting the lives of their partners. At the same time, expatriating dual-career couples in which both partners are committed to their careers (Elloy & Smith 2003) have become a more important consideration in the international assignment context (Brookfield 2016; Cartus 2016; Kierner 2018; Kierner & Suutari 2018; NetExpat and EY 2018). In this dissertation, the study focus is on the angle of a single partner, not both partners, and thus the expatriate workers themselves are not included. The partners of this study can be characterized as career-oriented expatriate partners who consider their careers as an important part of their lives. They have built up their careers for many years and have been professionally committed to their work. In this context, the partners are part of a dual-career couple, and thus, the concept applies to them as well.

The groundings of this study can be found in the existing research on expatriate partners that explores them from different viewpoints, and specifically on research that explores their identity, role, career, adjustment, and well-being related issues. These central studies have guided me to identify the existing research gaps, find the main focus of my own research, and ultimately find the focus of this dissertation. There is, indeed, a comprehensive selection of expatriate partner research that has focused on issues including the partners' motivations and willingness to accept an international assignment (e.g. Konopaske, Robie & Ivancevich 2005; Stahl et al. 2002; Thorn 2009; van der Velde, Jansen, Bal & van Erp 2017), their adjustment (e.g. Ali, van der Zee & Sanders 2003; Shaffer & Harrison 2001), stress and strains (Brown 2008; Haslberger & Brewster 2008; Rosenbusch & Cseh 2012), partner roles (e.g. Lauring & Selmer 2010), gender issues on the international assignment (Harris 2004; Harvey & Wiese 1998;

Linehan & Scullion 2004; Punnett, Crocker & Stevens 1992; Richardson & Zikic 2007), and company support (e.g. Cole 2011; McNulty 2012). Theoretical choices among research on expatriate partners have included theories such as the family systems theory (McNulty 2012; Rosenbusch & Cseh 2012), social identity theory (Lauring & Selmer 2009), spill-over theory (Lauring & Selmer 2009), and role theory (Mäkelä, Känsälä & Suutari 2011).

Specifically, expatriate partners' career related issues have been studied among expatriating dual-career couples, and this track of research has become one of the expanding research angles into partner experiences (Harvey et al. 2009; Kierner 2018). In these studies, the focus is on how two career-oriented individuals in a family coordinate their careers and arrange their family life in a way that both partners can create, maintain or even develop their own personal careers. These studies have covered relatively similar topics than can be seen in partner research in general, such as a willingness to accept assignments (Selmer & Leung 2003), partners' career experiences (McNulty & Moeller 2018), partners' roles (Mäkelä et al. 2011), adjustment issues (Ravasi, Salamin & Davoine 2013), career coordination strategies (Känsälä, Mäkelä & Suutari 2015), repatriation (Kierner & Suutari 2018), and dual-career support practices (Harvey et al. 2009).

International relocation is acknowledged to be a challenging and life-changing experience for both expatriates and their partners (Brown 2008; Copeland & Norell 2002; Rosenbusch & Cseh 2012). These changes may be related to matters such as social relationships, feelings of security and familiarity, roles, and the loss of professional and maybe even personal identity. Previous studies have reported numerous different daily challenges that expatriate partners face in the unfamiliar environment of their host country. Challenges such as interactions with local people, different obligations, the frustration related to living in a foreign culture, and concerns over health and security in a new environment have been highlighted as potentially problematic for expatriate partners, and are well documented (Brown 2008; Herleman, Britt & Hashima 2008; Rosenbusch & Cseh 2012).

International relocation can also aggravate adversity in close personal relationships (Kupka, Everett & Cathro 2008) and disturb the work-family balance (Harris 2004), and this can result in premature returns and cause distress for everyone involved (Kupka et al. 2008). Different reports have, indeed, indicated that family-related issues are among the main reasons for both assignment refusals and failures (Brookfield 2016; Cartus 2016; NetExpat and EY 2018). However, there are sometimes new assignments that follow immediately one after another or at intervals (in the home country and abroad), meaning further challenges for the partners (e.g. Suutari 2003).

One of the major changes encountered by partners is related to the possibilities to continue their careers. In many cases, partners are not working in the host country, despite having had a career prior to the relocation (McNulty 2012; Riusala & Suutari 2000; Suutari & Brewster 2001). Often, these changes in both the professional and personal fields of life result in the cessation of the partner's career (Lauring & Selmer 2009; 2010; Mäkelä et al. 2011). A typical role transition partners experience is a transition to a 'traditional' stay-at-home partner, simultaneously losing their financial independence (Lauring & Selmer 2010; Mohr & Klein 2004). These roles require partners to take a major responsibility for child care, deal with issues related to housing and family finances, communicate with the host-country authorities, and deal with various daily chores including health issues (Mäkelä & Suutari 2011; Rosenbusch & Cseh 2012). Studies have further implied that due to the cultural differences related to gender roles, male partners may find transitioning and adjusting to new roles more challenging than female partners (Harris 2004; Harvey & Wiese 1998; Linehan & Scullion 2004; Punnett et al. 1992; Richardson & Zikic 2007; Selmer & Leung 2003).

An individual's identity is shaped by both work and non-work roles (Mainiero & Sullivan 2005; Mirvis & Hall 1994; Super 1980), and sometimes adjusting to a new role may create role conflicts that threaten the partners' self-worth and sense of self (Kupka & Cathro 2007; McNulty 2012). Additionally, giving up their own career and job can increase stress for both partners during IAs (Harvey & Buckley 1998; Harvey et al. 2009; Haslberger & Brewster 2008; Kupka et al. 2008; Mäkelä & Suutari 2011). Ultimately, by leaving their own careers behind, partners make it possible for expatriates to have an international career path. But what is the price that partners have to pay in terms of career identity, personal career aspirations and development, and subjective well-being?

As we can conclude from the above literature, interest in expatriate partners has been increasing over the past few years, and the available research now covers a rather wide range of topics. Empirical research on how relocation affects expatriate partners' career identities has been limited, and in contrast, expatriates' identities have gained more research interest, and hence have been studied more deeply (e.g. Adams & van de Vijver 2015; Kohonen 2008; Scurry, Rodriguez & Bailouni 2013). However, due to the important role of the partner (Gupta, Banerjee & Gaur 2012; Harvey 1998; Lazarova, Westman & Shaffer 2010; van der Zee, Ali & Salomé 2005) and the related challenges of relocation and overseas living (McNulty 2015; Takeuchi, Yun & Tesluk 2002), more research focusing on the impacts of expatriation on the partners' career identity reconstruction is needed. The same applies to career capital development, but while expatriates' career capital development has been subject to comprehensive research, the perspective of

partners has not received similar attention. Notably, this is despite research suggesting that expatriation can be a life-altering and developmental experience for both partners (Brown 2008; Copeland & Norell 2002; McNulty, Lauring, & Selmer 2019; Mäkelä et al. 2011; Rosenbusch & Cseh 2012; Suutari 2003). Finally, research has also indicated that how changes in valuable resources such as job, career, social support networks and the overall familiar environment affect partners' subjective well-being also require further examination (Kupka & Cathro 2007; McNulty 2012; Rosenbusch & Cseh 2012).

In current, but specifically in early expatriate research, many of the studies have had expatriates as their focal point, leaving partners as merely bystanders (Andreason 2008). In these studies, research data is often collected only among expatriates, making an assumption that expatriates have somehow been given or have sufficient knowledge of the information concerning partners and families (Bonache et al. 2018). Another weakness with existing research is that it has given principle focus to the negative sides of expatriation and being an expatriate partner, including topics such as stress (Brown 2008), coping and adjustment challenges (Mohr & Klein 2004; Shaffer & Harrison 2001), the cross-over/spill-over of negative emotions (Takeuchi et al., 2002), and to a large extent concentrated on general adjustment issues. As such, far too little attention has been paid to the positive effects of expatriation on partners.

As a consequence of these perspectives, this dissertation explores the under-researched themes of expatriate partners' experiences in the areas of career identity, career capital development, and subjective well-being. By doing so, the dissertation aspires to offer a holistic view on career-oriented expatriate partner's situations, especially in regard to career related matters.

1.2 Purpose of the dissertation and research questions

The overarching purpose of this research is to explore the experiences of expatriate partners, and deepen the understanding of the effects of international assignments on expatriate partners' career identities, career capital, and subjective well-being.

These issues are explored by addressing the following three questions presented in Articles 1, 2 and 3:

Article 1: What kind of career transitions do expatriate partners experience, and how do these transitions affect their career identities?

Article 2: Does expatriation develop expatriate partners' knowing-why, knowing-how, and knowing-whom career capital, and if so, in what ways?

Article 3: How do expatriate partners' resource losses and gains affect their subjective well-being (SWB)?

A summary of the three articles, including the purpose of the study, source of data, research approach, and theoretical groundings are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of the purpose of the study, source of data, research approach and theoretical groundings

	Article 1	**Article 2**	**Article 3**
	The Career Transitions of Expatriate Partners and the Effects of Transitions on Career Identities	Development of Career Capital During Expatriation: Partners' Perspective	Expatriate Partners' Subjective Well-Being and Related Resource Losses and Gains
Purpose of the study	Provide an understanding of the effects of international assignments on expatriate partners' career identities.	Deepen the understanding of the effects of expatriation on the development of career capital among the partners of expatriates.	Explore the effects of international assignments on expatriate partners' subjective well-being and related resources.
Source of data	Semi-structured in-depth interviews with 27 Finnish expatriate partners (of whom 20 were living abroad and 7 had recently repatriated at the time of the interviews).	Semi-structured in-depth interviews with 30 Finnish expatriate partners (of whom 20 were living abroad and 10 had repatriated at the time of the interviews).	Semi-structured in-depth interviews with 20 Finnish expatriate partners (all of whom were living abroad at the time of the interviews).
Research approach	Qualitative approach, narrative analysis	Qualitative approach, thematic analysis	Qualitative approach, thematic analysis

	Article 1	**Article 2**	**Article 3**
Theoretical groundings	Career theory (e.g. Arthur & Rousseau 1996; Mirvis & Hall 1994) Identity theory (Kellner 1992) Career identity theory (Fugate, Kinicki & Ashforth 2004)	Career capital theory (DeFillippi & Arthur 1994; Inkson & Arthur 2001)	Conservation of Resources theory (Hobfoll 1989, 2001, 2002, 2012) Subjective well-being (Diener 1984; Diener & Lucas 1999)

I am the sole author of Article 1. Article 2 is co-authored with Vesa Suutari. Article 3 is co-authored with Liisa Mäkelä. I was the lead author in all of the three articles. I had the main responsibility for planning, data collection, data analysis, writing, and composing the articles, and also for managing the review processes.

1.3 Intended contributions

In general, this dissertation and the included three research papers contribute to the academic discussion by highlighting the positive effects of international relocation on partners, rather than just the challenges or negative experiences they face. First, the study contributes to the discussion by deepening the understanding about the effects of international assignments on expatriate partners' career transitions, and the effects of these transitions on career identities. The notion of career identity is reflected through the theoretical lens of modern careers and identities. The study also adds to the knowledge of how partners utilize their career self-management skills during their long-term stay abroad. Here, career self-management is considered as the partner's ability to engage themselves in career exploration, set personal career-related goals, build professionally important networks, and make decisions that lead towards a desired career path (see De Vos & Soens 2008; Ireland & Lent 2018; King 2004). Second, while the actual research on the development of skills among expatriate partners has been limited, this study aims to demonstrate that international relocation can offer great opportunities for partners' career capital development. In order to do so, a career capital framework with three dimensions of career capital (DeFillippi & Arthur 1994; Inkson & Arthur 2001) is used to facilitate the further understanding of partners' career capital development. A third theoretical objective is to examine the effects of international assignments on expatriate partners' subjective well-being and related resources. Here, COR theory (Hobfoll 1989;2001;2002;2012) helps to facilitate our

understanding of the loss and gain processes of resources that contribute to partners' perceptions of their SWB (Diener 1984; Diener & Lucas 1999). Especially, the dissertation offers a clear and purposeful contrast to the recent body of research on expatriate partners' experiences.

In addition to the theoretical objectives and contributions presented above, the study further provides managerial implications and suggestions for practice. Thus, this dissertation offers guidance for organizations' HR professionals to plan and execute tailored support practices for accompanying partners, and also build comprehensive dual-career programs. As a practical contribution, the dissertation offers pragmatic guidance to expatriate couples in regard to their career and well-being related considerations.

1.4 Key concepts of the study

To aid understanding for the reader, it is important to clarify the key concepts that are used in this dissertation.

Expatriate partner

An expatriate partner is defined as a partner who accompanies the assignee, usually when the assignment is longer than 12 months (McNulty & Moeller 2018; Shaffer et al. 2012).

Dual-career couple and dual-career expatriate couple

Dual-career couple refers to those couples where both partners pursue personally salient jobs with developmental aspects. Both partners are also psychologically committed to their work roles, professions and careers (Rapoport & Rapoport 1969; Elloy & Smith 2003). A dual-career expatriate couple, on the other hand, is defined as a couple who have been at least twelve months on international assignment, and include a partner who was working and committed to his/her career before departure (McNulty & Moeller 2018; Mäkelä et al. 2011).

Career identity

Career identity refers to how individuals define and make sense of themselves, with respect to the work context (Fugate, Kinicki & Ashforth 2004).

Career capital

Career capital refers to a combination of competencies individuals need in order to succeed in their careers. Career capital consists of three 'knowings': Knowing-why, knowing-how, and knowing-whom. Knowing-why refers to issues such as motivation, identity and values; knowing-how to skills, abilities and knowledge; and knowing-whom to professional and social relationships, and sources of information (DeFillippi & Arthur 1994; Inkson & Arthur 2001).

Subjective well-being

Subjective well-being is defined as an individual's own evaluation of their moods and emotions, and how satisfied they are with life (Diener & Lucas 1999).

1.5 The structure of the dissertation

This dissertation comprises of two parts. The first part consists of five chapters. It presents the theoretical framework of the study, the methodological and philosophical choices that have been made, the summaries of the appended articles, and the discussion and conclusion of the dissertation. The first part starts with the introductory chapter that presents the background of the study, the research questions and the purpose of the dissertation, and key concepts of the study. Chapter 2 discusses the theoretical background of the study, including expatriate partner perspective in the context of international relocations. Chapter 3 presents more detailed descriptions of the philosophical and methodological standpoints of the study, including data gathering, data analysis, and quality of research considerations. Chapter 4 provides summaries of each of the three articles included in this dissertation, and presents their contributions. Chapter 5 discusses the theoretical and practical contributions of the study, the limitations of the study, and presents some directions for future research. The second part of the dissertation consists of three individual articles.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The aim of this chapter is to present the theoretical groundings of the dissertation. I will start by describing the characteristics of expatriate partners from different research angles, including the concepts of expatriating dual-career couples, partners' motives and their willingness to accept an international assignment, adjustment, partners' career issues and role changes, and the company support provided. Following this, I will review the literature on career identities, career capital, and subjective well-being, with respect to partners and the international context.

2.1 Dual-career couples in the international context

The study participants all considered their careers as an important part of their lives, they had built up their careers for many years, and were professionally committed. As such, they can be defined as career-oriented partners who are part of a dual-career couple. However, as the group in focus of this dissertation, the concept of a dual-career couple needs clarification.

The usual definition of dual-career couples defines them as couples where both partners aspire to or already have jobs that provide developmental opportunities and have personal salience (Rapoport & Rapoport 1969). There are also studies that focus on dual-earner couples. However, the difference between these two types of couples is that in the dual-earner couple both partners' main driver is to earn an income in order to support their family, whereas dual-career couples are more psychologically committed to their careers, professions and work roles (Eby 2001; Elloy & Smith 2003; Harvey & Buckley 1998; Pierce & Delahaye 1996). Although studies indicate that dual-career couples are common in Finland and other Nordic countries (Känsälä & Oinas 2015; Riusala & Suutari 2000), their number is also increasing internationally (Elloy & Smith 2003). Unfortunately, dual-career couples are said to be more overloaded and stressed, and to experience work-family balance and role-related conflicts more than single-career couples (Elloy & Smith 2003; Higgins & Duxbury 1992). Additionally, having young children can make a dual-career situation even more challenging (van Gils & Kraaykamp 2008).

The majority of expatriate partners who are employed and had careers prior to the relocation do not continue to work abroad (Brookfield 2016; McNulty 2012; Suutari & Brewster 2001). As the number of accompanying partners is significant, then career-related issues may be of concern for a large number of partners (Brookfield 2016; Suutari & Brewster 2001). In the expatriation context, dual-

career couples are defined as *dual-career expatriate couples*, i.e. "people having spent at least one year on international assignment and having a working spouse before departure" (Mäkelä et al. 2011: 189). These career-oriented partners commonly face challenges that limit their opportunities to continue working (Cole 2011; McNulty 2012). For example, partners may have difficulties in obtaining work permits (Cartus 2016; Harvey & Buckley 1998; McNulty 2012, Permits Foundation 2012), or their professional qualifications and/or language skills may be insufficient (Mäkelä et al. 2011; Permits Foundation 2012). In addition, a lack of networks may also diminish partners' possibilities to find suitable jobs, while the expatriates' work demands, including long working hours may further limit partners' career opportunities (Mäkelä et al. 2011).

It should be also noted that these career-related challenges come on top of the other challenges that all expatriate partners are said to experience. Studies have indicated that partners are commonly forced to leave their close social networks behind, which in turn can cause feelings of loneliness or isolation. Living in a new country requires a certain degree of adjustment to the foreign culture and environment, and the partner must cope with different healthcare systems, and education and daycare systems (Cartus 2016; Mäkelä et al. 2011; Mäkelä & Suutari 2011; Rosenbusch & Cseh 2012; Shaffer & Harrison 2001). All of these requirements are assumed to put pressure on partners' lives, and consequently their families.

Having discussed the definitions of dual-career couples in the international context, I now move on to review major traditions and themes in expatriate partner research.

2.2 Major traditions in expatriate partner research

In this section I will discuss the major research traditions and themes in partner research, and what is currently known about expatriate partners in the context of international assignments. The chosen themes I will discuss are closely related to the main topics and objectives of this dissertation. For instance, adjustment is not the main theme of my study, but is nevertheless an integral part of partners' identity reconstruction and subjective well-being. That said, following the general introduction to partners, types of assignments and the characteristics specific to dual-career expatriates, the dissertation moves on to review earlier literature and study findings on partners starting with a discussion on partners' motives and willingness to accept an IA.

2.2.1 Expatriate partners' motivations and willingness to accept an international assignment

Making the decision to accept an international assignment is one of the crucial and the most challenging decisions that partners face in the beginning of a relocation process. Therefore, this topic has also gained considerable interest among expatriation scholars, and understanding what motivates partners to accept an international assignment has inspired many studies (e.g. Harvey et al. 2009; Konopaske et al. 2005; Stahl et al. 2002; Thorn 2009; van der Velde et al. 2017). It is said that partners play a far more important role in the decision process than the notion of a 'trailing spouse' describes (Richardson 2006). Previous studies indicate that a partner's decision-making process about relocating can be described as "a complex interaction of cognitive reasoning and psychological and cultural value factors" (Gupta et al. 2012: 3573). It has been argued that those expatriating couples who self-initiate their relocation can schedule the move and choose the destination more personally, which is not the case with those who are send abroad by their companies. Consequently, the decision to move might be more suitable and reasonable for the career-oriented partner, as well (Selmer & Lauring 2011a).

Although companies have different criteria in selecting their expatriates for international assignments, in many cases, only minimal attention has been paid to partners and children, and thus they have not been included in the selection process (Anderson 2005). Neglecting partners seems problematic, given that the partner's career and job opportunities have an important role in the decision-making process (Stahl et al. 2002). It has been noticed that incorporating partners into the selection process may prevent assignment failures or premature returns due to personal problems (Andreason 2008; Forster 1997; Goede 2020). Considering partner's opinions about relocation is also an important issue to consider with respect to expatriates' willingness and possibilities to relocate. Indeed, a partner's willingness to relocate seems to have a positive influence on the expatriate's willingness to choose an assignment (Konopaske et al. 2005).

In general, partners' motives to relocate seem to be related to three main factors: The partner's career and employment situation, their personal characteristics and their close relationships. A partner's career situation is, indeed, one of the most important themes impacting the decision to accept an international assignment, and there has been an increase in rejecting assignments due to partner concerns over their employment (Brookfield 2016; Permits Foundation 2012). Career and employment situation also impacts the desire to have a longer stay in a host country, or to return home, sometimes even prematurely. Consequently, partners' employment issues are a common reason for assignment refusal (Cartus 2016).

Studies have indicated that partners who have high career role salience are not willing to leave their careers behind for the expatriate's work, and they are also more likely to reject an IA (van der Velde et al. 2017). All in all, job involvement and an unwillingness to leave his/her job can, indeed, be a significant obstacle in terms of a partner's willingness to relocate internationally (Konopaske et al. 2005).

In regard to personality characteristics, adventurousness is argued to be positively related to a partner's willingness to relocate (Konopaske et al. 2005). Also, curiosity (i.e. the desire to gain new experiences and go through learning processes) functions as a triggering mechanism to explore and learn about different career options in an international context. In addition, hope (i.e. an individual's motive to set goals, plan pathways to meet those goals and the agency to induce the required effort to move along a chosen pathway) appears to be an important element impacting upon the willingness to relocate (Harvey et al. 2009).

Previous studies have also confirmed the relevance of close relationships, i.e. those between family and partners to the decision to relocate abroad. These 'significant others' also actively take part in the decision-making process itself (Doherty et al. 2011; Richardson 2006). Hardill (2004) explains that besides being a career-related decision, transnational living may be result of an investment in children in the form of cultural and social capital (e.g. education). According to Thorn (2009), the desire of a partner to move abroad, and especially to the host country, is one of the most important motives to expatriate. Many partners may see expatriation as an important source of new experiences for children, thus motivating them to relocate. Particularly, these families with children do not see children as a barrier to expatriation (Richardson 2006). Taken together, these findings suggest that accepting an international assignment is always an issue which influences all of the family members, and even the extended family of those involved (Suutari & Taka 2004).

Next, the expatriate partners' adjustment experiences are discussed.

2.2.2 Adjustment

Adjustment is perhaps the most widely studied topic in the area of partner research. Therefore, a large body of literature has formed around the adjustment challenges that partners face. As Andreason (2008: 387) points out, one of the weaknesses of early adjustment research was that partners' experiences were primarily studied from the perspective of the expatriate manager/employee, and not from the partner's own point of view, and "used instead expatriate managers as proxy informants". Andreason further argues that there were no real efforts to

understand the unique experiences of partners, or that any efforts to do so were minimal. However, this situation has been improved in later research.

One reason for an increased interest in partners' adjustment is probably that expatriate partners have been found to have a strong impact on the satisfaction and cross-cultural adjustment of expatriates throughout the assignment (Shaffer & Harrison 1998). Thus, the adjustment of both the partner and the expatriate are highly correlated (Black & Stevens 1989; Shaffer, Harrison, Luk & Gilley 2000) and a mutually reinforcing process (Mohr & Klein 2004).

Concerning this interconnectedness, it has been argued that expatriate family members can experience various negative spillover effects (e.g. Lauring & Selmer 2009) and/or crossover effects (e.g. Van der Zee et al. 2005). As Takeuchi et al. (2002: 655) describe: "Spillover effects refer to the influence that expatriate attitudes in a particular domain (e.g., work) have on attitudes in other domains (e.g., nonwork), whereas crossover effects refer to the influence of expatriate attitudes on the spouse's attitudes (and vice versa)". Since these different spillover and crossover effects affect partners' willingness to adapt, they have been also discussed within adjustment studies. As Takeuchi et al. (2002) further note, there might be both negative and positive synergies between partners' and expatriates' cross-cultural adjustment processes, meaning the process is mutually dependent and reciprocal. If either the partner or expatriate fails to adjust to a new cultural context, this might also affect the general well-being of the other party.

Previous studies have reported that expatriating abroad is a process that creates a need for psychological adaptation and the adoption of new behaviors (Kelly & Morley 2011). Additionally, it has been characterized as a process of cross-cultural social learning, and coping with a new situation (expatriation) which is expected to be temporary (Black & Mendenhall 1991; Caligiuri & Tarique 2009). Adaptation to a new situation means going through a profound change, and even the loss and reestablishment of one's identity (Haslberger & Brewster 2008; Shaffer & Harrison 2001). Thus, even a single assignment is challenging for the expatriate and his/her partner (Mäkelä & Suutari 2011). Since frequent moving between regions and countries, separation from families and friends, and adjusting to new cultures is demanding, it has been argued that only a few individuals are psychologically capable of facing these challenges (Forster 2000).

Sometimes in an expatriation situation, as in new situations in general, the individual will have certain expectations, whether realistic or unrealistic. Usually, some of these expectations are not fulfilled, and others are met or even exceeded. The more different elements in a new situation, the more the expatriate partner potentially has to cope with. On long-term international assignments,

accompanying partners face several challenging differences such as building new social networks, learning a new language, and adjusting to new cultures, roles and behaviors, job loss, or taking on a new job (see Louis 1980).

Black and Gregersen (1991) concluded that factors such as considering a partner's opinion about the international relocation, a partner's pre-departure training, and social support have positive effect on the partners' adjustment. Black, Mendenhall and Oddou (1991) identified three dimensions of international adjustment: interaction adjustment, general adjustment, and adjustment to work. Shaffer and Harrison (2001), on the other hand, identified three different partner adjustment dimensions: interaction adjustment, cultural adjustment, and personal adjustment. Here, *interaction adjustment* describes the relations with local people, *cultural adjustment* describes the adaption to different environmental and situational conditions (including local customs), whereas *personal adjustment* is related to one's sense of belonging and feeling at home in a new environment. Accordingly, Shaffer and Harrison (2001) suggest that building new interpersonal relationships, especially with host-country nationals, adjusting to new cultural settings, and building and establishing a new identity is crucial to partner adjustment. Here, in terms of cultural adjustment, it should be added that some studies have indicated that female partners have a significantly higher cultural adjustment capacity than male partners (Cole 2011). In a recent study, Goede (2020) further highlights the relevance of attitudinal factors, and particularly partners' general satisfaction with the international assignment as a way of coping with stress and helping the progress of adjustment. Interestingly, Goede argues that interaction adjustment was not a factor that influenced partners' intentions to return prematurely.

Regarding other factors that impact adjustment, a partner's personality variables have found to be strong determinants of cultural adjustment, of which open-mindedness and emotional stability appear to be particularly important. Family cohesion and adaptability were found to be closely related to the life satisfaction of expatriate partners (Ali et al. 2003; Copeland & Norell 2002). Indeed, a strong and stable marriage has been perceived to have a great effect on partners' perceived adjustment (McNulty 2012). Other variables found to positively contribute to partners' adjustment related to the length of assignment, learning the host-country language, and pre-visiting the host country before the relocation (Ali et al. 2003; Copeland & Norell 2002). In addition, Mohr and Klein (2004) suggest that an older age of the partner, prior international experience, a low cultural distance between countries, and partners' participation in the decision-making process relate positively to the degree of adjustment. Gupta et al.'s (2012) study on Indian origin partners interestingly showed the importance of gender role and the

mentality of marital obligation in partners' adjustment process. Notably, Indian partners may be willing to even jeopardize their careers and personal lives, and give priority to their children's and partners' lives and partners' careers instead of their own. Other influential factors regarding adjustment were personality factors such as extraversion/curiosity about foreign culture and openness to change, support from the family and organization, demographics of the country (climate, language and local customs), and pre-departure training.

Clearly, career and employment situation play increasingly important role in partners' adjustment. Hence, some partners have been found to feel unsatisfied with the fact that they do not have a professional identity (Cole 2011). A loss of career also causes disturbance among the family members (Rosenbusch & Cseh 2012). Cole (2011) found that partners who experience unemployment have a lower interactional adjustment compared to employed partners. Cole's (2011) results also support the idea of male partners having more difficulty in adjusting to interruptions in employment. The lack of dual-career support and inability to obtain paid work can even lead to a loss of identity. In contrast, both professional support and social support significantly affect the construction of (meaningful portable) identity and partner adjustment (McNulty 2012).

All in all, an expatriate partner's success in the adjustment has been identified even as a key to overall expatriate assignment success (Herleman et al. 2008), and Cole (2011) suggests that partners' adjustment issues might be among the major reasons for expatriate assignment failure. Unfortunately, the correlation between employee and partner adjustment is an issue that even today companies fail to recognize, which leads to neglecting to include partners in the decision and planning process (Rosenbusch & Cseh 2012).

Now, after examining views related to partners' adjustment, I will move to review the literature on partners' career issues and roles during an international assignment.

2.2.3 Accompanying partners' career issues and related role changes during international assignments

Earlier literature has examined partners' career related issues from different perspectives, for example, partners' experiences of giving up one's work and career (McNulty 2012; Riusala & Suutari 2000), an inability to get a paid work in a host country due to difficulties in obtaining a work permit (McNulty 2012), problems with qualifications (Permits Foundation 2012), and a lack of sufficient language skills and networks (Cole 2011; Mäkelä et al. 2011).

In the light of previous study findings, international assignments can, indeed, disrupt a career-oriented partner's career and job prospects (McNulty 2012; Riusala & Suutari 2000; Suutari & Brewster 2001). Career related challenges such as assumed unemployment during relocation has been argued to potentially affect partners' attitudes towards the whole relocation process. For example (and as already has been addressed), partners' employment issues are a common reason for assignment refusal (Brookfield 2016; Cartus 2016; Permits Foundation 2012), and especially those who have high career role salience may not be so willing to accept an IA (van der Velde et al. 2017). Partners' career possibilities in a host country may be limited due to the expatriate's often extensive work demands (Grant-Vallone & Ensher 2001; Mäkelä & Suutari 2011). Undoubtedly, this, in turn makes it difficult for the partner to find a similarly engaging and challenging job abroad on his/her own initiative (Bikos et al. 2007a) or even to have a job at all (Mäkelä et al. 2011). Further challenges for partners will arise if there are multiple assignments that immediately follow one another or are at intervals (Banai & Harry 2004; Cerdin & Le Pargneux 2010; Mäkelä & Suutari 2011).

In their study, Bikos et al. (2007b) noticed that partners are concerned about the gaps that occur in their career profile due to unrelated employment and how they impact their career path. Sometimes, partners work in jobs that have no connection to their profession (Bikos et al. 2007a). Receiving professional and social support is critical in order to prevent the partner feeling that he/she has sacrificed their own career in order to support the expatriate in his/her career aspirations (McNulty 2012). In an older study, Stephens and Black (1991) demonstrated that career-oriented partners had significantly better chances to find employment after an IA compared to non-career-oriented partners. Additionally, higher-earning partners would be more likely to find work. Stephens and Black argue that possible explanations for this may be that those partners were more qualified, had more to lose, and therefore tried harder to find employment, or perhaps because their partner's companies provided some kind of assistance in job-finding. These findings also potentially refer to better career self-management skills (De Vos & Soens 2008; Ireland & Lent 2018; King 2004).

Expatriation may present a situation that can significantly affect career-oriented expatriate partners' roles, and thus lead to role transitions (Lauring & Selmer 2010; Mäkelä et al. 2011). Earlier research has indicated that partners play many different roles in different domains such as work, family and social relations, and also the economic environment (Haslberger & Brewster 2008). One role that partners typically experience is a stay-at-home partner role (Mohr & Klein 2004). Partners may feel confused when they try to understand these new roles and identities, since, for example, a professional role seems to be significant for career-

oriented partners (Rosenbusch & Cseh 2012). Furthermore, changes in roles have been found to have a strong effect on partners' adjustment abilities and self-esteem (Brown 2008; Mohr & Klein 2004). As Shaffer and Harrison (2001) argue: How well a partner adjusts to her/his new role, depends on how well the partner can re-establish (her/his) identity in the new cultural setting. But naturally, there are partners who may consider their career-related role less important than their role as a parent and a supportive partner (Bikos et al. 2007b; Lauring & Selmer 2010).

Particularly, role change and related challenges have been acknowledged as an issue among male partners. Due to loss of income, career and status it may be hard to become dependent on the female expatriate, and due to different cultural gender role expectations, losing the traditional role as a breadwinner for the family and adopting the non-traditional role of the homemaker is more demanding for male partners (Harris 2004; Richardson & Zikic 2007; Selmer & Leung 2002; Selmer & Leung 2003; Tharenou 2008). Linehan and Scullion (2004) argue in their study that, even everywhere in Europe, putting a male career on hold is still not socially accepted as normal. Therefore, dual-career couples may avoid expatriation, and hence sacrifice the female partners' career advancement. Consequently, being the male accompanying partner is still rare. However, as an interesting note, males with former expatriate experience, high investments in their education, and higher satisfaction with their jobs, are sometimes quite willing to follow their partners on international assignment. In this kind of an exchange process between partners, both of the partners want to give an equal chance for international career development (van der Velde, Bossink & Jansen 2005).

All in all, career challenges that affect both female and male partners can jeopardize the whole assignment and have been found to be among the major reasons for assignment failure (Cole 2011; Rosenbusch & Cseh 2012).

Next, a look at company support issues is presented.

2.2.4 Company support for expatriate partners

As the above literature review has demonstrated, previous studies have detected various challenging situations that expatriate partners face, and which would demand support from either sending or receiving organizations. Despite the significance of partners' career issues and a recognized importance of company support for partners, studies have shown that both general support practices and the career assistance provision, including the professional and social support offered by organizations, continues to be poorly administered (e.g., Cole 2011; McNulty 2012; McNulty & Moeller 2018; Riusala & Suutari 2000). Indeed, in some

cases companies today may offer even less relocation and general support services than before (Cartus 2016). Therefore, partners can be left home alone and unprepared for the assignment (Kupka et al. 2008), and the situation they confront can become unstructured and distressful (Haslberger & Brewster 2008).

Regarding career-oriented expatriate partners, support practices that have been considered highly important include support such as professional career counseling, as well as assistance in exploring employment opportunities (Harvey 1998). Additionally, Harvey and Buckley (1998) suggest that companies could take more into account partners' career histories and career life cycles. Indeed, the most commonly offered partner assistance is work visa assistance in the host country, and others include, for example, allowances that must be used for designated expenses such as education and/or job search assistance (KPMG 2019).

In her study, McNulty (2012) identified three organizational support types (i.e., practical, professional and social support) that partners were provided with during expatriation. Of these three, practical support was the most common type of support, whereas professional support and social support were poorly provided for or lacking. Professional support included, for example, issues that were related to the partner's career challenges. Social support issues included support to alleviate marital stress and to support socialization within the expatriate community.

In Cole's (2011) study which strongly emphasizes partners' career perspectives, only 25 per cent of partners had received some employment-related assistance from the employing company. Most of the assistance that partners received was job search assistance, followed by direct employment, annual allowances for partners, and cash payment. Family relocation assistance was perceived as particularly important during the settling-in period. Practical assistance (such as help from already settled expatriate partner) was considered more valuable than e.g. cash allowances. Despite these efforts, Cole argues that many of the employment assistance programs for partners are not working as effectively as they should be. Furthermore, according to Andreason (2008), studies also show the importance of host-country language fluency, and therefore it would be important to include language training in both pre-departure and in-country training. Overall, the importance of engaging partners in psychologically meaningful activities could bring motivation and meaning in partners' daily life (Handler & Lane 1997).

As mentioned earlier, a lack of support can lead to deep regret stemming from the feeling that one has sacrificed his/her own career just to support the expatriate's career. Adequate company support can also be seen as a means to reduce partners' premature return intentions. As Goede (2020) states, tailored support programs

assist in satisfying partners' expectations about the relocation, especially if the partners are already taken into account in the selection process.

Overall, partners can be in a very different situation with respect to company support. For example, support for self-initiated expatriate partners is not as similarly available as it may be for partners whose husband or wife is send abroad by their companies. Hence, in some cases the extra support may be expected from recruiting organizations (Selmer & Lauring 2011b). Finally, in terms of gender, Selmer and Leung (2002) argue that male partners need more support especially in finding work opportunities and the creation of jobs for partners. Involving male partners in activities that can benefit their careers has been considered as a key issue for them being comfortable with their life abroad (Punnett et al. 1992).

Next, after presenting the major research streams in expatriate partner research, I will move on to discuss the theoretical frameworks and perspectives related to career identities, career capital and subjective well-being.

2.3 Career identities, career capital, and subjective well-being in the international context

In this section I will discuss more in-depth the career and well-being perspectives that were utilized in the articles of this study and how they are related to the focus group of the dissertation, that is, career-oriented expatriate partners. These include: identity and career identity in the international context in Article 1; career capital with three knowings (knowing-why, knowing-how and knowing-whom) in the international context in Article 2; and subjective well-being through the lens of the Conservation of Resources theory (COR) in Article 3. I will start with discussing the concept of career.

2.3.1 Exploring career as a concept: What is a career?

Careers can be looked at in various different ways, and have been the subject of extensive research over the past few decades. Defining careers is not simple, and studies have presented various ways to explain the phenomenon (Peiperl & Arthur 2000). In the modern world of work, careers have become even more versatile and the variety of potential career paths is becoming increasingly diverse. In addition, individuals themselves are seen as more and more responsible for the development of their skills, knowledge and overall careers (Lamb & Sutherland 2010; Mirvis & Hall 1996). Consequently, during recent decades we have seen the emergence of modern career models such as the ''boundaryless career', 'portfolio career',

'kaleidoscope career', and 'intelligent career' (Arthur & Rousseau 1996; Mainiero & Sullivan 2005; Mallon 1998; Parker & Arthur 2004).

The principal fields contributing to career theory have been psychology, sociology, education, and management (Peiperl & Arthur 2000). Peiperl and Arthur (2000) note that the whole concept of career has been changing over time, which has been reflected in the theories on careers. They further point out that in the discussion of careers, there have been four lines of primary debate: structure versus action, stasis versus adaptation, universalism versus particularism, and institutional knowledge versus individual knowledge. The debate line of *structure versus action* examines to what extent careers are a product of established structures or individual actions. The structured view stems from the works of Weber and his ideas of bureaucracy. The action-based view, on the other hand, views careers as individual actions stemming from works of Maslow (the hierarchy of needs) and University of Chicago scholars. Additionally, many views on careers mediate between structure and action. The debate line of *stasis versus adaptation* refers to how much the world of careers is presumed to stay the same rather than change. Closely related to this debate are discussions on career transitions. The third line of debate, *universalism versus particularism* refers to the idea that organizations and people are the same the world over, or that personal networks can make a difference. The last line of debate, *institutional knowledge versus individual knowledge*, focuses on issues of knowledge, i.e. that either knowledge is a feature of organizations or it resides in the individual. This also is connected to the discussions on an individual's employability (Peiperl & Arthur 2000).

Inkson (2007:4) argues that one of the problems in career research has been "a tendency to think of careers as being about people's experiences in their occupations and jobs and not to look beyond that". According to Inkson (2007), this means an oversimplification of the phenomenon because careers are affected by various other issues such as economic and social systems, organizational cultures, and of course, an individual's close relationship networks like family. Also, Super (1980: 282) sees careers "as a combination and sequence of roles played by a person during the course of a lifetime". Roles such as a child, student, worker, partner and parent may be temporal and change to another role (e.g., due to age or job change), and at some stage of life a person may play several roles simultaneously where they have an impact on each other. In line with Super, Louis (1980) defines career as sequence of both work and non-work roles that are related to experiences that accumulate over time.

It has been stated that careers have also become more 'boundaryless' as they move across the boundaries of separate employers, and a person may even reject some

career opportunities due to personal or family reasons (Arthur & Rousseau 1996: 3-6). Concurrently, individuals have been argued to become 'boundaryless careerists'. Thomas, Lazarova & Inkson (2005: 341) define the boundaryless careerist as "the highly qualified mobile professional who builds his or her career competencies and labor market value through transfer across boundaries". In the international context, expatriates often act as boundaryless careerists. Hence, assignment can be regarded as an opportunity to develop important skills which may advance an expatriates' career in the future, though not necessarily in the company where they currently work (Stahl et al. 2002).

In addition to 'boundaryless careers', careers can be regarded as 'portfolio careers' where a career is composed of various, and even simultaneous, short-term and temporary jobs (Mallon 1998). Another example of the flexible modern view on career is a 'protean career' which does not distinguish sharply between people's work and non-work lives. Instead, it adopts a more elastic concept of career space where an individual's identity and sense of self are shaped by both work and non-work roles (Mirvis & Hall 1994). Further, one of the most recent career perspectives is the 'kaleidoscope career' model, which sees careers as a web where people and different issues are interconnected, and where the career moves of individuals generate changes in other's lives (Mainiero & Sullivan 2005). Eaton and Bailyn (2000) note that careers are not purely individual and linear, but rather shaped by family and work relationships. In addition, circumstances, luck, the actions of others, and education and training play an important role. Finally, a career model often applied to the expatriation context has been introduced. This recent approach used for analyzing career-related development during expatriation is called an 'intelligent career', and the model incorporates the ideas of both a boundaryless career and a protean career (DeFillippi & Arthur 1994; Dickmann & Cerdin 2018; Dickmann & Doherty 2010; Parker & 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. I will discuss these three 'knowings' more in section 2.3.3.

Overall, with respect to expatriate partners, this study draws upon these aforementioned broader definitions of careers (e.g., Inkson 2007; Louis 1980; Mainiero & Sullivan 2005; Mallon 1998; Mirvis & Hall 1994; Super 1980).

Career transitions

Following the changes in the world of work and in career models, career paths are also becoming more unpredictable, and they may involve several transitions. There are various reasons such as individual and situational causes that provoke career transitions. Factors for career transition have traditionally included employer

moves, status shifts, and function changes (West & Nicholson 1989). However, an individual's career transitions are not always conscious decisions or based on rational decision-making, but rather an unplanned process that leads to a new occupation/role (Murtagh, Lopes & Lyons 2011). In addition, Rice (2014) emphasizes the significance of change events in career development. To reinforce career change decisions, people can use different strategies such as describing the decision as being right (constructing certainty), seeing similarities between a new career and an old career (continuity), and perceiving career change as a means to a desired future (adopting a temporal life-span perspective). Overall, many positive emotions also seem to play an important role in transitions (Murtagh et al. 2011).

Bright, Pryor and Harpham (2005) have indicated that even a change of residence can significantly influence career decision making. That being said, from the expatriate partner's perspective, his/her career transitions are caused by the expatriate assignment itself and the career options the partner has in a host country (Cartus 2016; Harvey & Buckley 1998; McNulty 2012; Permits Foundation 2012). Consequently, living abroad can significantly influence career-related decisions and initiate career transitions (see Bright et al. 2005).

As a further observation, Higgins (2001) notes that in addition to individual factors including demographics and work histories, a decision to make a career change is affected by social relations. Thus, social networks may function as a source of career transition (see also Mäkelä et al. 2011). For example, friends may act as advisors and increase an individual's confidence, which in turn may help to overcome career obstacles. According to Higgins, family members represent the most important relationships in an individual's advice network.

All in all, career transitions lead to both individual and organizational outcomes, whether they are desired or not. In terms of expatriate partners, career transitions may generate identity work that requires sense-making of and the reconstruction of their identities (Ibarra & Barbulescu 2010; Nicholson 1984). Consequently, the next section introduces the concepts of identity and career identity.

2.3.2 Identity and career identity

What is identity?

As with the definition of career concept, the ambiguity of the concept of identity has led to a wide variety of definitions. Accordingly, during the last few hundred years, different perspectives of identity have appeared in discussion. However,

what we can draw from these discussions is how the perception of identity has shifted from an early idea of static identity, to the dynamic and ever evolving concept of identity that is seen today.

In traditional societies, identity was seen as fixed and stable, and it was connected to an individual's membership in a clan, tribe or specific group such as hunters. Identity was not seen as problematic, or subject to changes or crisis (Kellner 1992: 141). The transcendental self of the European Enlightenment was born due to the radical break in the way that the self was conceived in Western social thought (Holstein & Gubrium 2000: 4). Principally, from Descartes's cogito, to Kant and Husserl's transcendental ego, and to the Enlightenment concept of reason, identity was seen as fixed and unchanging (Kellner 1992).

Following the idea of the transcendental self, two centuries later, the turn to a social self emerged. Social relations could no longer be overlooked, and self became a social object that was part of ordinary living. This self of modern social psychology is described as a combination of individual agency, optimism, and democracy. Its origins can be traced to the works of the American pragmatists William James ('empirical self'), Charles Horton Cooley, and especially Georg Herbert Mead who situated the self in daily living. Typical of this American philosophical tradition was to emphasize the practical outcomes of human behavior. The self was a reflection of social participation (the "looking glass self" forwarded by Cooley), and in the interaction process, society's members "developed of sense of who they were from how others responded to them" (proposed by Mead) (Holstein & Gubrium 2000: 4). For Mead, the self became a relationship between 'I', the acting self, and 'me', the self that emerges in the interaction (and attitudes) with others (Jenkins 1996: 41). This socially grounded self was dynamic and subject to change in relations to others' responses, thus the self was experienced only indirectly. Thus, the self became a social structure (Holstein & Gubrium 2000: 4, 10, 30). Berger and Luckmann (1991: 194) also emphasized the social aspect of identity and described identity as a key element of subjective reality, which is in a dialectical relationship with society and formed, maintained, modified, and reconstructed in social processes and social relations. James, Cooley and Mead's thoughts were further developed to form a concept of "symbolic interactionism" by Herbert Blumer who was part of the so called Chicago School and one of Mead's students. This time, the social self became increasingly sociological. According to symbolic interactionism, "individuals respond to the meanings they construct as they interact with one another" (Holstein & Gubrium 2000: 32).

In modern society, identity became more self-reflective, multifaceted and subject to change, and was transformed to both a personal and theoretical problem (Kellner 1992: 141-142). In the postmodern world where modern societies become more complex, identity becomes more unstable and more fragile (Kellner 1992: 143). However, it is argued that the self has lost its traditional grounding, and the modern autonomous and self-constituting subject (based on e.g., the Frankfurt School and Baudrillard's "hyperreality") is fragmenting, disappearing and disconnecting. When situated in the postmodern world, "not only is there a story of the self, but it's been said that the self, itself, is narratively constructed" (Holstein & Gubrium 2000: 3, 89).

In sum and stemming from these postmodern definitions of self, in this dissertation, identity is considered as a dynamic and constantly evolving process where the interplay of social interaction and self-reflection has central role in the construction of identity.

Identity and career identity in an international relocation context

When it comes to the international context, previous research has indicated that identity can change as a consequence of the international relocation and its effects on the individual's self (Sussman 2002). For example, according to her findings among expatriates, Kohonen (2004) argues that for some, a foreign assignment means identity change, which on the one hand may be based more on cultural issues (i.e., adopting host culture values and insights), and on the other hand on new managerial competencies and mental maturation. Factors that contribute to identity construction therefore include the physical and mental distance from home, and the unfamiliar cultural environment (Kohonen 2008).

In terms of expatriate partners, it has been argued that international relocation affects how partners perceive their self-worth, and also how they are able to maintain their sense of identity (Kupka & Cathro 2007). Sometimes, living abroad may cause the loss and reestablishment of one's identity (Haslberger & Brewster 2008; Kohonen 2004; McNulty 2012; Shaffer & Harrison 2001). In their study of expatriate spouses, Collins and Bertone (2017) indicated that partners' central identities including their social role and personal identities were threatened or challenged. Overall, these findings demonstrate how international relocation can have significant effects on a partner's sense of self, and if partner is career-oriented, also on his/her career identity.

As already noted, the role transitions that accompany career transitions can often generate identity work. In career research, both career identity and professional identity concepts have been used, and have a resemblance as they both refer to the

ways people make sense of themselves in the work context (Fugate et al. 2004). Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010) even argue that occupation or a job is often a factor which defines for people who they are. *Professional identity* refers to an individual's professional self-concept that is built on one's values, skills, motives, experiences, and attitudes. Professional identity construction unfolds by observing role models and experimenting with different possible 'selves'. Identity is also constructed based on an internal self-evaluation of what kind of professional an individual is or aspires to be, and on external evaluations i.e., positive/negative feedback from others (Ibarra 1999). *Career identity*, on the other hand, refers to a more flexible view of self. Fugate et al. (2004) suggest that career identity not only refers to ways individuals define themselves in the work context, but it also represents an individuals' hopes, fears and goals. Moreover, it is a part of the individual's entire personality, and constantly evolving due to the learning processes individuals undergo (Meijers 1998).

Empirical studies on the career identities of expatriate partners have been scarce, but among expatriates, identity has received more attention (e.g. Adams & van de Vijver 2015; Kohonen 2008; Scurry et al. 2013). Kohonen's (2008) study indicated a strong link between IAs and career identity reconstruction among expatriates. Specifically, career identities are reshaped during international assignments and they have an impact on repatriates' career aspirations. Especially, identified 'identity shifters' expressed new career aspirations and were more committed to their subjective (boundaryless) rather than their objective (organizational) career. However, repatriation was particularly unpleasant for them since they were deeply involved in the host-country culture and well-adjusted to it.

In terms of partners, in the aforementioned study by Collins and Bertone (2017), male partners particularly experienced threatened career identities, whereas for female partners, career identities did not play such an important role as other central identities (e.g., partner and/or mother identity).

As previously discussed, the world of work is becoming more unstable and traditional organizational careers are being replaced by more flexible and boundaryless career models (see e.g., Arthur & Rousseau 1996). Thus, career identities are also becoming more diverse, unstable or fragile (see Kellner 1992) and the concept of identity in the work context needs to be reconsidered. In order to avoid a too institutionalized view on identity, a more individual career identity which is not only connected to a particular job or professional role might offer an alternative (Fugate et al. 2004; LaPointe 2010). Therefore, in this dissertation, I consider expatriate partners' career identities to be a product of their different

work and educational experiences both prior to and during expatriation, and also the roles and relationships they have had while abroad.

Since Article 2 addresses the issues of partners' career capital development, in the next section I will move to describe the concept of career capital and the development of three knowings in the context of expatriation.

2.3.3 Career capital and the development of three knowings

Career capital refers to the skills and competencies an individual needs in order to be successful in his/her work and consequent career. Career capital consists of three knowings: Knowing-why, knowing-how, and knowing-whom. Knowing-why refers to issues such as motivation, identity and values; knowing-how to skills, abilities and knowledge; and knowing-whom to professional and social relationships and sources of information (DeFillippi & Arthur 1994; Inkson & Arthur 2001).

Skills and knowledge are described as key personal assets that are built over time. Career capital theory with three knowings can be regarded as a framework for understanding how changing conditions affect individuals' knowledge, skills, and their career possibilities (Inkson & Arthur 2001). The model has been previously applied e.g., in studies focusing on the career capital of knowledge workers (Lamb & Sutherland 2010), aspects of career capital that business leaders need in order to facilitate their organizational role transition (Brown, Hooley & Wond 2020), on senior women managers' transition to entrepreneurship (Terjesen, 2005), and on the complexities of women's career transitions (Cabrera 2007). Accordingly, in Article 2, career capital theory was applied to expatriate partners because they face role, employment and career related transitions, which in turn may generate changes in their career related skills and knowledge. Given that there is no prior research on the career capital development of partners to refer to, in addition to general literature on career capital, I will next review the existing literature on the development of expatriates' career capital, and consequently on the effects of the international context on the development of individuals' career capital. At the end of the section, I will briefly describe the findings of earlier studies concerning general learning-related aspects of partners.

There are various studies that have focused on the development of expatriates' skills during their assignments (e.g. Dickmann & Doherty 2010; Dickmann & Harris 2005; Jokinen 2010; Stahl et al. 2002). Focus has been on, for example, the influence of multiple IAs on career capital development (Cappellen & Janssens 2008; Suutari & Mäkelä 2007), the cumulative effect of subsequent IAs on career

capital and transferability of career capital (Jokinen 2010), differences in assigned expatriates and self-initiated expatriates' career capital accumulation (Dickmann et al. 2018), and the development and transferability of career capital in international governmental organizations (Dickmann & Cerdin 2018). Finally, focusing mainly on the knowing-how dimension of career capital, research has expanded to studies on all three forms of career capital (Dickmann et al. 2018; Jokinen 2010; Suutari & Mäkelä 2007). I will start the review of these dimensions with knowing-why career capital.

Knowing-why career capital

Knowing-why career capital consists of the energy, sense of purpose, motivation, identity, values, interests, and work-family issues (DeFillippi & Arthur 1994; Inkson & Arthur 2001; Parker & Arthur 2004) that enhance commitment and improve performance and learning (Dickmann & Harris 2005; Haslberger & Brewster 2009). However, motivation can also stem from non-work motives (Inkson & Arthur 2001). Expatriation presents a situation that can challenge established beliefs, norms and values, and hence it can encourage self-reflection and increased awareness. For expatriates this often means self-development, strengthening of their career identities, and a development of self-understanding and self-confidence potentially impacting career paths (Dickmann & Doherty 2010; Dickmann & Harris 2005; Suutari & Mäkelä 2007). Especially, expatriates who have experienced more than one assignment consider the first assignment, particularly, as a journey inward that strongly develops their self-awareness and interpersonal skills. These skills are also seen as highly transferable (Jokinen 2010; Lamb & Sutherland 2010). Issues that have been found to reflect the knowing-why career competency of global managers are related to, e.g. work-life balance, career progression, and finding challenges (Cappellen & Janssens 2008).

Knowing-how career capital

The knowing-how dimension of career capital consists of the skills, abilities, expertise, and both tacit and explicit knowledge that accumulate along the career path (DeFillippi & Arthur 1994; Inkson & Arthur 2001). According to DeFillippi and Arthur (1994), in particular new forms of careers such as boundaryless careers which are typical in the international career context, facilitate the accumulation of a portfolio of skills and experience. Research among expatriates has indicated that IAs, indeed, have a strong developmental effect on knowing-how career capital in areas such as general business understanding, social skills, and managerial skills that seem to develop significantly over time (Cappellen & Janssens 2008; Dickmann & Doherty 2010; Dickmann & Harris 2005; Jokinen 2010; Jokinen et al. 2008; Suutari & Mäkelä 2007). These skills are also regarded flexible and highly

transferable across different cultures, functions and organizational boundaries (Cappellen & Janssens 2008; Jokinen 2010). In addition to business skills, cultural sensitivity and intercultural competence, communication skills, and the ability to see other viewpoints (i.e. a broader perspective) are found to improve. As a means to facilitate the development of these skills, expatriates, for example, actively participate in local clubs and language classes in order to meet local people (Dickmann & Doherty 2010; Suutari & Mäkelä 2007).

Knowing-whom career capital

Knowing-whom career capital is related to the internal and external relations of organizations, professional and social relationships, attachments, reputation and sources of information (DeFillippi & Arthur 1994; Inkson & Arthur 2001). In addition to knowing-why and knowing-how career capital, knowing-whom and social capital (i.e. the network relationships expatriates possess) can be acquired through IAs (Suutari & Mäkelä 2007). It has been found that the creation of social capital is strongly affected by cultural differences, and thus, gaining social capital on IAs may be challenging (Taylor 2007). The development of knowing-whom capital and its accumulation further depends on expatriates' own proactivity and activity whilst abroad. Hence, expatriates' networking skills might be put under pressure, causing strains in their social networks (Dickmann & Doherty 2010; Dickmann & Harris 2005).

In addition to professional networks consisting mainly of hierarchical superiors, colleagues and clients, knowing-whom career capital can be gained from personal networks that stretch beyond business such as family relations, friends, and acquaintances (Cappellen & Janssens 2008; Dickmann & Doherty 2010; Inkson & Arthur 2001). Jokinen's (2010) study indicates that many expatriates do not even think of their personal social networks from a career capital perspective, and they do not create networks consciously with career progression in mind. However, contacts are created in the workplace and outside work, for example through participating in social activities organized by children's schools.

Different networks (especially external) may offer information about career opportunities outside the person's own company. Some studies have indicated that social capital can be regarded as the most important key career capital, and therefore, beneficial in terms of future career (Mäkelä & Suutari 2009). However, with regard to life after an international 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 replace the weakening of home-country connections. As Jokinen (2010) states, in comparison to highly cumulative career capitals of knowing-how and knowing-why, the

development of knowing-whom career capital often starts from scratch on each assignment. Nevertheless, if the expatriate decides to pursue an international career, in some cases he/she might be more able to make more use of his/her international networks (Mäkelä & Suutari 2009).

According to Dickmann and Doherty (2010), if the expatriate feels that his/her company does not facilitate the growth of career capital, he/she may in many cases, become 'career capitalists' and actively start self-managing their own career development (see also Inkson & Arthur 2001). This kind of personal agency means that people must have ability to set themselves goals, make plans for action and strategies to realize them, anticipate likely outcomes, and guide and motivate their efforts accordingly (Bandura 2005). For example, being a career capitalist may require an individual to engage themself in active participation in networking events. As a whole, recognizing sometimes even initially distressful planned and unplanned events as potential learning opportunities is essential, because these events and their learning outcomes (such as various skills, interests, knowledge, and beliefs) may function as a basis of future professional aspirations (Krumboltz 2009; Krumboltz, Foley & Cotter 2013; Mitchell, Levin & Krumboltz 1999).

Expatriate partners and skills development abroad

As already said, existent research has not extensively covered the development of career capital of expatriate partners, and when learning-related perspectives have been applied, the focus has often been on partners' adjustment and coping aspects (Ali et al. 2003; Chen & Shaffer 2018). Nevertheless, some researchers argue that expatriation can also offer a range of developmental opportunities to the partners of expatriates. These developmental opportunities have been found to include e.g., acquiring cross-cultural social skills (Black & Mendenhall 1991), adjustment skills (Suutari 2003), and language skills (Ali et al. 2003). Learning experiences acquired abroad have also been reported to foster overall personal growth (Kupka et al. 2008), the development of a global mindset (Mikhaylov & Fierro 2015), open-mindedness, and a sense of self-efficacy and self-confidence (Suutari 2003; Krumboltz et al. 2013). They can further affect the partner's identity and future interests (Shaffer & Harrison 2001). Overall, although finding suitable jobs may be difficult for partners and jobs do not perhaps correspond to a partners' education level or their previous level of seniority (Bikos et al. 2007a), they may still offer opportunities for learning new skills in a cross-cultural environment.

In the next section I will move on to discuss subjective well-being (the topic of Article 3) by starting with a description of the Conservation of Resources theory which was applied as a theoretical lens in the study.

2.3.4 Subjective well-being in the international context through the lens of Conservation of Resources theory

Subjective well-being (SWB) refers to individuals' evaluations of their lives, life satisfaction, and moods and emotions (Diener & Lucas 1999). As Schmutte and Ryff (1997: 551) state that "well-being represents an unambiguously desirable psychological state". SWB includes issues such as life satisfaction, fulfillment, happiness and positive affect. Subjective well-being can encompass experiences that are linked to some momentary events in life, large segments of life (such as work, social relationships, and marriage), or even individuals' entire lives. SWB describes well-being from the individual's own personal perspective (Diener 1984; Kim-Prieto, Diener, Tamir, Scollon & Diener 2005). Important events and situations (such as international relocations) that change an individual's life play an important role in SWB, and subjective health appears to show a strong relationship to happiness and SWB (Diener 1984). In addition, available resources and any changes to them have an impact on an individual's SWB (Freund & Riediger 2001).

Previous research has already confirmed the relationship between international assignments and stress (Ward & Kennedy 2001). Therefore, as one of the leading theories of stress within organizational psychology and organizational behavior research (Hobfoll et al. 2018), the Conservation of Resources theory was adopted in Article 3, which focused on expatriate partners' subjective well-being. According to Hobfoll (2001: 341): "The basic tenet of COR theory is that individuals strive to obtain, retain, protect, and foster those things that they value". The theory addresses the idea that available resources and changes to them have an impact on an individual's well-being. Hobfoll (2001) has further described COR theory as an integrated resource-based stress theory that emphasizes both an individual's internal processes and the processes related to the individual's environment. Basically, resources are valued in their own right (Hobfoll 1989; 2001), but on the other hand, resources are also valued because they aid individuals to gain new resources or to protect the ones they already have (Hobfoll 2002). Hence, it can be argued that resources also play a motivational role in an individual's life (Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti & Schaufeli 2009).

Hobfoll (1989; 2012) has classified resources into four different resource groups which are condition resources, object resources, personal resources, and energy resources. The first group, *condition resources,* are related to an individual's life circumstances and as valuable work and family resources that are sought after. *Object resources* include objects such as a car or house. They are mainly valued by their physical nature, and for example, as Hobfoll (1989: 517) argues "[a] mansion has increased value because it indicates status". The third group of resources,

personal resources includes an individual's key skills and personality traits such as self-efficacy and people's belief in their capability to influence events that affect their lives (Bandura 1994; 2002; 2012). Finally, e*nergy resources* are comprised of time, credit, knowledge, and money. These resources are regarded as valuable because they help to acquire other kinds of resources (Hobfoll 1989; 2012). One important factor in the context of IAs is social support. In his early research, Hobfoll (1989) stated that social support does not fit into any of the resource groups described above. However, in his later studies he indicated that social support is essential in acquiring other valuable resources (Hobfoll 2002). For instance, unemployed individuals need social capital (i.e. networks) to have a better chance of finding a new job (Huffman, Culbertson, Wayment & Irving 2015). Therefore, in this study social support is regarded as an energy resource.

Stress and reduced well-being are regarded as a result of resource loss or the threat of resource loss (Grandey & Cropanzano 1999). Additionally, stress and a reduction of well-being can happen if individuals invest significantly in acquiring resources, but fail to do so (Hobfoll 2001; 2002). The COR model typically states that resource loss has a more powerful effect on an individual's well-being than resource gain, and resource losses may even result in resource loss cycles. On the other hand, acquiring resources may result in gain spirals (Hakanen, Perhoniemi & Toppinen-Tanner 2008), and Hobfoll (2002; 2012) argues that in positive resource caravans, resources do not exist individually but are interrelated (Hobfoll et al. 2018). Interestingly, some studies have demonstrated that although the COR model has highlighted the severity of resource losses, it is also possible that resource gain might be an equally important explanatory factor contributing to improved well-being (Freund & Riediger 2001). As a further consideration, Hobfoll (2002) argues that in stressful circumstances people seek to identify resources and mobilize them. Hence, resource gain spirals are also more likely to emerge.

If we consider international relocations, they are argued to have a significant effect on a number of different stakeholders (Lämsä, Heikkinen, Smith & Tornikoski 2017). Particularly, relocation can mean the loss of various resources such as social support networks, employment, familiar living environment, and roles. That is, changes happen in work, family, and in life overall. In addition, most of these losses apply to all family members including children (Rosenbusch & Cseh 2012).

Subjective well-being and the international relocation context

As mentioned, subjective well-being is based on people's experiences by describing an individual's mood and emotions, and how satisfied one is with their life (Diener & Lucas 1999). Individual well-being has increasingly gained interest among

scholars, and thus the number of studies on understanding SWB have increased as well (see e.g., Feeney & Collins 2015; Kahneman, Diener & Schwarz 1999).

Based on the findings of this research, there are several factors that impact well-being. Studies have indicated that related to individual aspects, for example, personality traits (DeNeve & Cooper 1998), intercultural personality traits (Van der Zee & Van Oudenhoven 2000), the ability to pursue personal goals (Cantor & Sanderson 1999; Diener & Lucas 1999), a sense of personal agency, control and purpose (Baumeister & Newman 1994; Baumeister & Wilson 1996; Peterson 1999), and the gender of the expatriate partner (Nolen-Hoeksema & Rusting 1999) have a considerable effect on SWB.

In addition, in terms of social aspects, a sense of belonging (Baumeister & Leary 1995), participation (Cantor & Sanderson 1999), group membership (Amiot, de la Sablonnière, Terry & Smith 2007; Baumeister & Newman 1994; Baumeister & Wilson 1996), and close supportive relationships (Feeney & Collins 2015; Myers 1999) have been found to either prevent or increase psychological stress and SWB, depending on their presentation.

Finally, previous research indicates that career and employment (Bluestein, Kozan & Connors-Kellgren 2013; Warr 1999) and leisure activities (Celen-Demirtas, Konstam & Tomek 2015) have substantial effects on SWB. Next, I take a closer look at these factors.

Personality traits and SWB

As noted above, previous studies have indicated that SWB has links to personality traits such as extraversion (e.g., DeNeve & Cooper 1998). In addition, there is some evidence that SWB is related to cognitive traits including self-esteem and optimism. Especially, high self-esteem seems to be a significant predictor of SWB (Diener 1984; Diener & Lucas 1999; Schmutte & Ryff 1997). In the international context, intercultural personality traits: emotional stability, cultural empathy, social initiative, open-mindedness, and flexibility can be regarded as coping resources that add to subjective well-being in a new and unfamiliar cultural environment, and which are positively linked to life satisfaction. Among those traits, social initiative describes how actively an individual engages in social situations, whereas open-mindedness describes attitudes toward new cultural experiences, values, and associated members (Ali et al. 2003; Van Erp, Van der Zee, Giebels & Van Duijn 2014; Van der Zee & Van Oudenhoven 2000).

Goals, personal control of environment and SWB

As Diener and Lucas (1999) note, personality comprises not only traits, but also goals that individuals aspire to. This means we also need to understand the things in life that motivate behaviors. According to Cantor and Sanderson (1999), well-being increases when individuals are able to pursue personal, realistic and motivating goals that the individual intrinsically values. Also, the ability to adapt to changing situations and have personal control over them increases well-being and creates a sense of personal agency and purpose (Baumeister & Newman 1994; Baumeister & Wilson 1996; Peterson 1999). In terms of expatriate partners, the sense of control may be challenged in a changed environment, and for example, communicating in the local language may become a source of stress and depression. A study by Herleman et al. (2008) indicated that psychological comfort with the living environment is positively correlated with an expatriate partner's life satisfaction, and a negative correlation can be found in relation to their experienced stress and depression. The importance of a sense of control is highlighted in Diener's (1984) notion that even pleasant events do not promote SWB, if the individual has a feeling of a lack of control over them.

Gender and SWB

Both well-being research and expatriate research have pointed out some gender differences in well-being. Among well-being studies, explanations for gender differences in moods and behaviors range from biological explanations, personality explanations, and social context explanations (Nolen-Hoeksema & Rusting 1999). Nolen-Hoeksema and Rusting (1999) argue that women have more different roles in their daily lives than men which overload them and expose them to stress. Women are also more often expected to express emotions such as sadness, fear and happiness than men.

Earlier expatriate research has argued that being an expatriating male partner may be harder due to various reasons such as role change, loss of income, and career challenges (Harris 2004; Harvey & Wiese 1998; Linehan & Scullion 2004; Richardson & Zikic 2007; Selmer & Leung 2002; Tharenou 2008; van der Velde et al. 2005). Different cultural gender roles also play an especially important role for male partners. Oishi, Diener, Choi, Kim-Prieto and Choi (2007) have demonstrated that cultural differences affect how life events impact individuals, and for example, how a role change to a traditional stay-at-home parent can be challenging for them. Consequently, expatriation may have greater negative effects on male partners' well-being and more support is therefore needed (Selmer & Leung 2002).

Sense of belonging, group membership and SWB

Participation, goals and tasks give both meaning and structure, and social well-being to everyday life. The need to belong is an essential part of well-being, and loneliness and isolation are linked to negative effects on health, adjustment and overall well-being (Baumeister & Leary 1995). Studies have indicated that international relocation affects partners' sense of belonging and their personal control of environment, circumstances, and life (Ali et al. 2003; Baumeister & Newman 1994; Baumeister & Wilson 1996; Black & Mendenhall 1991; Caligiuri & Tarique 2009; Kelly & Morley 2011; Peterson 1999). Overall, participation and meaningful personal goals help individuals cope with different challenges. Although in changed circumstances it can be challenging to find new ways to participate, the situation also presents new opportunities for experiencing well-being. However, people need to have the right resources which open doors to their participation. These resources include issues such as personal resources (health, traits etc.), social resources (social networks and social support), and material resources (status, income) (Cantor & Sanderson 1999).

Consequently, after a major change in life such as moving to a new country, becoming part of a new group becomes crucial. But this process can cause clashes between new and old social identities (Amiot et al. 2007). In addition, self-worth can depend on whether one belongs to a particular social group (Baumeister & Newman 1994; Baumeister & Wilson 1996). However, it should be noted that although links between social contacts and SWB have been discovered in studies, researchers are not always certain about the direction of influence, and thus it could be that when people are happier, they are also more sociable (Diener 1984).

Close social relationships and SWB

Committed and supportive relationships can result in higher levels of subjective well-being (Feeney & Collins 2015; Myers 1999). Unfortunately, it has been stated that these important social resources are often lost due to international relocation (Cantor & Sanderson 1999), often leading to isolation from friends and extended family (Brown 2008; Rosenbusch & Cseh 2012). In terms of close relationships, family and family cohesion (defined as "the emotional bonding that family members have toward one another": Olson 2000: 145) are regarded as central resources of SWB (Hobfoll et al. 2018). Westman (2001) describes family as a social system in which members are linked to each other, and where changes that affect one member will affect changes in others. The extent to which a couple's relationship is stable also relates to the partner's well-being (Ali et al. 2003; McNulty 2015), and indeed, research on expatriate couples has strongly

highlighted the interconnectedness of couples' life satisfaction (Van der Zee et al. 2005).

Earlier in section 2.2.2 (adjustment), it was discussed that spillover and crossover effects significantly affect expatriate family members' well-being. It is known that family members play different roles in different domains such as the work domain, family domain, social relations, and the economic environment. In order to cope in a new environment, family members must come to terms with each of these individual domains. While the expatriate employee remains in a relatively stable and familiar office situation, partners do not usually get sufficient support in this distinctly unstructured situation (Harvey & Wiese 1998; Haslberger & Brewster 2008).

Because the domains are not isolated from each other, there is spillover from one domain into another. If an individual experiences more conflict in one domain, he/she has fewer resources to fulfill his/her role in another domain (Grandey & Cropanzano 1999). For example, an expatriate's demanding work may leave fewer resources available for demands in family domain. In their study on expatriate compound life, Lauring and Selmer (2009) found that since the boundaries between home and work became blurred, reciprocal spill-over effects between work and home occurred. In addition to spillover, family members may also experience crossover between each other. The results of a study by Van der Zee et al. (2005) clearly supported that the stressors of one partner had an impact on the other partner, i.e. that there was a crossover effect between individuals. Thus, the distress experienced by one partner causes increased feelings of distress in the other, and the main source of distress was related to the partners' home situation.

Furthermore, family members may be jointly stressed by a lack of time spent together, and by the uncertainty surrounding their future after relocation. Long working hours, multiple business trips and professional demands may have a negative effect on expatriates' personal lives and their family responsibilities (Grant-Vallone & Ensher 2001). This also is likely to affect the partner's personal situation and well-being. Sometimes relocation can be a so challenging and significant source of stress that the expatriate marriage fails. McNulty (2015) has found two major reasons for expatriate divorce. The first one she describes as a core issue in the marriage that has already existed before going abroad. These include issues of alcoholism, mental health problems, or domestic violence which continue also while abroad. The second one is the expatriate culture itself that negatively influences one or both partners. McNulty notes that the expatriate culture can create a form of 'group think' that results in behavior that might be

contrary to how people would behave in their home settings, including infidelity, sexual misconduct, and workaholism.

However, despite these quite pessimistic research findings, on a positive note it should be emphasized that positive events can also cross over to the other partner creating positive feelings (Westman 2001). But it cannot be denied that, all in all, expatriate family members are said to face more SWB affecting demands than family members in domestic settings (Haslberger & Brewster 2008).

Career and SWB

As Bluestein et al. (2013: 264) note, "work plays a complex role in people's lives and that its absence can be felt across a broad array of human experiences". Thus, career and employment also affect most individuals' well-being (Bluestein et al. 2013; Warr 1999). Based on those thoughts and the evidence of previous research, being unemployed is among the major stressors expatriate partners experience abroad (Bikos & Kocheleva 2013; Haslberger & Brewster 2008). The difficulty of continuing his/her career can challenge the partner's belief in themself, and in the worst case, result in as Brown (2008: 1025) describes, a "reduced self". In other words, a lowered self-esteem following on from feeling less valued and competent.

Clearly, the career situation can become emotionally demanding, and mixed feelings can come into play, shifting from optimism to unhappiness. For example, Bikos et al. (2007a) found that partners' optimism about finding work changed to pessimism and unhappiness after only a few months because they were unsuccessful in finding a job that corresponded to their career or were left unemployed. In a later study, Bikos and Kocheleva (2013) revealed that the more important the occupational role is for the expatriate partner, the greater the potential for feeling psychological distress. Furthermore, losing other partner's salary often affects the family's overall income and economic situation. This concern is important to acknowledge, since the improved income is found to relate positively to an expatriate partner's life satisfaction (Ali et al. 2003). Looking on the bright side, however, some studies have indicated that, for example, meaningful hobbies may prevent reduced SWB during unemployment, and different activities and social support together can support partners' well-being so that the feelings of stress are reduced (Celen-Demirtas et al. 2015; Handler & Lane 1997; Huffman et al. 2015).

Now, after discussing the theoretical basis of study, the dissertation shifts to present its methodological considerations.

3 METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this chapter I present the methodology I selected for this dissertation. I also describe the research settings. The discussion starts with the philosophical assumptions of the study and the researcher's background. After that, I discuss the qualitative research approach adopted in this study, including the research process, data collection, data analysis, and research quality aspects.

3.1 Philosophical considerations of the dissertation

The overarching purpose of this research was to give voice to expatriate partners, and to explore their experiences and deepen the understanding of the effects of international relocation on partners' career identities, career capital, and subjective well-being.

Certain philosophical and methodological standpoints have guided this research process. The research paradigm contains a researcher's assumptions of ontology, epistemology, and methodology. It can be defined as "the basic belief system or worldview that guides the investigator, not only in choices of method but in ontologically and epistemologically fundamental ways" (Guba & Lincoln 1994: 105). *Ontology* is concerned with the nature of reality and the nature of human beings in the world (Denzin & Lincoln 2018: 97), and hence, it reflects what can be known about reality (Guba & Lincoln 1994: 108). *Epistemology* deals with the questions of "How do I know the world?" and "What is the relationship between the inquirer and the known?" *Methodology* is related to finding the best ways of gaining knowledge about the world (Denzin & Lincoln 2018: 97). Thus, it ponders how the inquirer can find out what he/she believes can be found (Guba & Lincoln 1994: 108).

Earlier, science and research were dominated by positivistic beliefs about ontological realism and the use of mainly quantitative experimental methods. However, positivism could not offer sufficient tools for understanding peoples' subjective experiences and how they make sense of and interpret them. Thus, research has later witnessed the emergence of constructivism and ontological relativism (see Angen 2000; Guba & Lincoln 1994: 109). The philosophical background of constructivist research can be found in hermeneutics and phenomenology which are concerned with subjective and shared meanings (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008: 18). In short, constructivism and interpretivist approaches are related in a sense that they both adopt *a relativist ontology*, i.e. they assume that there are multiple realities; a *transactional epistemology,* i.e. that people build their social reality in interaction, and based on their experiences,

knowledge is socially constructed, understanding is co-created between researcher and research subject; and a *hermeneutical/dialectical methodology,* i.e. a naturalistic set of methodological procedures that is used in collecting and analyzing empirical material. The goal of qualitative research is to understand and interpret phenomena through meanings obtained from research participants' experiences (Denzin & Lincoln 2011: 13; Guba & Lincoln 1994: 109; Lincoln, Lynham & Guba 2018: 110). From a personal and reflective perspective, constructivism and interpretivist paradigm also best describe my view of the world and the actions that take place in it.

This study shows that there are, indeed, multiple realities as respondents view, make sense, and interpret their experiences differently, and as a researcher, I also interpret and make sense of these accounts through my own reality. Interpretation and sensemaking can be characterized as a retrospective social process that draws from meaningful lived experiences, and happens through communication, i.e. through talk, discourse and conversation (Weick 1995: 24, 41). Lincoln et al. (2018: 117) describe that "we are shaped by our lived experiences, and these will always come out in the knowledge we generate as researchers and in the data generated by our subjects". Thus, in this study the knowledge has been teased out (or extracted) from expatriate partners' lived subjective experiences, and co-created in interaction among the investigator and respondents. According to Guba and Lincoln (1994: 111), in constructivism, researchers and respondents are interactively linked and findings are created in the investigation process. Therefore, I have tried to get as close as possible to the partners' experiences and let them express them with their own voice, and not, for example, by using expatriates as proxy informants.

People build their social reality in interaction and based on their experiences. To bring out the research subjects' personal viewpoints, in constructivist and interpretive approaches, research material is collected from natural and real situations by using qualitative naturalistic methods such as interviewing (Angen 2000; Denzin & Lincoln 2000: 2–5; Janesick 2000: 384). Accordingly, I regarded interviews as the best way to collect research material for my study.

Strauss and Corbin (1998: 11) see the benefits of qualitative research in that it can be used to infer multifaceted details of phenomena related to topics such as feelings, emotions and thought processes. Qualitative research material is always interpreted from the unique viewpoint of the research subject. However, from a methodological perspective, flexibility is typical to qualitative research, meaning, for example, the formation of a research plan during the research process and also

according to research context (Kvale 1996: 54–55; Silverman 2000: 2–13, 88–91; 2005: 5–15).

Qualitative methods such as interviews involve an active interaction and dialogue between the study participants and the researcher (Riessman 2008: 109). In this interaction, the researcher makes sense of the meaning of the participant's story (Riessman 2008: 116). Stemming from this, the researcher's own background and assumptions can potentially affect and shape any interpretations. Therefore, I will next discuss my background as a researcher.

Researcher's background

In assessing the quality of the research study, my role as a research scientist, as a producer of knowledge, and my status regarding the research subject needs to be reflected on. According to Angen (2000), good people skills, creativity, patience and persuasiveness, along with a need to be passionately involved in the research topic are characteristics of a good researcher. A researcher can be described as an instrument through which the topic is revealed. In constructivism, the inquirer position is seen as being a "passionate participant" and a facilitator of interaction between the inquirer and participants. Thus, the researcher becomes a co-constructor of knowledge (Lincoln et al. 2018: 112, 124). As Janesick (2000: 385) describes, the researcher cannot detach himself/herself from the starting values of the study, as they affect how we understand the research subject and guide the choices of the research scientist. Angen (2000: 385) argues that: "Interpretive researchers assume that reality as we can know it is construed intrasubjectively and intersubjectively through the meanings and understandings garnered from our social world. There can be no understanding without interpretation." Accordingly, objective reality can never be truly "captured" (Denzin & Lincoln 2000: 5).

Regarding my own background as a researcher, I had a personal relationship with the research topic due to my own experiences as an expatriate partner. These experiences can be now described as driving forces of my research. In 2008, I first relocated due to my husband's work for two years to the Netherlands. During that time, I got to know and made friends with several Finnish and foreign highly educated expatriate partners who had left their close social support networks, work and careers behind. I was curious to hear their stories about leaving "everything", and at the same time fascinated about the several ways that they had coped, or at least tried to cope, with the situation. My discussions with these people inspired my interest in wanting to know more about the impacts of international assignments on expatriate partners' well-being, and especially on their careers and skills. I started to search for information but was surprised to find how scarce the

research with data collected among partners was. After repatriation and facing my own career-related challenges caused by the relocation, my interest towards the topic grew, and hence, finally at the end of 2011 I contacted the University of Vaasa and enquired whether I could start conducting research and do a PhD on the topic. In 2012, I relocated for a second time with my family due to my husband's work, only this time I was already starting my own research. I soon realized that this second relocation to Canada was a great opportunity for me to deepen my knowledge on partner issues, both through new discussions and observations, and especially through the possibility to act as a visiting scholar at the local university.

Consequently, from the beginning of my dissertation process I had a good subjective knowledge and understanding of the phenomena based on my experiences, and therefore, was already quite familiar with the context of the research and the unit of analysis (partners). But, of course, subjective experience alone is not enough to conduct quality research, and can in some cases be even a potential source of research bias. In order to acquire a wider understanding of expatriation, international assignments and the challenges related to accompanying partners and expatriate dual-career couples, I conducted a thorough literature review of scientific articles and books that explore partners from different viewpoints, and specifically in regard to identity, role, career, adjustment and well-being related perspectives.

Naturally, my own experiences also acted as a resource for finding the research gaps and formulating research questions, and even selecting respondents. Based on the field notes I had written in Autumn 2015 before the interviewee selection, I had several issues to consider, such as whether my background would potentially affect my choices regarding the participants, the nature of interview agenda, and my role in the interview situation. In terms of choosing the study participants and determining the selection criteria, I had written down notes that addressed whether I should include those partners whom I already knew, or only those I did not know beforehand. The questions I had written down included, for example: 'Can interviewing those I know hamper our relationship, or is it possible that with my own actions I can violate or harm a trust between us?' As a result of these considerations, I eventually decided to include mainly those partners who were unknown to me.

Despite how contradictory the participant's experiences were to my own, I did not try to squeeze them to fit my own perceptions. Rather, I appreciated them (as experiences) for the way they were. This also happened because I soon realized that the interviews offered me a great learning experience. As a researcher, I

learned to see in how many various ways the basically same situation can be experienced, and that there are, indeed, multiple realities.

3.2 Qualitative research process

3.2.1 Data collection

As already noted above, the goal of qualitative research is to give a deeper understanding of the research subject's experiences, and to consider them as a unique phenomenon. Therefore, in this study I chose interviews as the most suitable method for data gathering. The research data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews. Although using interviews as a method of scientific data gathering is a relatively recent phenomenon, it has gone through significant changes and developments. From being originally a quite straightforward procedure and formal way of collecting data, it has become a more interactional event shared by two or more equally active participators. Today, the interview method is recognized as a particularly significant means to examine the research subjects' personal viewpoints and experiences, also beyond the areas of social sciences. It has even been argued that the experience itself has now become generated and mediated by talk, and thus the reality we live in has become narratively shaped (Gubrium & Holstein 2012: 27–39). Additionally, in the postmodern era, both interviewer and interviewee construct their narratives together in collaboration, in order to produce research data (Borer & Fontana 2012: 47).

There are differing grounds for selecting the participants for interviews. In the selection of interviewees, both the sample characteristics and sample size are to be taken into account. These issues depend, for example, on the complexity of the studied phenomenon, the purpose of the study, and whether a numerical analysis is planned to be conducted (Morse 2012: 195). I used different means to find and select participants for this study. The biggest group of participants were found through a large survey that included members of the Finnish trade union 'The Academic Engineers and Architects in Finland'. These expatriate survey participants were working and living outside of Finland at the time. As part of the survey, expatriates were asked to give their partners' contact information, who were then invited to participate in their own survey. In the partner survey, participants had an opportunity to express their interest to be interviewed later on. I contacted those who were interested via email, introduced myself and the topic of my study, and asked whether they were still willing to take part in the interviews. Fortunately, the majority of them were still keen to participate. In addition to these

partners, I selected some interview participants from my own expatriate network. Finally, as a third means to find participants, the snowball sampling method (Robinson 2014) was used, and existing interviewees provided the contact information of further potential participants, and so a few more partners were recruited.

Since career concerns play such an important role in my study, this factor also had to be taken into account in participant selection. Hence, the majority of the selected interviewees described themselves as particularly career-oriented. In addition, all of the partners considered their careers to be an important part of their life roles. The partners had worked and built their careers actively before their relocation, the majority of them over the course of several years. Those few partners who had taken parental leave just prior to the assignment were also included in the study because they all had plans to return to working life after their parental leave.

In total, 30 partners were interviewed. I conducted most of the interviews during November and December in 2016. Of these interviews, 6 were face-to-face interviews, 23 were conducted using Skype, and one was a telephone interview. Thus, the internet provided a practical tool for synchronous real-time online interviews and data collection, in a case where the unit of analysis (research participants) consisted of globally dispersed individuals in different time zones (James & Busher 2012: 179). The interviews lasted between 46 and 140 minutes, and were all recorded and transcribed for analysis. While writing the report, the originally Finnish verbatim quotes were translated into English.

The interviewees included 26 female partners and four male partners, and their ages ranged from 29 to 55 years old. Almost all of them (27 partners) had children. In terms of educational background, 18 of them had a Master's degree level education, and 9 had Bachelor's degree level, so the majority were highly educated. At the time when I conducted interviews, 20 partners were living abroad, and 10 partners had already repatriated; seven were quite recently repatriated (less than six months previously) and three had repatriated a couple of years earlier.

Regarding the assignment type, I divided participants into two groups according to the assignment type of the leading partner (i.e., the expatriate due to whose work the family had moved abroad), as Assigned and Self-initiated expatriate assignments. This typology describes the type of the assignment on which the expatriates with their families were abroad, and whether the expatriates were sent abroad by their home organizations (assigned expatriates i.e., AEs) or whether they initiated their own expatriation and job search abroad (self-initiated expatriates i.e., SIEs). In Article 1, I excluded three of the partners because they

had repatriated more than two years previously. Seven of the partners had repatriated quite recently (less than six months ago) and were thus settling back home. In Article 2, all 30 interviewees were included. In Article 3, the final data consists of those 20 interviewees who were living abroad. The demographics of the interviewees are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Demographics of the participants

Pseudonym	Age	Education degree	Children	Host countries	Years abroad in total	Assignment type of leading partner
Emma	43	Master's	3	Germany, USA, Germany	5	AE
Anita	35	Bachelor's	No	Germany, USA	5	AE
Oliver	37	Master's	2	Belgium	1.5	AE
Thomas	42	Other[a]	2	China, Great-Britain	8	AE
Katie	38	Master's	2	China, USA	4	AE
Eva	41	Other[b]	1	Chile, Canada, USA	5	AE
Maria	36	Bachelor's	No	USA	2	AE
Jack	46	Other[c]	2	France	4	AE
Emilia	36	Master's	2	UK, France	4	SIE
Sofia	48	Bachelor's	2	Sweden, The Netherlands, Canada	12	SIE
Joanne	36	Master's	2	Germany, The Netherlands	6	SIE
Amelia	37	Master's	No	The Netherlands	1.5	SIE
Julia	50	Bachelor's	2	UK, Germany, Canada	11	SIE
Nina	37	Master's	2	UK, The Netherlands, Switzerland	9	SIE
Sandra	37	Master's	2	The Netherlands	8	SIE
Olivia	37	Master's	2	The Netherlands	6	SIE
Katrina	46	Master's	2	Canada	7	SIE
Ava	35	Master's	2	Switzerland	2	SIE
Heidi	37	Master's	2	Switzerland	1.5	SIE
Hannah	35	Master's	1	The Netherlands	1.5	SIE
Erin	41	Bachelor's	2	USA	3	AE
Ella	39	Bachelor's	3	USA, Canada	6	AE

Pseudonym	Age	Education degree	Children	Host countries	Years abroad in total	Assignment type of leading partner
Isabel	46	Master's	2	Argentina, Spain, Mexico, Mexico	9	AE
Kate	42	Bachelor's	3	China, China, India	9	AE
Daniel	55	Master's	2 (adult)	India	1.5	AE
Suzan	41	Master's	1	The Netherlands	2	AE
Amanda	43	Bachelor's	4	India	3	AE
Sara	44	Master's	3	Poland, Austria, Vietnam	7	Both
Lydia	35	Master's	2	UK	2	SIE
Laura	29	Bachelor's	1	Canada	2	SIE

Note: AE – assigned; SIE – self-initiated
[a]Post-secondary education
[b]Vocational upper secondary qualification
[c]Master's degree studies (not graduated)

Although mainly being described as semi-structured interview research, in this study the interviews also share characteristics with unstructured (narrative) interviews and guided interviews. First, the direction of inquiry is mainly inductive, meaning that the research moves from empirical research to theoretical results (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008: 22). However, it should be stated that at some stage, the research process involved both inductive and deductive reasoning which aims to test previous theory (i.e., the process proceeds from previous theory through hypotheses to empirical study and analysis) (Elo & Kyngäs 2008). Second, the open-ended research questions were planned in advance, but also developed during the interviews (Morse 2012: 195). Thus, in order to facilitate a conversational style interview situation, the interviews followed an interview agenda rather than a restrictive set of questions. This naturally gave a degree of flexibility for the interviewees to more freely express their emotions and experiences. However, to ensure that all the relevant questions for the study were asked and the themes were sufficiently discussed, I opted to use a guiding research agenda. Third, as an interviewer, my aim was to receive rich and 'long responses' by guiding the order and direction of the interviews with a minimum amount of interruption. Consequently, not all of the interviews were equivalent, for example, in content and length (see Morse 2012: 195).

During the interviews, participants were first asked to give some background information about themselves and their families. After the background information questions, interviewees were asked to describe their relocation history and motives for moving abroad and accepting the assignment. In order to capture participants' career experiences, the career theme covered issues such as educational and work history, reasons for entering a specific occupation, perceptions of changes in their role and career identity, and future career aspirations. Then, questions that reflected the aspects of learning (career capital) were presented. In order to capture participants' well-being experiences, the well-being theme covered inquiries about changes in well-being during the different phases of relocation, reasons (for example specific important events) for these changes, and the effects on self-esteem. Additionally, issues related to the interviewees' social relations were addressed. When needed, based on the interviewees' former accounts they were asked to describe their experiences in further detail (give more information) through some follow-up questions. This way, each of the interviews and the data they offered became characteristically personal and unique.

All scientific research questions, research practices, research processes, and relationships between a researcher and research topic have some ethical aspects (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008: 63). Especially, when the research is related to collecting information that participants experience and find particularly personal and sensitive, confidentiality becomes a major concern (James & Busher 2012: 187). Consequently, since the topics of the interview in this study were very personal and even emotional for some participants, as an interviewer I had to ensure a sensitive and empathic atmosphere in the interview situation. Hence, it was important to assure the anonymous and the confidential treatment of data for the interviewees (James & Busher 2012: 187).

Having discussed the qualitative research process, I now move on to describe the narrative analysis and thematic analysis.

3.2.2 Narrative analysis and thematic analysis and evaluation of the quality of studies

In this section I will discuss the selected methods of data analysis, the reasons for choosing these analysis methods, the analysis processes, and the evaluation of the quality of resulting studies.

The data gathering, analysis and writing of several draft reports were interwoven, so the analysis was conducted not only at the end of data gathering, but also concurrent with the data collection (see Morse 2012: 195). In addition, earlier versions of the studies were presented and evaluated in international conferences. In terms of data analysis, two analysis methods were adopted: narrative analysis (Article 1) and thematic analysis (Articles 2 and 3), both of which offer a good approach for organizing, interpreting and making sense of qualitative research data. In qualitative research and the constructivist-interpretivist approach, it is important to consider the trustworthiness of the findings. It has been argued that conventional and positivistic concepts of validity, reliability and generalizability are not suitable for evaluating qualitative research, and thus these terms are commonly replaced with naturalistic equivalents of "credibility" (i.e. internal validity), "transferability" (i.e. external validity), "dependability" (i.e. reliability), and "confirmability" (i.e. objectivity) (Denzin & Lincoln 2018: 20; Guba & Lincoln 1994: 114; Korstjens & Moser 2018; Lincoln & Guba 1985: 296–300). In addition, when validating narrative studies, persuasiveness, coherence, correspondence and pragmatic use have been issues that have been addressed (Riessman 1993: 65–68).

Having given this general description of chosen analysis approaches and quality of research aspects, I move on to discuss their use in the articles of my dissertation.

Narrative analysis (Article 1)

Narrative analysis was adopted in Article 1 that focused on expatriate partners' career identities. It has been stated in previous research that people often express their career identities in the form of narratives (e.g. Churchman & King 2009; Fugate et al. 2004; Gabriel 1999; Kohonen 2008; Riessman 2008). Holstein and Gubrium (2000: 3) describe this as follows: "not only is there a story of the self, but it's been said that the self, itself, is narratively constructed". Accordingly, career identity may be seen as set of self-narratives that describe a person's past and desired future, i.e., what he/she wants to become (Jenkins 1996: 13). Thus, after familiarizing myself with the studies that had examined both career identity transitions and identity work, I noticed that a narrative approach offers an interesting and suitable way to capture the nature of identity reconstruction also for use in my study. Furthermore, since narrative inquiry is often used to study disruptive life events (Riessman 2012: 368) such as moving abroad and giving up one's career are assumed to be, then the approach seemed even more relevant. In terms of ontology, I assumed self and identity as concepts that are socially constructed, and which are expressed in people's narratives (Bujold 2004; Boje 2001: 16). In addition, according to Fugate et al. (2004), an unfamiliar situation facilitates people to make sense of and interpret their new roles and career

identities through narratives (see also Baumeister & Newman 1994; Gabriel 1999; Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld 2005).

In Article 1, the participating partners made sense of their career identities in self-narrative form. Partners told stories about themselves and their experiences in past and present tense, and also described their future considerations (McAlpine 2016; Polkinghorne 1988: 19). Polkinghorne (1988: 177) states that the goal in narrative analysis is "to uncover the common themes or plots in the data". The process can be described as a hermeneutic circle where analysis moves between the original data and emerging patterns, and the researcher makes comparisons and finds similarities and differences between stories (Bujold 2004; Kohonen 2008; McAlpine 2016; Polkinghorne 1988: 167, 176–177).

Here, the 'pre'-analysis phase started already during the interviews when I started to make sense and interpret the partners' stories. In the first phase of analysis, I read the written transcript several times. I gave particular attention to what partners said, and how they said it. Simultaneously, I continued making notes on the transcripts to highlight the initial themes. During the second phase of analysis, I identified similarities and differences in the story patterns, while the narratives' main themes and plots started to emerge. At this stage I identified three narrative types. Finally, based on the interview transcripts I wrote short individual narratives for each participant. I placed the written narratives to different narrative types and then compared them with each other to double check that they were suited to that specific narrative type. Through the comparison of narratives, I noticed some discrepancies which led me to the re-categorize some of them into a fourth narrative type. While constructing my own interpretation of the data, my goal was to remain as close as possible to the interviewees' own interpretations of their own experiences.

Evaluating the quality of narrative study

Important questions concerning research quality include questions such as: How can I ensure the quality of research, and how can I argue that my research is reliable and valid? It has been said that the positivist criteria used to evaluate research quality (i.e., validity, reliability and generalizability) are not applicable to narrative studies (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008: 223; Janesick 2000: 393; Kvale 1996: 236; Shenton 2004). Riessman (1993: 64) has argued that the findings of narrative research are not exact representations the external 'reality' or 'truth'. Hence, they are 'narrative truths' and the stories do not reflect objective facts but rather a subjective meaning and interpretation (Polkinghorne 2007). According to Polkinghorne (1988: 176), the results have 'the appearance of truth or reality' for both the researcher and the readers. Consequently, they are the researcher's own

interpretation of the participants' meanings. Finally, these interpretations are further interpreted by the readers of the analysis.

Stemming from the nature of narrative research, Riessman (1993: 65–68) has presented four ways of validating narrative studies: persuasiveness, coherence, correspondence and pragmatic use. *Persuasiveness* indicates whether the interpretations are reasonable and convincing (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008: 224). According to Riessman (1993, 65–66), theoretical claims should be supported with evidence from the informants' accounts. My goal was to give voice to the study participants, and as stated above, to remain as close as possible to the interviewees' interpretations of their experiences. By documenting my interpretations, I wanted to give readers a possibility to assess whether they were reasonable and convincing.

Coherence demonstrates how some particular themes emerge importantly and repeatedly from the data (Riessman 1993: 67), and interpretation is thus more than an ad hoc process (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008: 224). In order to ensure coherence in this study, I read and re-read the written transcripts several times. These readings helped me to identify similarities and differences in the story patterns. Based on the readings and continually comparing the data with identified patterns, the main themes and plots of the narratives emerged accordingly. Finally, I provided a detailed, thick and transparent description of identified narrative types, using several illustrative quotes in the article to affirm my interpretations.

Correspondence refers to how a researcher can take results back to those he/she has studied. Thus, the participants of the study are allowed to check the interpretations of their narratives. But, because both the stories and meanings of participants' experiences can change over time, member checks can become questionable (Riessman 1993: 66). However, in this study I offered the participants the opportunity to check and give feedback on their interview transcripts. I also asked them to contact me in the future if they wanted to tell more about their experiences (see also Kohonen 2008).

Pragmatic use addresses whether a particular study can become the basis for other's work (Riessman 1993: 68). To ensure this was possible, I openly described how the interpretations were made, and aimed at making as visible and transparent as possible what was done, for example, by offering a comprehensive, detailed description of participant selection, data collection and data analysis. In this way, the readers were offered the possibility to evaluate the trustworthiness of study and its usefulness to them.

Thematic analysis (Articles 2 and 3)

In Articles 2 and 3, thematic analysis was adopted. Article 2 focused on partners' career capital development by employing the Career Capital framework presented in sections 2.3.3, while Article 3 examined expatriate partners' subjective well-being through the lens of the Conservation of Resources theory presented in section 2.3.4. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis can be placed in a group of analysis methods that they describe as being independent of theory and epistemology, and can therefore be considered as applicable to various theoretical and epistemological approaches. Moreover, in terms of philosophical background, Braun and Clarke state that as thematic analysis is not tied to any pre-existing theoretical frameworks, researchers can use it as a realist and essentialist method that reports and reflects the reality of the participants. It can also be used as a constructionist method that examines how, for example, meanings and experiences are constructed in different discourses that operate in society, i.e. to find out the surface of reality (see also Vaismoradi, Turunen & Bondas 2013).

Thematic analysis aims to actively explore patterns of talk, used words and their relationships, and to identify potential similarities and differences between emerging themes. Due to its theoretical freedom, it is quite a flexible method and therefore very suitable for analysing different kinds of qualitative data sets such as the interviews used here (Braun & Clark 2006). Its focus is on content, "what" is said, and the data is interpreted based on themes that the researcher has developed and are a result of researcher's prior knowledge drawn from literature and theories (and the data themselves) (Riessman 2008: 54).

Regarding Articles 2 and 3 of this study, thematic analysis was chosen because it has the ability to identify, analyze and report the themes of the interview data (Braun & Clarke 2006), and also the flexibility it offered in interpreting the data. Thematic analysis has also been seen as a useful research tool to approach fairly large sets of data based on multiple interviews (Nowell, Norris, White & Moules 2017). Thus, it provided good means to sort the data into different themes related to career capital development (Article 2) and subjective well-being (Article 3).

In both of these articles, the data were analyzed by employing Braun and Clarke's (2006) model of thematic analysis with systematic coding and categorizing of transcripts. In both studies, analysis started with the reading of the transcripts several times in order to acquire a sense of the whole. During the reading, first observations and comments about the data were written in margins of transcripts. Concurrently, lists of comments and themes were compiled as separate files. Through this open coding, the notes, lists and potential preliminary themes of each transcript were then compared together and in relation to the entire dataset. Based

on these comparisons, they were further integrated into larger themes and their subthemes across the whole dataset, organized and named (Braun & Clarke 2006; Vaismoradi et al. 2013).

Evaluating the quality of thematic analysis

When evaluating the quality of thematic analysis, the trustworthiness of the credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability of the research findings of studies 2 and 3 were taken into account. *Credibility* (internal validity) demonstrates the truth of the research findings, i.e. how correct the information of data and the interpretation of the participants' views are (Korstjens & Moser 2018). In terms of constructivist and interpretivist approaches, Lincoln et al. (2018: 129) further state that: "Validity is a construct of the development of consensus". In order to improve validity, the whole research procedure should be made explicit and transparent to readers. Shenton (2004) stresses the issues a researcher should take into account when assessing credibility, including the possibility for study participants to check interpretations of data, providing a thick description of data, and thorough the incorporation of the knowledge of previous research when framing the study findings. In Articles 2 and 3, credibility was thus ensured by reading and reflecting on the data several times, cross-checking the findings across multiple interviews, and comparing the findings to observations in previous research (see Glaser & Strauss 1967: 3, 102, 105-113; Strauss & Corbin 1998). To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, the participants had the possibility to check the interview transcripts and give feedback on them. Participants could also contact the researcher later on if they wanted to add further descriptions of their experiences (e. g. Kohonen 2008). Finally, the transcriptions were collated to form a database for evidence and possible review at a later date.

Transferability (external validity/generalizability) demonstrates whether the results can be transferred to other contexts or settings and other groups of respondents (Korstjens & Moser 2018). In qualitative research, applying results to a wider population and other environments is often difficult due to the small number of participants (Shenton 2004). Therefore, transferability can be strengthened through a thick description of the research and its findings (Korstjens & Moser 2018). Thick description is said to be more than a mere description of facts and what people are doing. According to Denzin (2001: 100): "It presents detail, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships that join persons to one another. It enacts what it describes. Thick description evokes emotionality and self-feelings. It inserts history into experience." Describing the phenomenon that is studied in detail allows making comparisons (Shenton 2004). In terms of transferability in Articles 2 and 3, the research context including the

sample size, partners' cultural backgrounds and demographics, as well as the interview procedure and analysis process were clearly described so that readers could assess if the results can be applied to other contexts (Korstjens & Moser 2018). In addition, through a thick description of the participants' experiences, their voices, feelings, emotions, actions and meanings were made visible for readers (Denzin 2001: 100).

Dependability (reliability) is related to the stability of findings over time, meaning that findings would be consistent and could be repeated, i.e. that results would be similar in the same context using the same method, and with the same participants (Korstjens & Moser 2018; Shenton 2004). To assure the dependability of the study findings in the articles included in this dissertation, the research steps that were taken were transparently described and reported from presenting the research design and theoretical choices, identifying the research gaps, and gathering and analyzing the data. This kind of in-depth methodological description allows readers to gain a deeper understanding of how the study could be repeated (Shenton 2004). Furthermore, according to Silverman (2001: 229–230), achieving reliability in interview studies may include e.g. tape-recording face-to-face interviews, careful transcribing, and presenting extracts of data in the study report. All of these approaches were implemented in the articles concerned. Specifically, 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, extracts of the data were presented in the articles to illustrate the analytical claims and interpretations.

Finally, *confirmability* (objectivity) ensures that the research results can be concluded as stemming from the data, instead of being a product of the researcher's imagination (Korstjens & Moser 2018), researcher bias, or a product of the researcher's personal interest. Thus, the findings are really descriptions of the participants' experiences and do not represent those of the researcher. Means to enhance confirmability include explaining why certain approaches have been adopted, and openly explaining the possible shortcomings and weaknesses of the chosen methods (Shenton 2004). One more way to enhance confirmability is the acknowledgement of the researcher's beliefs and assumptions. Therefore, in assessing the quality of this dissertation in general, my role as a research scientist and my status with regards to the research topic have been considered, and have been brought forth in the study report since they may affect the analysis and interpretation of the data. In addition, the extracts of the data used in the articles have helped to show that the interpretations that have been made are grounded in the data, and are not merely the researcher's own viewpoints (Braun & Clarke

2006; Korstjens & Moser 2018; Silverman 2001: 229-230). Next, the summaries of the three articles of this dissertation are presented.

4 SUMMARIES OF ARTICLES

In this chapter the aims, main findings and contributions of the three articles of this dissertation are presented. The articles cover three different aspects: expatriate partners' career identities (Article 1), expatriate partners' career capital development (Article 2), and expatriate partners' subjective well-being and related resource losses and gains (Article 3).

4.1 The career transitions of expatriate partners and the effects of transitions on career identities (Research article 1)

The purpose of Article 1 was to explore expatriate partners' career identities in the context of long-term expatriate assignments. It draws attention to the career transitions that expatriate partners experience, and the effects of these transitions on their career identity reconstruction. The paper is the first empirical study that focuses exclusively on expatriate partners' career identities. This study is important because expatriation is a situation that significantly affects expatriate partners' employment issues, and in the worst case, continuing one's career becomes impossible. Concurrently, giving up one's career can have significant effect on the partner's self-worth and their ability to maintain their sense of identity (Kupka & Cathro 2007; McNulty 2012). The data for the study was collected with 27 in-depth interviews with Finnish accompanying expatriate partners, and was analysed utilizing narrative analysis.

As a major finding, the study identifies four career identity narrative types: 'Stable career identities', 'Threatened career identities', 'Lost career identities', and 'Emerging new career identities'. The results indicate that when career-oriented expatriate partners have less possibilities to continue working, the partners face both career and role transition. Thus, while for expatriate dual-career couples the relocation can be a challenging experience, being an accompanying partner does not necessarily mean the end of one's career or a total loss of career identity. On the contrary, it can mean the starting point of a new career and the re-construction of career identity as the 'Emerging new career identities' group demonstrates. Importantly, the results reveal that partners' career identity maintenance and reconstruction is to large extent related to their self-management skills prior to and during the relocation. In addition, the findings indicate the importance of self-directed activity and personal initiative in maintaining, losing, or reconstructing their career identities during relocation. These skills become even more important when partners experience more than one assignment.

As the first exploration of expatriate partners' career identities, this study provides a number of contributions to the existing literature, and extends the international HRM knowledge while at the same time deepening the knowledge of career identity work among expatriate partners. The practical contribution for organizations is that it emphasizes the advantages that organizations would receive if they engaged partners in the decision making process of whether to accept a relocation. It also suggests that companies should consider more customized selection practices for different expatriate dual-career couple profiles by making use of the career identity typology presented in this study. Ultimately, paying attention to a partner's career situation potentially helps them to proactively explore their career opportunities abroad.

4.2 Development of career capital during expatriation: Partners' perspective (Research article 2)

The primary objective of Article 2 was to examine the effects of expatriation on the development of career capital among expatriate partners. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the topic, partners and their experiences across different life and/or employment situations were taken into account. The study is one of the first empirical studies that examines and focuses particularly on the expatriate partners' career development. Data for the study were collected with 30 in depth interviews with Finnish accompanying expatriate partners, and were analyzed by employing Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis. As a framework, the study utilized the career capital model with three knowings: 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 & Arthur 1994; Inkson & Arthur 2001; Parker & Arthur 2004).

The results of this study indicate that partners experienced various learning experiences that developed their career capital during their expatriation. These learning experiences related to the experience of living abroad itself, and also to the specific activities they conducted abroad (e.g., partners in paid work, doing volunteer work, studying, or having hobbies). With regard to knowing-why career capital, all partners, for example, developed an international mindset and increased their self-awareness and self-confidence through self-reflection. In the dimension of knowing-how career capital, the development of coping skills, communication skills, people skills, and cross-cultural skills were reported. In the area of knowing-whom career capital, the expatriate partners developed their

realization of the importance of establishing social networks. Partners working in demanding jobs also reported the development of business area knowledge, knowledge of the management styles in different cultural contexts, and an increased personal agency and initiative in finding professional networks. The extent to which partners developed knowing-why, knowing-how and knowing-whom career capital was thus found to partly depend on their situation abroad as stay-at-home partners, or as employees in less or more demanding jobs. Though the experiences were developmental for all partners as reported among expatriates, there were aspects in which partners' experiences differ from the development experiences of expatriates. For example, partners' jobs were typically less demanding, they faced a more unstructured situation abroad, they did not benefit as much from company support and networks, and partners' roles and partner situations varied more across individuals and also changed often during the expatriation.

The study advances the understanding of how expatriation affects expatriate partners' career capital, which is a topic which has not been previously studied in-depth. The study contributes to the literature by deepening our understanding of expatriate partners' career capital development. To that extent, the study contributes to the expatriation literature by providing new knowledge and insights into skills-related issues during relocation. The findings also contribute to the increasingly topical theme of expatriating dual-career couples, and offer an alternative and more positive image of the partners' experiences compared to earlier research where the main focus has been on the negative challenges they face. As a practical contribution for organizations, the study highlights the importance of designing specific support practices for expatriate partners including career counseling, cross-cultural and language training, and help in job searching. Overall, the career capital model with the three dimensions of knowing offers a useful theoretical framework within which to examine the impacts of relocation and international experience on partners.

4.3 Expatriate partners' subjective well-being and related resource losses and gains (Research article 3)

The aim of Article 3 was to investigate expatriate partners' subjective well-being (SWB) and related resource losses and gains during international assignments. The overarching goal of this study was to expand and deepen our understanding of expatriate partners' subjective well-being, and how changes in resources caused by international relocation relate to SWB. Since the earlier literature on partners' SWB is still quite fragmented, a more holistic understanding of the different

antecedents for SWB as well as the related underlying mechanisms was needed. In addition, previous research has presented fairly pessimistic views on expatriate partners' well-being. Therefore, this study also examined the positive effects of relocation on partners' well-being. The data for this study were collected through 20 in-depth interviews with Finnish expatriate partners, and were analyzed by employing thematic analysis. The study utilized the Conservation of Resources theory as a framework (Hobfoll 1989; 2001; 2002; 2012; Hobfoll, Halbesleben, Neveu & Westman 2018). COR theory states that an individual's SWB is affected by the condition resources, object resources, personal resources, and energy resources that people aspire to obtain, retain, protect and foster. In the context of international relocation, these resources become threatened, or are even lost.

The findings reveal that relocation causes significant changes in expatriate partners' resources. These changes in resources lead to changes in subjective well-being, either directly or through affecting the partner's energy and personal resources. Thus, it can be concluded that an international assignment presents a critical life event that affects the essential resources in partners' lives. Particularly, relocation abroad seems to affect partners' condition resources, covering a familiar living environment, their employment situation, and personal relationship dynamics by changing them, in some cases extensively. Thus, the results suggest that condition resources seem to have a more important role than other resources in international relocations. Additionally, resource gain spirals appear to have a more powerful effect on partners' well-being than resource loss cycles. This finding conveys the power of gain spirals, and is quite surprising if we compare it to the existing literature that typically highlights the negative effects of international assignments on expatriate partners' overall well-being. It seems that staying or even intending to stay in one host country contributes to investing, especially in career-related resources. On the other hand, the length of stay abroad and assignment type did not fully explain how much individual partners were willing to invest in resources. Overall and importantly, the results underline partners' abilities to replace and gain resources, and also their self-directed activity.

This research contributes to the extant expatriate literature by providing new insights into the resources related to well-being among expatriate partners with the help of the COR model. It approaches partners' SWB and related changes in resources not only as a negative phenomenon, but also from a positive perspective. In addition, it contributes by broadening the focus from widely studied partners' adjustment perspectives, to identify the self-management skills that assist in replacing lost resources that underpin well-being. In terms of contribution to COR theory, the study represents evidence that resource gains and gain spirals have even more powerful effects on the subjective well-being of partners than resource

loss cycles. As a practical contribution, for expatriating dual-career couples it demonstrates that partners should recognize and be aware of the effects of relocation on their condition resources. For employing organizations, the findings emphasize the importance of paying attention to partner concerns from the pre-departure phase until repatriation. This would mean e.g. taking into account partners' employment situations, involving partners in the decision-making process, giving pre-departure training, and offering career support and guidance.

5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this concluding chapter is to draw together the results of the three individual research articles included in this dissertation. The aim of this dissertation is to contribute to the understanding of expatriate partners' experiences in the areas of career identity, career capital development and subjective well-being. This is accomplished by answering the following research questions: (1) What kind of career transitions do expatriate partners experience and how do these transitions affect their career identities? (2) Does expatriation develop expatriate partners' knowing-why, knowing-how, and knowing-whom career capital, and if so, in what ways? (3) How do expatriate partners' resource losses and gains affect their subjective well-being (SWB)?

Here, I will also summarize the overarching contribution of the dissertation. The themes of contribution can be considered from two main perspectives. Firstly, in terms of theoretical contribution the study brings new knowledge to the field of international HRM. Secondly, as a practical and managerial contribution, the study offers insights for international HRM and HRD professionals who plan, execute and assess their organizations' global mobility issues. As a further practical contribution, it offers guidance to expatriate partners by demonstrating the developmental and well-being aspects related to international relocation.

At the end of the chapter, I will discuss the limitations of the research, and present some directions for future research.

5.1 Theoretical contributions

This dissertation contributes academically by providing insights to expatriate partners' experiences from three angles: career identity, career capital, and subjective well-being. Therefore, instead of presenting only one angle of expatriate partners' situation in the context of international assignments, it offers a novel holistic overview of the situation. In doing so, the dissertation utilizes several research streams while linking expatriate partners to the theoretical landscape of international relocation, dual-career couples, career identities, career capital development, and subjective well-being. In addition, it applies two different data analysis methods, namely narrative analysis and thematic analysis.

Given that it has been stated that expatriation presents a life-changing and stressful event in partners' lives (Brown 2008; Copeland & Norell 2002; Rosenbusch & Cseh 2012), an overarching contribution of this dissertation is to reveal more optimistic views on partners' expatriation experiences. Without

denying the challenging impacts of moving abroad, this study is one of the few empirical studies to examine this side of expatriation; that is the positive effects of international relocation on partners. Therefore, it offers new perspectives compared to the results of previous research that have been characterized by overly negative outcomes of expatriation for partners. For example, the findings of this dissertation indicate that male partners adjust to their new roles as stay-at-home parents smoothly and they even enjoy themselves in a new situation which is, indeed, a contradictory finding to earlier study results (Harris 2004; Harvey & Wiese 1998; Linehan & Scullion 2004; Punnett et al. 1992; Richardson & Zikic 2007; Selmer & Leung 2002; 2003; Van der Velde et al. 2005; Tharenou 2008). This finding hopefully encourages more women with families to apply for international assignments.

Being one of the first empirical research studies to focus exclusively on expatriate partners' career identities (Article 1), on the developmental experiences of expatriate partners from the career capital angle (Article 2), and to apply the Conservation of Resources theory to examine expatriate partners' SWB (Article 3) this dissertation makes a number of contributions to the existing theoretical landscape.

First, it contributes to IHRM knowledge and the academic discussion by drawing attention to the expatriate partners' career transition experiences and the effects of transitions on career identity reconstruction (Article 1). The results and identified four career identity types: 'Stable career identities', 'Threatened career identities', 'Lost career identities' and 'Emerging new career identities' also contribute to the discussion of identities and career identities by deepening the understanding of career identity work among expatriate partners. In addition, the study demonstrates that international assignments have a considerable effect on partners' careers and career identities. The applied narrative method demonstrated its value when studying career identities in an international context. This supports the views of literature that narratives are an act of sense-making, and self and career identities are narratively constructed (Bujold 2004; Boje 2001; Churchman & King 2009; Fugate et al. 2004; Gabriel 1999; Holstein & Gubrium 2000; Kohonen 2008; Riessman 2008). Furthermore, the findings of this study support the views that when the possibility of continuing to work diminishes, partners face both career and role transition (Bikos et al. 2007b; Harvey & Buckley 1998; Lauring & Selmer 2010; McNulty 2012; Mohr & Klein 2004; Mäkelä et al. 2011; Rosenbusch & Cseh 2012). In addition, the findings are in line with the views of earlier research (Inkson 2007; Louis 1980; Mainiero & Sullivan 2005; Mallon 1998; Mirvis & Hall 1994; Super 1980) that career and related identity are the result of the different roles and complex social interaction networks that

individuals possess. Career identity is not just about job roles, but built from a number of different experiences and roles which in turn affect what kind of career identity partners build during their relocation journey. Indeed, being an accompanying partner can mean the starting point of a new career and the re-construction of career identity, instead of the end of one's career or a total loss of career identity.

Second, this dissertation contributes to the academic discussion on the overall development of partners during international relocation (Article 2). Therefore, the study contributes to the IHRM research and literature by providing new knowledge and insights into the development of partners' career capital. Since expatriate partners face transitions with respect to their roles, employment and careers, and consequently their career related skills and knowledge, the career capital framework with the concepts of knowing-why, knowing-how, and knowing-whom proved to offer a useful theoretical lens thorough which to examine and extend the understanding of the impacts of international experience on partners' career capital development. This strengthens the view that the method mainly used in previous expatriate research (e.g. Cappellen & Janssens, 2008; Dickmann & Doherty, 2010; Dickmann & Harris, 2005; Jokinen, 2010) and research on transitional career experiences (Brown et al., 2020; Cabrera, 2007; Terjesen, 2005) can also be applied to focus groups who are not necessarily in paid work. The lack of sufficiently challenging job opportunities and possibilities to work, at least full time, may prevent partners from developing their professional skills as well as expatriates, but on a positive note, the findings indicate that partners share several learning experiences that are related to the three dimensions of career capital, whether they are in paid work or doing other activities (volunteer work, studying, and/or hobbies). It can be said, however, that more demanding work abroad also offers even broader and deeper learning experiences for partners.

Third, this dissertation contributes to the literature on partners' subjective well-being and related resources (Article 3). It approaches expatriate partners' SWB and related changes in resources not only as a negative phenomenon, but also from a positive perspective. Additionally, being one of the first studies to apply the Conservation of Resources theory to expatriate partner research, it contributes to the literature on COR theory by demonstrating that condition resources seem to have a more important role than other resources in changing life situations. The study also suggests that gain spirals have a more powerful effect on partners' subjective well-being than resource loss cycles, contrary to prevalent assumptions (Hobfoll 1989; 2001; 2002; 2012). The results provide empirical evidence that expatriation causes changes particularly in partners' condition resources, covering a familiar living environment, employment situation, and personal relationship

dynamics (e.g., marriage, other family members, relatives, and friends). Overall, changes in condition resources lead to changes in a partner's subjective well-being, either directly or by affecting their energy resources (e.g., time and money) and also their personal resources (e.g., language- and culture-related skills and knowledge). However, once again on a positive note, the findings highlight the ability of partners' to replace lost resources and also their contentment with the decision to move and experience life abroad. Consequently, the findings of this dissertation provide new optimistic perspectives on partners' experiences in contrast to the mostly pessimistic views presented in previous research (e.g., Gupta et al. 2012; Kupka & Cathro 2007; Kupka et al. 2008).

Fourth, the findings of this study put special emphasis on the salience of partners' career self-management skills and personal agency as key features of a successful relocation. These issues seem to have a strong link to the partners' overall experience of living abroad and to their subjective well-being. The dissertation reveals the central role of partners' career self-management skills during the whole relocation process. These skills are relevant to career identity work and reinventing one's career identity (Article 1). Self-directed activity, resilience and a willingness to step outside the comfort zone to explore and experiment with alternative career options clearly enhance partners' career identity reconstruction. Personal initiative and personal agency further help to reinforce career identities. Similarly, the results suggest that expatriate partners are largely responsible for the development of their own career capital (Article 2). The reported findings provide various examples of the importance of a partner's own active role and career self-management skills. In terms of subjective well-being, the findings also highlight the importance of partners' self-directed activity and their ability to replace lost resources (Article 3). Overall, taking part actively in various non-work roles including voluntary work, hobbies and studies can also be good starting points for future career considerations and identity work. These non-work domains and activities also offer potential opportunities for developing one's career capital, and increase subjective well-being by finding and replacing well-being generating resources.

5.2 Practical contributions

In addition to theoretical and methodological contributions, this dissertation also provides many practical and managerial implications that can be drawn from the study findings. It also provides practical guidance to expatriate partners and families.

First, in terms of managerial implications, the identified career identity typology can offer new perspectives for organizations to implement in their expatriate assignee selection processes. Thus, this dissertation highlights how important it is to engage partners in the decision of whether to accept an international assignment, and suggests that organizations' HR professionals consider employing more customized selection practices that pay attention to different expatriate dual-career couple profiles. In fact, all of the articles of this dissertation suggest that partners' concerns should be taken into account from the pre-departure phase until repatriation. This becomes even more pressing as dual-career expatriate couples become increasingly common. Both home- and host-organizations would benefit from offering comprehensive partner support programs, which could minimize the risk of assignment refusals, and unfortunate and costly assignment failures or premature returns. Unfortunately, it also seems that some partners are disappointed in the level of organizational support they receive.

After accepting an assignment, help with work permits and pre-departure training should be offered. Based on partners' stories, such training should provide a realistic overview of the host country culture and include language training, whether on the local language or English. Moreover, for career-oriented partners organizations could offer career support and guidance that stems from partners' career histories, the current stage of their career life-cycle, and their career aspirations during the assignment. In addition, their desired future careers, even after return should be taken into account. Considering these factors would help in assessing what kind of support and guidance practices are needed. Support could include information about the practices of recognizing a partner's professional qualifications, and knowledge of the host country's job markets and work culture. Partners would also need advice on building their own personal networks, and how to write CVs and find (volunteer) work in the new host country.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that organizations could offer more flexible work arrangements for expatriates, for example in relation to the length of their working hours. It would be good if management could also pay more attention to the number of expatriates' business trips and the amount of time one is required to spent on them. In order to reduce feelings of uncertainty, providing expatriates and their family members with clear and timely information on the length of stay and/or possible relocation to another host country or repatriation home would be a good idea. Overall, even taking some of these measures into practice could enhance both partners' well-being, and help the expatriate family to feel more valued and supported.

Second, in addition to managerial contributions, this dissertation offers practical implications for expatriate partners. Given that not all companies offer support practices, partners themselves must become more active in organizing their lives. As Articles 2 and 3 suggest, they should be aware of and understand that expatriation will affect both their career capital and condition resources. This demands quite considerable efforts, including searching for specific country information, finding out about cultural differences, and planning a meaningful schedule and agenda (covering potential volunteer work, hobbies, networking events, etc.) in advance of the arrival in a new country. If partners aspire to work in a host country, they should proactively explore local qualification requirements and employment opportunities, and develop skills specific to the host country including language skills. In addition, peer support from other partners who are going or have gone through similar relocation experiences would help to understand the upcoming situation. Essentially, potential assignment-related changes should be discussed with all of the family members. The findings clearly show that arranging enough time for communication within the family and especially arranging time to support the marital relationship is valuable for the subjective well-being of both partners and the whole family.

5.3 Limitations and directions for future research

This study has its limitations. Typically, many of these limitations are quite common to a qualitative research methodology in general. In this study, the data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Although interviews are an excellent way to examine individuals' experiences, the self-reported nature of the data brings a danger of bias. Consequently, I can only rely on my understanding and interpretations of the interviewees' accounts, and this has a subsequent implication for the findings and conclusions I have derived from these interpretations. However, it is the readers who will make the final interpretation (Polkinghorne 1988), which may also be subject to preconception and reader bias. As a further consideration, there are limitations that are related to the samples used and the temporal aspects of the research design.

First, due to including only Finnish expatriate partners, the participants' cultural context and backgrounds are remarkably homogeneous. For example, in Finland, dual-career and dual-earner couples are the norm. Also, gender equality is extremely well established, and therefore, being a stay-at-home parent is an accepted role even for men. For this reason, research engaging a more internationally diverse participant sample would increase the understanding of partners' situations and perhaps provide more generalizable results. Additionally,

all of the participants were highly educated high-status expatriate partners, thus the experiences of these partners may not be generalized as being similar to the experiences of partners from different demographic backgrounds.

Overall, expatriate research has largely focused on high-status and high-income workers and their families, and thus the findings are very specific to those population groups. Therefore, research should be extended to include migrant dual-career couples (see Al Ariss, 2010; Haak-Saleem, Brewster, & Lauring, 2019) and also other under-researched groups such as different ethnic groups, multicultural populations, LGBTQ people, disabled employees, and expatriate entrepreneurs. Especially, it is highly likely there will more diversity within the expatriate population in future that expatriate research should not overlook.

Second, the small sample size, which is quite typical for qualitative research, is a limitation of this study. As is known, small sample size prevents drawing significant generalizations from a study's findings. Therefore, more studies with larger participant populations and using a mixed approach and/or applying quantitative methods would help to provide more generalizable results.

Third, in terms of temporal dimension, longitudinal research data collected several years after repatriation would provide valuable information related to whether international relocations impact partners' career and well-being related issues in the years after returning home. Longitudinal research would also reveal if IAs and the experiences partners have gained during them have long-term effects on partners. This would also reveal whether employers value and are able to recognize any developmental advantages that international experience offers for partners when even expatriates with wide international work experience have problems integrating back into their home-country job markets. Accordingly, partners with repatriation experiences should be included in future research. Overall, instead of concentrating only on the negative impacts of relocation on partners, positive impacts should also be given more attention.

As has already been recognized in recent research, the ways people work have changed due to COVID-19 and the adoption of digital technologies. These changes will also affect global mobility and the number of long-term assignments (Caligiuri, De Cieri, Minbaeva, Verbeke & Zimmermann 2020; KPMG 2019; Minbaeva 2020). The data for this dissertation was collected before the COVID-19 pandemic, and therefore partners' experiences here were not affected by the situation. Stemming from this, one future research avenue might be to also focus on what effects these changes have on 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 there will be fewer

expatriate partners following their partners abroad while short-term assignments and virtual assignments start to replace traditional international assignments? As an outcome, new forms of global mobility will likely have impacts on expatriate partners' experiences, and also on expatriate and partner research in general.

To conclude, although the expatriation might be a challenging issue for expatriate partners, this dissertation has also revealed also positive sides of it. When all of the company stakeholders, including management and HR professionals, perceive the significance of partners in the assignment context, they will be willing to put more effort into planning and executing tailored partner programs. Additionally, the results of this dissertation show the well-being enhancing and developmental aspects of international relocation for partners, and when partners utilize their career self-management skills and make use of their gained career capital, expatriation does not necessary mean the end of one's career. Consequently, it may open the door to new and interesting possibilities.

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The career transitions of expatriate partners and the effects of transitions on career identities

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine expatriate partners' career identities in the context of long-term expatriate assignments. Drawing on in depth interviews with 27 Finnish accompanying expatriate partners, the study explores how partners make sense of their career identities in the self-narratives, or stories they tell about themselves, in their changed situation. The study findings identify four narrative types which were labelled as 'Stable career identities', 'Threatened career identities', 'Lost career identities', and 'Emerging new career identities'. The results indicate that international assignments have a considerable impact on expatriate partners' career identity reconstruction. The results also highlight the importance of partners' career self-management skills prior to and during the relocation, and partners' self-directed activity whilst abroad.

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Introduction

Many internationally mobile employees who take new expatriate assignments relocate with their partners (Brown, 2008; Cole, 2011; Riusala & Suutari, 2000; Suutari & Brewster, 2001). At the same time, the number of expatriate couples in which both partners are committed to their careers has been increasing (Harvey, Novicevic, & Breland, 2009; Lauring & Selmer, 2010; Mäkelä, Känsälä, & Suutari, 2011). Relocation has a significant impact on the accompanying partners and they often find themselves in an unstructured situation, with minimal support (Haslberger & Brewster, 2008). The existing research on accompanying expatriate partners has focused on aspects such as the partners' willingness to accept an international assignment and their motivations for doing so (e.g. Harvey et al., 2009; Thorn, 2009; van der Velde, Jansen, Bal, & van Erp, 2017), adjustment (e.g. Shaffer & Harrison, 2001), partner roles (e.g. Lauring & Selmer, 2010; Mäkelä et al., 2011), and career

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assistance provision (e.g. Cole, 2011; McNulty, 2012). It is clear that there has been an increasing interest in expatriate partners' career issues over the past few years. However, there is still a need for further research (Känsälä, Mäkelä, & Suutari, 2015). This study aims to address this gap, and focuses on partners' career identities. This research is important because relocation due to an international assignment often results in the cessation of the partner's career and the redefinition of their roles (Lauring & Selmer, 2010; Mäkelä et al., 2011). In addition, long-term expatriate assignments continue to be essential to global mobility and offer the best means of meeting the business objectives of many companies (Cartus, 2016). Long term expatriate assignment is usually defined as having a duration of over 12 months, with family members accompanying the assignee (Shaffer, Kraimer, Chen, & Bolino, 2012). In this study, the term 'expatriates' refers to business expatriates i.e. 'legally working individuals who reside temporarily in a country of which they are not a citizen in order to accomplish a career-related goal, being relocated abroad either by an organization, by self-initiation or directly employed within the host-country' (McNulty & Brewster, 2017, p. 46). The expatriates included in this study meet this definition in that they are employed by either a corporate entity or by a public sector/non-governmental organization, and includes both assigned expatriates (AEs) and self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) (see McNulty & Brewster, 2017).

Career identity not only refers to how an individual makes sense of, and defines themselves, in relation to the work context, but it is also a representation of the individual's hopes, fears and goals (Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004). In this study, partners' career identities are perceived as a product of the partners' past and current paid work or voluntary work and educational experiences and the other roles they have adopted during their relocation in a new cultural context. In terms of these other roles, it has been noted that, during the relocation, partners often adopt roles that require taking most of the responsibility for the care of the children, for housing-related family issues, for family finances, for communication with local authorities (Mäkelä & Suutari, 2011), and for multiple daily chores, including dealing with health issues (Rosenbusch & Cseh, 2012). Previous research has suggested that both work and non-work roles shape an individual's identity (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005; Mirvis & Hall, 1994; Super, 1980), and so it can be assumed that all of these aforementioned roles influence the partners' career identity reconstruction. In some cases, adjusting to a new role, such as becoming a stay-at-home parent, can lead to role conflicts and even threaten the partner's sense of self. Indeed, the impossibility of continuing one's career has been found to affect the partner's perception of self-worth and

their ability to maintain their sense of identity (Kupka & Cathro, 2007), and it can even lead to a loss of identity (McNulty, 2012). Giving up one's career and job can cause increased stress for both the expatriate and the partner while on assignment (Harvey et al., 2009; Harvey & Buckley, 1998; Haslberger & Brewster, 2008; Kupka, Everett, & Cathro, 2008; Mäkelä & Suutari, 2011). For example, Bikos and Kocheleva (2013) found that those partners who value the occupational role in their life more highly may experience a greater degree of psychological distress. Feeling less valued (Brown, 2008) can affect the partner's self-efficacy and career self-management, which is defined here as the partner's ability to engage in career exploration, set career goals, build networks, make important decisions, and work proactively to achieve desired career outcomes (see De Vos & Soens, 2008; Ireland & Lent, 2018; King, 2004). In summary, by putting their own careers on hold, partners are enabling expatriates to select and pursue an international career path, often at a cost to themselves in terms of identity, self-esteem and personal career aspirations.

Although the research on expatriate couples and/or partners has covered a wide range of topics (see e.g. Konopaske, Robie, & Ivancevich, 2005; Lauring & Selmer, 2009, 2010; Lazarova, Westman, & Shaffer, 2010; Punnett, 1997; Punnett, Crocker, & Stevens, 1992; Richardson, 2006; Richardson & Zikic, 2007; Stephens & Black, 1991), there has been limited research on how relocations affect the accompanying expatriate partners' career identities. Empirical studies on the topic are scarce, although among expatriates, identity has been studied most widely (e.g. Adams & van de Vijver, 2015; Kohonen, 2008; Scurry, Rodriguez, & Bailouni, 2013). Given the critical importance of the role of the partner in an international assignment (Gupta, Banerjee, & Gaur, 2012; Harvey, 1998; Lazarova et al., 2010; van der Zee, Ali, & Salomé, 2005) and the associated challenges of relocating and living in another country (McNulty, 2015; Takeuchi, Yun, & Tesluk, 2002), more research examining the impact of expatriation from the partner's point of view is needed. This study, therefore, aims to explore the experiences of expatriate partners by addressing the following research question: What kind of career transitions do expatriate partners experience and how do these transitions affect their career identities? Given that career identities are often expressed in a narrative form (e.g. Churchman & King, 2009; Fugate et al., 2004; Gabriel, 1999; Kohonen, 2008; Riessman, 2008), a narrative research method has been adopted.

As far as the author is aware, this is the first empirical study to focus exclusively on expatriate partners' career identities and, as such, it makes a number of contributions to the existing literature. As a major finding,

four career identity narrative types are identified: 'Stable career identities', 'Threatened career identities', 'Lost career identities', and 'Emerging new career identities'. The study provides new insights into career identity work among partners in the context of expatriate assignments. It highlights the importance of career self-management skills, self-directed activity and personal initiative, and the salience of pre-relocation career histories in helping to understand partners' career identity transitions, as well as their challenges and needs during the relocation and repatriation. This article starts with a discussion of different perspectives on careers and career identity, followed by a literature review of the current research findings on the careers of expatriate partners. The empirical findings on expatriate partners' career identities are then presented, utilising the typology of career identity narratives. In the final section, the theoretical and practical implications of these findings are discussed.

Perspectives on dual-careers, career transitions and career identity

Careers can be regarded from various different perspectives, such as 'protean careers', where work and non-work roles overlap to and shape and expand a person's identity and sense of self (Mirvis & Hall, 1994); 'boundaryless', where careers move across the boundaries of separate employers (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996); 'kaleidoscope careers' where careers are relational, comprising an interconnected web of people and issues, and where each career move creates changes in others' lives (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005); or as a combination of the different relationships and roles that people play during their lifetimes, such as a child, student, worker, partner, and parent (Louis, 1980; Super, 1980). Furthermore, in the context of examining the experiences of career-oriented expatriate partners, the concept of 'dual-career' needs to be defined. One of the earliest definitions suggests that dual-career couples are those where both partners pursue jobs that are personally salient and have a developmental aspect (Rapoport & Rapoport, 1969). The literature and research makes a distinction between 'dual-income' (dual-earner) and 'dual-career' couples: A dual-income couple is defined as one in which both partners earn an income to support the family unit; while a dual-career couple is defined as one in which both partners are employed and psychologically committed to their work roles, professions and careers (Eby, 2001; Elloy & Smith, 2003; Harvey & Buckley, 1998; Pierce & Delahaye, 1996). In this study, in order to provide the broadest perspective on expatriate partners' career issues, 'career' is understood as a product of the occupational and educational steps that expatriate

partners have taken, and which is strongly affected by changes in overall life context and social networks due to relocation.

Reasons for career transitions are varied and might include individual and/or situational causes (West & Nicholson, 1989). In the case of a dual-career expatriate partner, this includes career transitions that are caused by (assigned or self-initiated) expatriate assignments and the career-related options and possibilities that the partner has or does not have in a host country (Cartus, 2016; Harvey & Buckley, 1998;Mäkelä et al., 2011; McNulty, 2012; Permits Foundation, 2012). Earlier studies have also indicated that an individual's career transition is not necessarily the result of conscious and rational decision-making (Murtagh, Lopes, & Lyons, 2011) and that, for example, the expatriate partner's experience of living in another country can have a significant influence on career decision-making (see Bright, Pryor, & Harpham, 2005). In addition, Higgins (2001) notes that besides individual factors, social networks may function as a source of an expatriate partner's decision to change careers (see Mäkelä et al., 2011). Career transitions experience by partners often generate identity work, requiring them to make sense of and reconstruct their career identities, and to evaluate the different possibilities open to them (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). Transitions can generate major change in personal and social systems, and they can significantly impact the future development of the individual (Nicholson, 1984).

Traditionally, career identity has referred to how people make sense of and define themselves in relation to the context of work (Fugate et al., 2004). However, since the career situation of expatriate partners can become considerably unstable, and since their traditional organisational careers might be replaced by more flexible and boundaryless career models, it can be argued that some partners' career identities may become more diverse, unstable or fragile (see Kellner, 1992). Therefore, in this study, a more relevant perspective on partners' career identities is one that is based more on individual insights and that is less tightly connected to a particular job or professional role (Fugate et al., 2004), and which also considers partners' non-work roles and relationships, and how together they shape and expand partners' career identities (Louis, 1980; Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005; Mirvis & Hall, 1994; Super, 1980). The next section reviews the existing research on the effects of relocation on expatriate partners' careers and role transitions.

Perspectives on expatriate partner's career issues

The number of dual-career couples is increasing (Elloy & Smith, 2003) and they are especially common in the Nordic countries (Riusala &

Suutari, 2000). Research on dual-career couples has indicated that, compared to single-career couples, dual-career couples experience more stress, work-family conflict, role conflict and overload (Elloy & Smith, 2003; Higgins & Duxbury, 1992). This situation typically becomes even more challenging if the couple has young children (van Gils & Kraaykamp, 2008). Although both non-expatriating dual-career couples and expatriating dual-career couples (defined as 'people having spent at least one year on international assignment and having a working spouse before departure' (Mäkelä et al., 2011, p. 189)) experience similar challenges, there are some unique differences between the domestic dual-career context and the international context. First, there are the more general challenges that almost all expatriate partners face when they relocate abroad. These challenges include, for example, adjustment to an unfamiliar environment and foreign culture, dealing with different education, daycare and healthcare systems (Cartus, 2016; Mäkelä & Suutari, 2011; Rosenbusch & Cseh, 2012; Shaffer & Harrison, 2001), and the absence of social networks (Mäkelä et al., 2011). In addition, there are specific challenges experienced by career-oriented expatriate partners that are related to their career situation and limited opportunities for continuing their careers during the assignment (Cole, 2011; McNulty, 2012). Often, career opportunities are diminished due to difficulties in obtaining a work permit (Cartus, 2016; Harvey & Buckley, 1998; McNulty, 2012; Permits Foundation, 2012), lack of recognition of the partner's professional qualifications (Permits Foundation, 2012), or insufficient language skills (Mäkelä et al., 2011; Permits Foundation, 2012). The partner may lack important networks that could otherwise help him/her in finding work. The partner's career possibilities may be further limited by the demands of the expatriate's work, which often includes long working hours (Mäkelä et al., 2011).

Partners' employment issues continue to be a common reason for assignment refusal (Cartus, 2016) and, indeed, there has been an increase in the resistance shown by partners to accepting assignments, because of their concern in relation to employment issues (Brookfield, 2016; Permits Foundation, 2012). Partners with high career role salience are unwilling to put their careers on hold for the expatriate's work and are less likely to accept an assignment (van der Velde et al., 2017). The majority of the partners who do accept an assignment and who have had a career prior to relocating do not work in the host country (Brookfield, 2016; McNulty, 2012; Suutari & Brewster, 2001). Bikos et al. (2007a) found that partners who, at the beginning of expatriation, were still optimistic about finding work then became irritable and unhappy after a few months because they had not succeeded in finding a job that was

consistent with their career, or indeed any job at all. These partners were also worried about the impact that the gap in any unrelated employment would have on their career path (Bikos et al., 2007b). For some of these partners, finding work meant a transition to a job unrelated to their profession (Bikos et al., 2007a). Furthermore, expatriates are often offered multiple assignments, either one immediately following another or at intervals, resulting in further challenges for partners (Mäkelä & Suutari, 2011). In the light of these findings, it is clear that international assignments can disrupt the career and job prospects of career-oriented partners (McNulty, 2012; Riusala & Suutari, 2000; Suutari & Brewster, 2001).

Previous studies indicate that expatriate partners unable to continue their work experience significant role transitions (Lauring & Selmer, 2010; Mäkelä et al., 2011). Partners who had their own careers prior to the relocation typically experience a transition in their personal role to one of a 'traditional' stay-at-home partner, financially dependent on their husband or wife (Mohr & Klein, 2004). There are, of course, some partners who perceive their careers as secondary to their roles as parent and wife (Bikos et al., 2007b) and who regard their role in supporting their expatriate partner's career as primary (Lauring & Selmer, 2010). For others, however, this change in roles can strongly affect their self-esteem (Brown, 2008) and their ability to adjust (Mohr & Klein, 2004). In their research on partners' roles, Bikos and Kocheleva (2013) briefly considered identity issues, indicating that career identity transition was not problematic for all accompanying partners. However, for some partners, the loss of career and absence of an external professional identity caused disturbance at home (Rosenbusch & Cseh, 2012). In addition, studies indicate that, because of different cultural gender role expectations, the adoption of new roles is more demanding for male partners (Harvey & Wiese, 1998; Linehan & Scullion, 2004; Selmer & Leung, 2003). If partners do not receive any professional and/or social support, this can lead to deep resentment for having sacrificed their own career to support the expatriate's career (McNulty, 2012).

Based on the above literature review, it can be argued that there is a need for further research, given the significant impact that international assignments have on expatriate partners' careers. Career transition, and subsequent career identity reconstruction, appears to be central in the experiences of expatriate partners. Previous empirical research focusing primarily on expatriate partners' career identities, career transitions and career identity reconstruction is limited. Thus, career transitions and career identity provide a valuable perspective from which to study partners' career-related experiences in the long-term expatriate assignment context. In the next section, the research method is discussed.

Method

In-depth interviews were chosen as the most suitable method for data gathering, in order to explore the personal viewpoints and experiences of the research subjects. After examining previous studies on career identity transitions and identity work, it became apparent that narrative inquiry would be an applicable approach for capturing the nature of identity reconstruction (see e.g. Kohonen, 2008). Ontologically, for the purpose of this research study, self and identity are assumed to be socially constructed and expressed in narratives, which are an act of sense-making and a form of self-construction (Boje, 2001; Bujold, 2004). An additional reason for choosing a narrative method here is that, as Fugate et al. (2004) note, in a new situation, where people start to understand, interpret and make sense of their new roles and who they are, evolving career identities are often expressed in a narrative form (see also Baumeister & Newman, 1994;Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Hence, in this study, expatriate partners make sense of their changed roles and identities through self-narratives—telling stories about themselves. Gabriel's (1999, p. 196) description further clarifies reasons for using a narrative approach in identity research:

> A highly effective way of analyzing how identities are continuously constructed, how they become fragmented, and how they are reconstructed is through the study of stories in which individuals encode their identity, narratives which do not purport to merely report facts but poetically embellish facts for effect, allowing for a certain wish fulfilment. Stories do not present facts-as-information, but facts-as-experience, laden with symbolism and meaning, in which the storyteller expresses opinions, makes connections, displays feelings, and casts him/herself as a character in a meaningful narrative.

Holstein and Gubrium (2000) note that 'not only is there a story of the self, but it's been said that the self, itself, is narratively constructed' (p. 3). Thus, career identity may be considered to consist of self-narratives that bring together what a person has been, what he/she will be, and judgements about whether this is what a person wants to become (Jenkins, 1996). Riessman (2008) defines narrative as 'a bounded segment of talk that is temporally ordered and recapitulates a sequence of events' (p. 116). In this study, expatriate partners construct a plot about themselves with past, present and future considerations (McAlpine, 2016). Without the plot, the story would merely comprise a list of separate events with limited meaning (Polkinghorne, 1988). While some narrative researches make a distinction between the terms 'story' and 'narrative', in this study they are used interchangeably (see e.g. Riessman, 2008).

Data-gathering

This qualitative study draws on the experiences of Finnish expatriate partners with high career role salience and centrality (see van der Velde et al., 2017). Consequently, they all consider their careers to be an important part of their identity, with a majority of partners describing themselves as particularly career-oriented. All of the partners had worked and built their careers, most of them over the course of several years, before the relocation. Some of the partners took parental leave just prior to the assignment. However, these partners were not excluded from the study since they all intended to return to working life as soon as the parental leave was over. The research data were collected by means of semi-structured in-depth interviews. Most of the participants for interviews were derived from a larger quantitative survey of Finnish trade union members (The Academic Engineers and Architects in Finland) living outside of Finland. These expatriate participants were asked to provide their partners' contact information. The partners were then invited to participate in a survey. Partner survey respondents were asked if they were willing to be interviewed on a subsequent occasion, and those who agreed were contacted via email. Additional interview participants were selected from the researcher's own network of expatriate partners, and further participants were recruited through the snowball sampling method, with contact information being provided by existing interviewees.

In total, 30 partners were interviewed. Of these, three were excluded because they had repatriated more than two years ago. Thus, the final study data consisted of 27 interviews. At the time of the interviews, 20 partners were living abroad. Seven partners had just recently (less than six months ago) repatriated and were settling back home. Therefore, the impact on their career identities as a result of their experiences of living abroad were still fresh in their minds. Most of the interviews were conducted during November and December in 2016. All of these 27 interviews were face-to-face interviews (23 using Skype). The duration of the interviews varied between 46 and 140 min. The participants comprised 23 female partners and four male partners, ranging in age from 29 to 55 years old. 24 of the partners had children. The participating partners were highly educated: 17 of them to Master's degree level, and seven to Bachelor's degree level. In terms of the assignment type, participants were divided into two groups: Assigned and self-initiated expatriate assignments. The key difference between these two types of assignment are that AEs are sent abroad by their home organisations, whereas SIEs usually initiate their expatriation and job search abroad themselves. The demographics of the interviewees are shown in Table 1. In the table,

Table 1. Demographics of the participants.

Narrative type	Pseudonym	Age	Education degree	Children	Host countries	Years abroad in total	Recently repatriated	Assignment type
Stable career identities	Emma	43	Master's	3	Germany, USA, Germany	5		AE
	Erin	41	Bachelor's	2	USA	3	Yes	AE
	Thomas	42	Other[a]	2	China, Great-Britain	8		AE
	Anita	35	Bachelor's	No	Germany, USA	5		AE
	Emilia	36	Master's	2	UK, France	4		SIE
	Sara	44	Master's	3	Poland, Austria, Vietnam	7	Yes	Both
	Oliver	37	Master's	2	Belgium	1.5		AE
Threatened career identities	Ella	39	Bachelor's	3	USA, Canada	6	Yes	AE
	Ava	35	Master's	2	Switzerland	2		SIE
	Hannah	35	Master's	1	The Netherlands	1.5		SIE
	Sandra	37	Master's	2	The Netherlands	8		SIE
Lost career identities	Eva	41	Other[b]	1	Chile, Canada, USA	5		AE
	Lydia	35	Master's	2	UK	2	Yes	SIE
	Jack	46	Other[c]	2	France	4		AE
	Sofia	48	Bachelor's	2	Sweden, The Netherlands, Canada	12		SIE
	Isabel	46	Master's	2	Argentina, Spain, Mexico, Mexico	9	Yes	AE
	Joanne	36	Master's	2	Germany, The Netherlands	6		SIE
	Katie	38	Master's	2	China, USA	4		AE
	Heidi	37	Master's	2	Switzerland	1.5		SIE

(*continued*)

Table 1. Continued.

Narrative type	Pseudonym	Age	Education degree	Children	Host countries	Years abroad in total	Recently repatriated	Assignment type
Emerging new career identities	Julia	50	Bachelor's	2	UK, Germany, Canada	11		SIE
	Laura	29	Bachelor's	1	Canada	2	Yes	SIE
	Daniel	55	Master's	2 (adult)	India	1.5	Yes	AE
	Olivia	37	Master's	2	The Netherlands	6		SIE
	Katrina	46	Master's	2	Canada	7		SIE
	Amelia	37	Master's	No	The Netherlands	1.5		SIE
	Maria	36	Bachelor's	No	USA	2		AE
	Nina	37	Master's	2	UK, The Netherlands, Switzerland	9		SIE

Note: AE—assigned; SIE—self-initiated.
[a]Post-secondary education.
[b]Vocational upper secondary qualification.
[c]Master's degree studies (not graduated).

interviewees are already grouped according to the narrative types that emerged, in order to make it easier to locate the descriptions of participants' backgrounds when reading the Findings section.

Rather than following a restrictive set of questions, the interview form was relatively open, facilitating a more conversational style of interview. This gave more flexibility in terms of allowing the interviewees to express their emotions and experiences. However, the use of a guiding research agenda ensured that all relevant themes for the study were discussed. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Narrative analysis

The active interaction and dialogue between narrator and the listener, i.e. the researcher, is what makes narrative interview research so rich and fruitful. In a deep interaction, the researcher may even empathise so strongly with the narrator that s/he identifies with the narrator. In this way, the researcher becomes emotionally engaged with the narrator's experiences (Riessman, 2008) and the stories of self are actively created in relationship with others (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). According to Riessman (2008), a distinctive feature of dialogic analysis is that the researcher includes her/himself as an active voice and participant in the narrative and the interpretation of that narrative. The research relationship is a dialogue in which the researcher openly makes sense of and speculates about the meaning of participant's story.

Polkinghorne (1988) argues that, in narrative analysis, the goal is 'to uncover the common themes or plots in the data' (p. 177). A hermeneutic analysis method is used to identify patterns across and within the stories. This analysis involves making comparisons and finding similarities and dissimilarities between stories (Bujold, 2004; Kohonen, 2008; McAlpine, 2016; Polkinghorne, 1988). In this study, the first phase of analysis involved several general readings and re-readings of the written transcripts. During the second phase of analysis, similarities and differences in the patterns of the stories were identified, and the main themes and plots of the narratives emerged. Three narrative types were identified at this stage. Finally, short individual narratives were written for each participant, based on the interview transcripts. The written narratives were each assigned to a narrative type and were then compared with each other to double check that they met the criteria of that narrative type. Some discrepancies emerged as a result of this comparison, which led to the re-categorisation of a few of the narratives into a fourth narrative type.

The results of narrative research do not necessarily represent the external 'reality' or 'truth' (Riessman, 1993). Rather, the truths presented by

narrative researches are 'narrative truths' and the stories represent a subjective meaning and interpretation, rather than the objective facts of the event that is reported (Polkinghorne, 2007). The findings thus have 'the appearance of truth or reality' (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 176) for both the researcher and the readers; they are the researcher's interpretation of the meanings of the participants, which are further interpreted by the readers. Riessman (1993) has addressed ways of validating the trustworthiness of interpretations, including persuasiveness, coherence and correspondence. In the present research, the trustworthiness of the analysis was ensured, for example, by using detailed verbatim transcripts of recorded interviews, continually comparing the data with identified patterns, and providing a detailed and transparent description of each identified narrative type. Several illustrative quotes from the interviews are presented to affirm the researcher's interpretations. Trustworthiness was further ensured by offering participants the opportunity to check and provide feedback on their transcripts, and to contact the researcher at a later date to provide additional descriptions of their experiences (see also Kohonen, 2008).

Findings

Based on the narrative analysis and the plots that emerged, the following four narrative types were identified: 'Stable career identities', 'Threatened career identities', 'Lost career identities' and 'Emerging new career identities'. These identity types are based on consistent core patterns that can be detected across the narratives. These patterns are related to partners' experiences concerning their current career identity, their career self-management skills and career exploration activity; the coherence of their career story; and partners' emotional feelings about career. (See Table 2 in the beginning of the Discussion section) Each of these narrative types, with illustrative quotes, is described below.

Stable career identities

Seven of the interviews were placed in 'Stable career identities' group. A distinctive and common feature of these coherent career stories is the sense of a stable career identity that has remained constant in spite of the cessation of that career while living abroad. For some, career identity has strengthened as a result of the international experience. These partners have a strong belief in their professional abilities and they have actively participated in work life, taken on voluntary work or have had profession-related hobbies during their relocation. Typically, they are

optimistic about their career progress. Of note is that these stories were often narrated by professionals such as teachers. Emma and Emilia are teachers who have succeeded in maintaining their career identities. Emma admitted that her several relocations have shortened her career but that she has always been successful in finding something (paid work or volunteer work) that is related to teaching. Currently, she works as an assistant teacher in a new host country. She feels that her career identity is still strong—'superb'—and that work is an essential part of her self-image. She is very positive and optimistic regarding her future career: 'Teaching is what I want to do'. Emilia had worked as a full-time teacher for five years before the relocation. This work has contributed significantly to her self-esteem and career identity. During her time abroad, she has worked mainly as a mid-day assistant in her child's school. Despite not teaching, her career identity is strong and stable, and she still she sees herself as an advocate of the Finnish education system, even after many years away from Finland:

> I have maintained a strong professional identity, I still regard myself as a Finnish teacher.

She believes that after her repatriation her career will progress well and that she will easily secure a job teaching refugee and/or immigrant children.

Erin's story is an example of a stable career identity with roots in a lifelong profession, to which she feels that she has a 'calling'. Her career path in healthcare has been clear to her since she was a teenager and working in the health sector has been a long-held dream. Before the relocation, Erin had already worked for 18 years as a physiotherapist. During her time abroad, she attended English classes and did voluntary work in her children's school. It was obvious from the start of the assignment that she would be a stay-at-home mother:

> I did not have a work permit, I could not work in my field. When we made the decision to go, and before we went, it was very clear that I would be a stay-at-home mother.

Erin applied for leave of absence from her work in a hospital and so her working position was secured for her return. This helped Erin to retain her career identity and currently she considers this identity to be quite strong. She is optimistic about the future and has no plans to change her profession:

> If I now try to think of what my career identity was before the relocation, and how it has changed, I would say it is still pretty strong.

As these stories above indicate, factors important to maintaining a stable career identity include a profession which might be described as a 'calling', a secured job after repatriation through taking leave of absence,

and the ease of finding work back in a home country. In addition to the stories above, Sara, a lawyer, confirms the importance of the home country employer's support when accepting an international assignment:

> I would have needed a great job offer (in the host country) to quit my job at the government agency (in the home country). If it (the relocation) had meant the end of my career, I would not have agreed to go.

Thomas has been able to continue his work remotely, which has ensured that his career identity has not changed significantly. The rest of the partners in this 'stable career identity' narrative type have utilised various means to maintain their identities. For instance, during his time abroad, Oliver has been on occasional several-day business trips to different countries on behalf of his former Finnish employer. These business trips have helped him to maintain his career identity as a laboratory engineer:

> Since the beginning, when we arrived, it has been clear that I would be a stay-at-home father. These short-term business trips that I have had the opportunity to do here have been excellent opportunities to balance this (staying at home). Having the opportunity to do something that relates to my educational background.

For Anita, who does not have a work permit in the host country, active participation in a profession-related (personal training) hobby and volunteer work has been key to protecting her career identity and preserving her belief in her own abilities.

Threatened career identities

All four participant narrators in this group describe feelings of growing insecurity and uncertainty over their career identities. The partners' stories reflect their fears of losing their sense of identity and independence, and of losing their ability to control and self-manage their lives and careers in the same way as they were able to do in their home country. However, the participants are not passive bystanders but have, for example, worked remotely or undertaken further studies in an endeavour to secure a coherent sense of career identity. All of these career-oriented participants are actively exploring and trying to work out the future direction of their desired career paths and career identities. Partners are uncertain of what will happen next, given that changes in their career situation seem inevitable, due to, for example, difficulties in finding work, possessing unrecognised qualifications or an unknown length of stay. Participants presented questions such as 'who am I?' and 'what am I without my work?'. Typically, these participants were currently living in their first host country. At the time of the interviews, they all describe how they have started to think about and reflect deeply on their future work and careers.

Another point of commonality among these partners' stories is that they have been unable to 'take a crucial step' to advance their careers while abroad. This step includes, for example, putting their children in a day-care in order to find and start a full-time job with a local employer, requesting a more equal distribution of housework with the expatriate, or even moving back to their home country with the children. The participants express diverse reasons for not taking this crucial step, including fears of possible negative consequences for overall family well-being or not being a sufficiently supportive partner for the expatriate. Sandra describes how her remote studies and a job in a special education school helped her stay connected to her career identity. But at the same time, she feels a little disappointed that this job did not match the level of her education and that her occupational therapist qualifications were not recognised. Additionally, Sandra is not certain how long they will stay in the host country. The length of stay has already been much longer than the couple first planned and her husband has no interest in repatriating. She has now stopped working and feels that she is sacrificing her career. Her main responsibilities are for domestic work and taking care of children, which she feels limits her options and career development:

> Sometimes, when I am doing the laundry or filling the dish washer, 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.

It appears that, in common with participants identifying as 'stable career' types, the partners' career identities have been protected thus far by their previous work histories. Work experience has strengthened their career identities and they are all able to build coherent and meaningful stories about their work histories, which demonstrate feelings of consistency and life management. For instance, Ava and Hannah have many years of work experience in their home country and they have also worked whilst abroad. Ava worked in corporate communications before she resigned in order to relocate with her partner. Unfortunately, she did not manage to find a new job abroad. The situation became very stressful for her and so she has started to work remotely as a part-time consultant for her previous Finnish employer. Work has been important for Ava's self-esteem and career identity, and without her work she feels worthless. Although working as a consultant has helped her to maintain her career identity so far, she feels that her 'career self' is becoming fragmented:

> I experience my career as more fragmented, as I do not go to the same place of work, spend my whole career there, or advance within the company.

Hannah says that her only reason for moving abroad was her willingness to support her husband's career. Before the move, Hannah had

worked for eight years as a consultant and project manager, and she had recently been promoted. During the first year abroad, she worked from home for her Finnish employer. She strongly identifies herself with her job and work achievements:

> I have spent a lot of time during this last spring reflecting on whether I can step outside working life. What will I become if I do? I will just be Hannah, a mother. What is that worth? Nothing.

Hannah feels that she has made sacrifices with regard to her work. In common with several other female participants, she thinks that she has lost her independence by having no income of her own. Similarly, Ella is in the middle of making career decisions and she is considering searching for new opportunities, even if this means working in a totally different professional area than she did before the relocation:

> I hope to find a nice job, or to start my own company, or something … I am not really sure.

Overall, the partners' stories describe uncertain and mixed emotional feelings about their career progress in the future.

Lost career identities

The dominant characteristic shared by the eight participants in the 'lost career identity' narrative group is their pessimistic feelings and attitudes about the future of their careers. Although these partners consider careers to be meaningful for their identities, they feel 'lost'. Narratives describe stories of conflicts, contradictions, and lowered self-esteem. Stories of career and work histories lack coherence and are typically fragmented. As a result, career identities appear fragmented. During their relocations, the majority of the participants have not actively explored new career possibilities or been in a paid work. Reasons for not working are related to work permit restrictions, insufficient language skills, uncertainty over the length of stay, or feeling daunted about searching for a job. Compared to partners with 'Stable career identities', only a few have worked on a voluntary basis. Taken as a whole, the partners' stories reflect pessimism, feelings of failure and dissatisfaction with career progress.

For example, Lydia feels that her career has never developed in the way that she had wished, and so she feels uncertain professionally. She says that there is very little left of her career identity and that she is too scared to think about her future. Jack, in turn, had worked in several different jobs and was an entrepreneur immediately prior to the relocation. He says that his entrepreneurial career meant a lot to him, as:

> It was the only thing I could do and I think I was good at it.

He no longer sees himself as an entrepreneur and, instead, he wants to find a 'new professional self'. In terms of career, he sees his future as challenging. Just like Jack, Eva's pre-relocation work history is fragmented, consisting of various jobs and entrepreneurship. Additionally, she has lived in several countries and has moved from one country to another for her husband's career, without repatriating between relocations. Eva does not have a work permit and so she has not been able to work in any of the host countries while abroad. She feels insecure and thinks that her self-esteem has suffered. It has been hard for her to give up her own income and the situation has caused arguments with her husband. Eva feels that she has not only sacrificed her career, but even herself:

> My career identity is completely lost … I can say I have sacrificed myself. I did not think about it back then, but thinking about it now, damned, we have been here for five years. I have wasted five years of my life.

As Eva's story indicates, in this narrative type, the challenges of the change in role from being a working partner to a stay-at-home partner are evident. These challenges are related to experienced identity changes and the loss of financial independence and self-management, which have resulted in lowered self-esteem and a loss of the sense of being fully in control of one's own life. For Heidi and Katie, the role change from working partner to stay-at-home mother has also been demanding. Heidi, a substitute language teacher, says living abroad has resulted in deep self-examination of her career identity. For her, being a stay-at-home mother is not real work. The role change has caused an identity crisis and has had a negative impact on her self-esteem:

> I notice that the Finnish woman's identity and self-esteem are partly built on the professional identity … I feel it was a big part of my identity, that I had some skill and used it to earn money.

Katie had a permanent job as a marketing manager in a large multinational corporation (MNC) before her first relocation. She says that she had not thought about the importance of career for her self-esteem and identity until she gave up her work. During her time abroad, Katie has not worked, mainly due to the uncertainty over the length of her husband's assignment (China and USA), and challenges caused by cultural distance and language skills (China). She is fully aware that it was necessary to give up her career, given that she chose to accompany her husband, but adjusting to her new role has been difficult:

> I still cannot say I am a stay-at-home mother … . I do not identify as such.

In common with Eva, Sofia's and Isabel's career paths have been interrupted by several moves. Sofia, now living in her third host country,

views her career as stagnated. Isabel reflects that she has not gained enough work experience and that her career identity has been fragmented because of her relocations. Between the last two relocations, she worked in a Finnish university as a project worker. Unfortunately, a traumatic non-work related experience that she had suffered in a previous host country affected her ability to work at full capacity. As a result, she received negative feedback on her performance from her employer; this crushed her professional self-confidence and self-esteem for good:

> The experience was crushing. It still affects me. The first thing, when I think about taking a job, I think about the big failure in that job.

Even many years after that experience, Isabel feels that she lacks confidence and is too scared to apply for work. Additionally, she feels that she must always be ready to move again. Isabel argues that she has sacrificed her career and 'everything' because of the relocations and her associated responsibility as a stay-at-home mother.

Lastly, Joanne's story differs from the other partners' stories in this 'lost career identity' narrative type in that she had a clear career plan to work as a researcher before the relocation. When Joanne and her family moved to their first host country, she continued her doctoral studies as a visiting researcher at the local university. However, her motivation decreased because of some practical issues, such as difficulties in maintaining contact with her home university, and so she finally abandoned her studies. Giving up her doctoral studies was a difficult decision, as conducting research had become a significant part of her identity. Even after several years, she still struggles with the experience and compares her career to her husband's:

> It was such as big part of me … The kind of disappointment in myself. and in comparison, my husband's career has been so different … he has always been successful and progressed in his career. I have felt I have been kind of left behind, maybe.

Joanne has not worked for five years now, and when she talks about the future of her career, she often uses words such as 'scared', 'pessimistic', and 'nervous'.

Emerging new career identities

The eight expatriate partners who were classified into this fourth category present a coherent and consistent narrative about their career and identity development. Typically, these partners have a strong sense of resilience and have been capable of taking numerous goal-oriented steps towards new career paths such as entrepreneurship and other professional roles that are often significantly different from their previous roles.

All their narratives can be characterised as being full of positive attitude, optimism and a belief in their own abilities to find their own place in working life, while achieving a good and balanced life for themselves and for their families. Characteristically, the storytellers describe themselves as being in the midst of career identity reconstruction and/or in a state of career identity transition.

As a means to accomplish their career aspirations, some have chosen to start from low level jobs, yet aspire to achieve managerial level in the future. Katrina's, Julia's and Laura's stories are good examples of partners who have taken very determined and goal-oriented steps towards managerial level jobs.

Katrina describes herself as career-oriented, ambitious and performance focused. Before the relocation, she had attained a good managerial position in an insurance company. Moving abroad has resulted in considerable changes to Katrina's professional role and career identity, and she compares herself to her friends:

> It hurts to think how far my friends have progressed and are in good positions as managers.

Katrina has attempted to restart her career from scratch and gain important local work experience by working in lower level positions:

> I'm ambitious. I still hope to become a manager, saying anything else would be lying.

With this goal in mind, she has taken several different jobs and has not hesitated to change jobs when they did not serve her purpose. At the time of the interview, she describes her job within a large MNC as developing her career in the desired direction. Consequently, Katrina describes her career identity being under reconstruction.

Julia, too, had a long and successful career in management prior to her family's relocation. As a highly career-oriented person, she had already once refused to relocate for her husband's work. However, due to her company's organisational changes, Julia finally accepted the move. She was surprised to discover that it was difficult to find a job in the host country, because of the local cultural norm for women to adopt the role of stay-at-home mother. She decided to change her area of profession completely and found a job in the insurance business through her newly developed local network. To Julia's dismay, her husband was offered a new job in another country. Julia describes moving and giving up her work as psychologically disastrous for herself and as threatening for her career identity. It took an entire year for her to come to terms with the experience. Now, after restarting from the bottom, taking lower level jobs with low salaries, she has finally found her place in banking and works at a senior managerial level:

> Then, luckily, I found my current position through networking. I am very satisfied with my current position.

Julia describes her career identity over the last few years as being in a process of constant change because of the relocations. Finally, for Laura, pursuing her career aspirations was so important that she was prepared to jeopardise her marriage, and she moved back to Finland with her daughter. Laura and her husband, who stayed in a host country, are currently separated and have no plans to reconcile. Now, her new career as a product manager in an IT company is progressing well towards a higher managerial position and her career identity is getting stronger: 'I feel like a winner'.

For other partners (Daniel, Amelia, and Olivia), the means to accomplish their career aspirations included becoming entrepreneurs; they are changing their careers and leaving their previous professions to pursue work in another. Daniel has left behind several senior management level positions to become an entrepreneur, and he feels that he is now reconstructing his career identity. For Amelia, moving abroad initially caused a career crisis and giving up her financial independence created a huge change in her life. She previously worked in a managerial position within a large male-dominated hierarchical organisation (the police force) and has now changed career to become an entrepreneur with her own small personal training business. Now, having worked through her career identity crisis, she describes herself as having entered the 'finding herself' phase, where she is actively processing her career identity. Although Amelia never planned to be a personal trainer or considered personal training as her dream career, her history as a competitive bicycle racer made the career transition easier:

> Going into personal training education gave me a clear sense of direction, something I wanted to start engage in.

In contrast to Daniel and Amelia, Olivia, as a musician, did not work in a traditional organisational setting before the relocation. The development of her identity as a musician has been a process that has been ongoing since childhood:

> My professional identity, in a cultural field such as music, to acquire that high level of skill, has had to start from early childhood. It is your life. It is not just a job but a particular part of your personal identity and your self-image.

Relocating abroad has had some significant effects on Olivia's career identity. After spending some time in the host country, she decided to start a music school for young children and, later, a Finnish choir, both of which have been successful. Olivia's overall professional role has changed dramatically from being a performing artist to being a teacher of other

performers. It makes her especially proud that she has been able to create a successful business by expanding the music school client base and increasing the number of ticket sales for choir concerts, all of which she has achieved without having a local network. Becoming an entrepreneur has had a tremendously positive effect on her self-esteem. She has found her place within her new community and created a work role that brings her fulfilment:

> Socially, it is easier to be able to say that I run my own company.

The other participants in this 'emerging new career identities' category, Nina (former HR professional) and Maria (former TV producer), are turning their hobbies into new careers, with Nina starting an interior design business and Maria starting a horse business:

> I want to make it on my own, and for this I want to turn horse business into my own profession. In doing this, I would be able to show that… I am capable of building myself a new career.

They are both taking their first steps to becoming entrepreneurs, such as undertaking further training (Nina), conducting market analysis and developing business plans. They feel optimistic and excited about the future; they feel that they are making progress in developing a more entrepreneurial mind-set and that their career identities are changing and evolving accordingly.

These narratives represent active expatriate partners, whose career self-management skills are strong and who are ready to consider new alternative careers. In order to achieve their desired goals, they are actively exploring their career possibilities and are willing to seek out new experience and knowledge, and to learn new skills. They are proud of their courage, perseverance and persistent determination in adhering to a purposeful plan in order to achieve their goals. In the following section, the discussion and conclusions are presented.

Discussion

The major finding of this empirical study is the identification of four career identity narrative types: 'Stable career identities', 'Threatened career identities', 'Lost career identities' and 'Emerging new career identities'. The core patterns revealed in the study and the main differences and similarities between narrative types are shown in Table 2. The core patterns of narratives are listed on the left (column 0). These relate to: *Characteristics of the experienced current career identity*; *Career self-management skills and career exploration activity*; *Coherence of the career story*; and *Emotional feelings about career*. Columns 1–4 describe the identified features of each pattern for each narrative type.

Table 2. Core patterns of narratives and typical features of each narrative type.

0. Core patterns of narratives	1. Stable career identities	2. Threatened career identities	3. Lost career identities	4. Emerging new career identities
Characteristics of the experienced current career identity	Stable identities due to working in a same profession/area while in a host country; profession as 'a calling'	On the brink of losing career identity. Fears of losing independence, and control of self-management	Fragmented and lost career identities, fragmented work histories and careers	Emerging identities as entrepreneurs and self-employed, at managerial level or aspiring to it, studying new profession
Career self-management skills and career exploration activity	Belief in own abilities; active participation in work life or either volunteer work or profession related hobbies	Despite feelings of insecurity, are active explorers. Because of various reasons 'not taking a crucial step'	Feelings of insecurity and lowered self-esteem; not actively exploring new career possibilities, not working, only little volunteer work	Goal-oriented steps towards new career. Belief in own abilities, active career self-management; exploring possibilities, willing to gain experience and to learn new skills, resilience
Coherence of the career story	Coherent and stable career stories	Hitherto coherent career stories, but indicate fears of losing the coherence	Career stories lack coherence	Coherent career stories despite challenges and career identities in transition
Emotional feelings about career	Emotional feelings about career progress optimistic and overall attitude is positive	Emotional feelings about career progress uncertain and overall attitude is mixed	Emotional feelings about career progress and overall attitude are pessimistic, characterised by conflicts, contradictions, and feelings of failure	Emotional feelings about career progress are optimistic and excited. Overall attitude is very positive

With the exception of stable career identities narratives, the other three narratives reflect mixed experiences of cessation of career, but also of finding new career directions and reconstructing career identity. As discussed, these coherent stories of emerging new career identities reflect good self-management skills, self-directed activity and more optimistic emotional feelings about the future. 'Lost career identities' are the narratives of fragmentation of identity, lowered self-esteem, lower levels of self-directed activity and pessimistic emotional feelings of career progress. Previous research exploring expatriate identities has made similar findings, with the identification of 'identity shifters' and 'balanced identities' among expatriates (see e.g. Kohonen, 2008). However, this does not mean that identity type groups are static and unchanging; it is entirely possible that, for example, partners who are now characterised as having 'Emerging new career identities' could transition to a 'Stable career identities' type at some point. Equally, those currently having 'Stable career

identities' could, in changed circumstances, find themselves struggling to preserve this identity and move to a 'Threatened career identities' type, for example, in a situation where the partner is not allowed to take leave of absence due to the length of assignment and there is no job to return to after repatriation.

The findings of this study provide new insights into the reconstruction of career identity among expatriate partners in the context of expatriate assignments. It highlights the importance of career self-management skills and personal initiative, and the salience of individuals' pre-relocation career histories in understanding their challenges and needs during the relocation and after repatriation. The findings support the view that when the possibility of the career-oriented expatriate partner continuing to work diminishes, the partner faces both career and role transition. The results indicate that partners differ in the extent to which they perceive working while abroad to be important. Although some of the partners in this study were happy to take a career break, at some point the majority of them became concerned about their future post-assignment career prospects. It seems that these partners have both high partner role salience and high career role salience (see van der Velde et al., 2017) and, hence, although willing to relocate for their husband's or wife's work, they also value their own careers. For those partners who consider employment a purposeful part of their life and who wish to continue working while abroad, the new environment presents challenges. The results show the importance of employment and career for self-esteem and feeling valued (see also Bikos & Kocheleva, 2013; Brown, 2008). This study demonstrates that being at home without work and a regular personal income has a considerable impact on the partners' sense of independence and on the balance of power within the family. This balance is disturbed by the fact that the partner is no longer an equal earner and provider for the family, and instead becomes a stay-at-home parent (Lazarova et al., 2010). Additionally, many stay-at-home parents in this study have not been eligible for child home care allowances and child benefits, nor have they had the same opportunities to return to work after parental leave as they would have had in their home countries. The reasons that the partners in this study have not been able to work or continue a career are related to work permit restrictions, skills and qualifications, and the challenges of combining work and family in the host culture. The disparity between what the partners are able and willing to do in terms of work, and the reality of what is available and possible in the host country, is experienced as frustrating. This frustration was evident in all identity types, with the exception of the 'Stable career identities' type. For example, in those with 'Emerging new career identities',

the lack of formal country-specific skills initially led to some partners accepting work that did not correspond to their level of education or their previous level of seniority. Intriguingly, this has not caused long-term pessimism among these partners; on the contrary, their attitude to career progress is positive.

King (2004) has argued that career self-management skills promote a person's sense of control over his/her career. This current study highlights the importance of partners' career self-management skills prior to and during the relocation, and the relevance of these skills to career identity work and emotional feelings about career identity. The results suggest that, while living abroad, the reconstruction of career identity is advanced by self-directed activity, a sense of resilience and the readiness to step outside one's comfort zone in order to experiment with alternative career-related options. For example, the majority of the participants with an 'Emerging new career identities' narrative described themselves as possessing traits resembling those that are considered key to utilising career opportunities: Curiosity, persistence, flexibility, optimism and risk taking (Mitchell, Levin, & Krumboltz, 1999). Their employability and self-efficacy enabled them to identify and realise career opportunities, and engage in career exploration (Fugate et al., 2004; Ireland & Lent, 2018). Participants used both environmental exploration and self-exploration in order to find information about job market opportunities and to become more aware of their own values and interests (Bluestein, 1997; Zikic & Klehe, 2006).

Earlier studies have indicated that having more than one international assignment seems to be a relatively common phenomenon among expatriates (Banai & Harry, 2004; Cerdin & Le Pargneux, 2010). The results here suggest that the number of assignments, coupled with the individual's self-management skills, does indeed have an effect on the expatriate partner's ability to maintain or reinvent their career identities. For example, in the 'Emerging new career identities' group, only two of the participants had lived in more than one country, which suggests that staying in one host country might contribute to the reinventing of one's career identity. In contrast, five out of the eight participants in the 'Lost career identities' group had lived in two or more host countries. Thus, career identity reconstruction in expatriate partners is even more negatively affected when the partners experience more than one assignment, especially if they lack adequate career self-management skills. These findings confirm the results of previous research, which suggests that global careers involving multiple assignments in different countries, either following directly after one another or at intervals, often presents additional challenges for the accompanying partners (Mäkelä & Suutari, 2011).

However, it should be noted that the majority of partners (five out of seven) in the 'Stable career identities' group had also lived in several countries, but had succeeded in maintaining their career identities. Maintaining a career identity appears to be easier if the individual has a profession which might be described as a 'calling', if finding work after repatriation is relatively easy and if he/she has a secured job after repatriation through taking leave of absence. In addition to the number of the assignments, the temporal dimension of living abroad should also be considered. Overall, the average length of time spent abroad differed to some extent between the four career identity types. For example, the participants in 'Threatened career identities' had spent shortest time abroad (on average 3.6 years), whereas those in 'Lost career identities' had spent the longest time (on average 5.4 years). Despite this difference, it should be noted that each career identity type included participants who had been abroad for only 1.5 years and also those who had been living abroad for 8 years or more. Thus, it seems that the length of time abroad does not fully explain why individual partners fall into one career identity type rather than another.

In addition, the results indicate that career identities and the careers of many accompanying partners can become considerably fragmented. Frequent moves and disparate jobs make traditional career paths impossible. Thorn (2009) has argued that self-initiated mobility 'is the most extreme form of boundaryless career' (p. 451). This seems to be true for expatriate partners as well. Partners' career identities are reconstructed against a backdrop of repeatedly changing life roles, and thus career identities themselves are continually changing. In addition to the theory of 'boundaryless careers', other theories that help to explain expatriate partners' careers include 'kaleidoscope careers' (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005) and 'protean careers' (De Vos & Soens, 2008; Mirvis & Hall, 1994). These career theories emphasise the overlapping nature of work and non-work roles, where each career move creates changes in life, and which eventually results in a reshaping of career identity. In this study, some expatriate partners encountered barriers, such as work permit restrictions, unrecognised qualifications, and a lack of suitable job opportunities, and they were forced to make compromises between work and non-work roles. It can be argued that some role changes and career moves that partners experience are less voluntary than others, and this was clearly expressed in the language of the partners who felt this way about their career situation: 'I will just be Hannah, a mother. What is that worth? Nothing' (Hannah in 'Threatened career identities'), 'I have wasted five years of my life' (Eva in 'Lost career identities'), 'stagnated' (Sofia in 'Lost career identities), and 'scared, pessimistic, and nervous'

(Joanne in 'Lost career identities') 'psychologically disastrous' (Julia in 'Emerging new career identities'). On the other hand, the findings of this study suggest that non-work roles such as voluntary work (e.g. to help with networking and language skills development), hobbies and parenting might, for some partners, function as a springboard for future career considerations.

The results also reveal that the type of expatriate assignment, in terms of being either self-initiated or assigned, affects partner's career situation and career identity reconstruction. It has been argued that if the initiative to relocate comes from the expatriates themselves, the decision to move might be more acceptable to, and within the control of, the accompanying partner (e.g. Selmer & Lauring, 2011). Surprisingly, however, those partners with stable career identities were predominantly partners of AEs. This finding suggests that a predetermined length of career break, guaranteed repatriation within certain period of time and guaranteed re-employment in the same profession after repatriation, are beneficial for those partners who want to maintain their career identities. Furthermore, the findings here indicate that self-initiated expatriate partners are more concerned about losing their career identities, their independence and their ability to self-manage (for example, see Sandra in 'Threatened career identities'). On the other hand, the results show that SIE partners (in 'Emerging new career identities') are more likely to work while abroad (see also Suutari & Brewster, 2000). In summary, while these findings add to an understanding of the impact of different types of expatriate assignments on accompanying partners' career identity reconstruction, further research is needed, for example, to investigate why equal numbers of AE partners and SIE partners describe themselves as having 'Lost career identities'.

Finally, while results from previous studies (Harvey & Wiese, 1998; Linehan & Scullion, 2004; Selmer & Leung, 2003) have implied that adopting new roles is more demanding for male partners than for female partners, this does not seem to be the case among the four male participants of this study. In fact, the male partners were not worried about losing their status as a breadwinner, as might have been expected based on the aforementioned research. This result may be affected by prevailing norms relating to gender equality in the home country. Indeed, the influence of the home country culture in determining how people make sense of their career situation and career identities is significant among female expatriate partners. The stories of female partners highlight the significance of the home country culture as a modifier of career identity. They describe the Finnish woman as an independent individual, equal to a man, who earns her own money by working hard. This culturally held

viewpoint seems to be a potential source of crisis when partners reflect on their career identities while abroad. Negative comments received from relatives and friends in the home country about not working and being a stay-at-home mother make the situation even worse.

In summary, while the findings indicate that the number of assignments and the type of the assignment affect the career identities of expatriate partners, a better explanation of the results of this study is that there is a significant individual component to career transitions and career identity reconstruction. It seems that much of the partners' career identity maintenance and reconstruction is related to self-management skills, personal initiative and personal agency, both prior to and during the assignment. In some cases, it can even be argued that the loss of career identity is perhaps more a result of the partner's attitude than a lack of opportunity to find some kind of lower level and/or less well-paid work (or voluntary work), which, in the long run, could help to reinforce their career identities. In contrast, those with emerging new career identities are ready to take goal-oriented steps towards entrepreneurship, or to take low-level jobs in order to achieve a managerial level in the future, or to change their profession entirely. Additionally, partners in both 'Stable career identities' and 'Emerging new career identities' believe strongly in their own abilities and exhibit personality traits such as high self-esteem and optimism, in contrast to those traits exhibited by those with 'Lost career identities'.

However, despite the individual aspect of career identity construction discussed above, the career identity typology presented in this study could offer a new perspective for companies to use in their expatriate assignee selection processes. Thus, the practical contribution of this study for organisations is that it highlights the potential advantages of engaging career-oriented expatriate partners in the decision of whether to accept a relocation, and of considering more customised selection practices for different expatriate dual-career couple profiles. Both home- and host-organisations would benefit from providing more support programmes for partners, in order to minimise the risk of unfortunate and costly assignment failures or premature returns. Such support might even prevent personal and family-related crises among expatriate couples. Companies could more deeply take into account career-oriented expatriate partners' career histories, the way in which their careers have developed, the current stage of their career life-cycle (Harvey & Buckley, 1998), their desired future careers, and finally, their level of preparedness to face such a major career challenge. Considering these factors would help in assessing and understanding the extent of the partner's career self-management skills and the kind of support and guidance that may

be required. Guidance could include providing realistic expectations about the host country's job markets, advice on building personal networks, the practices for finding (volunteer) work in the new host country, and the kind of (volunteer) work that is relevant for developing the career competencies that will be valued in the home country after repatriation. Given that not all companies offer such support practices (McNulty & Moeller, 2018) and, indeed, may offer less relocation assistance and support than in the past (Cartus, 2016), partners themselves need to take a more active role. Career-oriented partners who are not offered any company support but who are willing to continue working or otherwise maintain their careers in the host country should proactively investigate local qualification requirements, develop country-specific skills including language skills and pursue employment opportunities in the host country. In addition, engaging in psychologically meaningful activities may provide motivation and give meaning to the partner's daily life. Activities that are perceived to be of benefit to their future careers could potentially protect partners from the psychological stress resulting from unemployment (Celen-Demirtas, Konstam, & Tomek, 2015). This conclusion is supported by this current study, as the results indicate that those engaging in a higher number of activities (volunteering, studies and/or hobbies) are more optimistic about their career progress.

Methodologically, this study supports the value of the narrative method when studying career identity, a phenomenon which is not only continuously changing, but also both individually and socially constructed. Using a narrative method has revealed how differently partners experience career transitions and the maintainance or reconstruction of their career identities, even when they have the same profession (e.g. teacher or nurse). Moving abroad is an individual experience and, thus, impacts partners and their career identities very differently. In addition, the current study illustrates that narratives offer a fruitful way of understanding expatriate partners' perceptions of career self-management and career behaviour in an international context and changed environment. That being said, this study is not without its limitations. One limitation is that the cultural context and backgrounds of the participants is remarkably homogeneous and includes only Finnish expatriate partners. Further studies with a more diverse participant population would help to increase understanding of this construct. This would also provide more generalisable results. In addition, longitudinal research would be beneficial. For instance, research and data collection several years after repatriation would offer valuable findings in terms of whether and how career identities change in the years after returning home, and whether international assignments and the experience gained during those assignments

have a long-term impact on career paths and career identities. Longitudinal studies would also reveal if and how partners move from one career identity type to another, for example, whether, and by which means, those with 'lost career identities' eventually manage to find their place in working life and reconstruct their career identities.

Conclusion

This research study extends HRM knowledge while drawing attention to the career transitions that expatriate partners experience and the effect of those transitions on career identity reconstruction. The results contribute to the understanding of career identity work among career-oriented expatriate partners and demonstrate that international assignments have a considerable impact on partners' careers and career identities. The study identifies four career identity types: 'Stable career identities', 'Threatened career identities', 'Lost career identities' and 'Emerging new career identities'. Importantly, it highlights the significance of partners' career self-management skills, self-directed activity and personal initiative in maintaining, losing or reconstructing their career identities while abroad. Additionally, awareness of career identity typology offers a new perspective for companies when they consider selection practices for different expatriate dual-career couple profiles. Engaging expatriate partners in the decision-making process as to whether or not to accept an international assignment, and taking into account their career situation, could potentially help partners to start proactively exploring their career opportunities abroad and could minimise the risk of assignment refusals or premature returns.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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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

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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,

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
Living abroad						
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[a]	China, Great Britain	8	AE	Remote working, entrepreneur
Katie	38	Master's degree	China, USA	4	AE	Not working, studying
Eva	41	Other[b]	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[c]	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
Repatriated						
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
[a]Postsecondary education
[b]Vocational upper secondary qualification
[c]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,

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:

> . . . 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

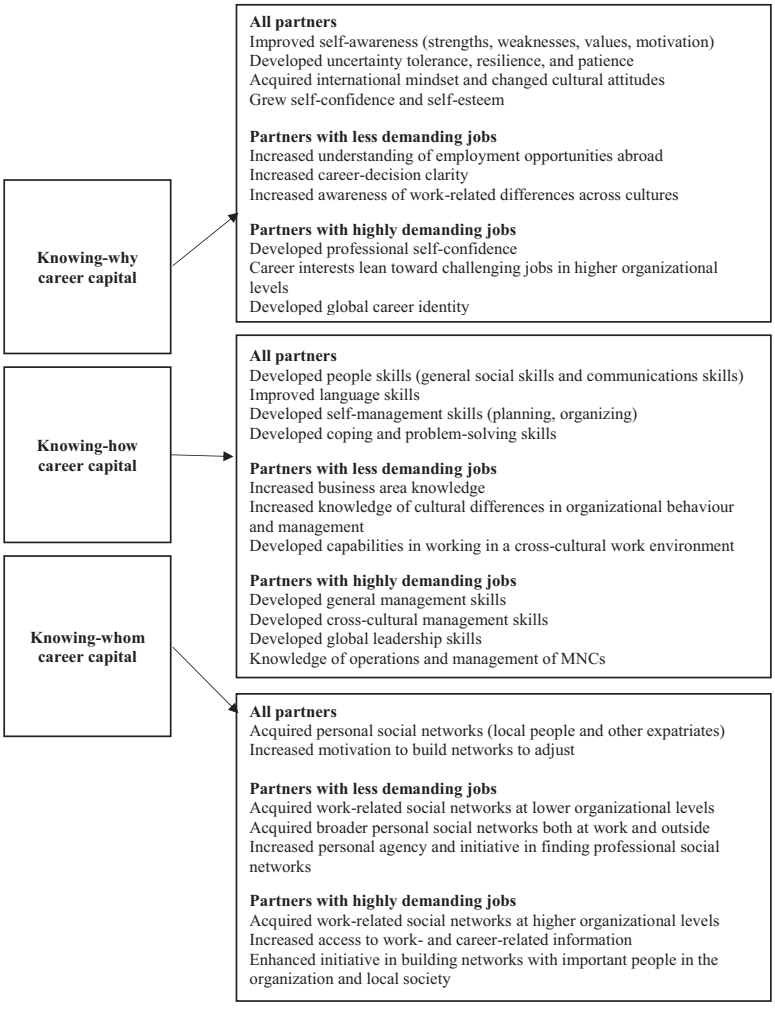

Figure 1.
Development of expatriate partners' career capital

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

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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Expatriate partners' subjective well-being and related resource losses and gains

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the subjective well-being (SWB) and related resources of expatriate partners during international assignments. The data were collected in 20 in-depth interviews with the partners of high-status Finnish expatriates and analyzed by employing thematic analysis. The results show that relocation causes significant changes in expatriate partners' condition resources that lead to changes in SWB either directly or through affecting their energy and personal resources. The findings highlight partners' ability to replace lost resources and the importance of self-directed activity while doing so. Additionally, resource gain spirals seem to have a more powerful effect on partners' SWB than resource loss cycles. This study contributes to the literature on expatriate partners by approaching their SWB and related changes in resources also from a positive perspective. Conservation of Resources theory is utilized as a framework for this study and we contribute to research on it by suggesting that condition resources might have a more important role than other resources in changing life situations. As a practical implication, we suggest that expatriate partners should be aware of that relocation will significantly affect their condition recourses. Organizations employing expatriates should give due consideration to partner concerns from the pre-departure phase until repatriation.

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Introduction

The globalization of economies has increased the need for international mobility among the workforce (Brookfield, 2016; Cartus, 2016; Shaffer et al., 2012; Stahl et al., 2002). Many employees are relocating from one country to another due to their work and typically this period, called expatriation, lasts over 12 months (McNulty & Brewster, 2017; Shaffer et al., 2012). The majority of these long-term expatriates take their partners and families abroad with them (e.g. Doherty et al., 2011; Riusala & Suutari, 2000; Selmer & Lauring, 2011; Suutari & Brewster, 2001; Thorn, 2009). Here, the term *expatriates* refers to business expatriates: 'legally working individuals who reside temporarily in a country of which they are not a citizen in order to accomplish a career-related goal, being relocated abroad either by an organization, by self-initiation or directly employed within the host-country' (McNulty & Brewster, 2017, p. 46). The expatriates included in this study can also be described as

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high-status expatriates both as a result of their originating from a developed country, Finland and their employment position (e.g. managerial level or senior specialist level) (Al Ariss, 2010; Haak-Saleem et al., 2019). They are employed by either a large corporate entity or by a public sector/non-governmental organization. The group includes both traditional corporate expatriates who were sent abroad by their home organizations and self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) who initiated their expatriation and job search abroad themselves (see McNulty & Brewster, 2017). As the interviewees of this study represent the partners of highly educated high-income expatriates, the findings are also very specific to those population groups.

Moving abroad causes major changes in expatriates' lives but also in the lives of those people following them abroad (McNulty, 2015; Richardson, 2006; Rosenbusch & Cseh, 2012). It has even been argued that relocation is more demanding for partners because they find themselves in an unfamiliar and unstructured situation, whereas the expatriate employee remains in a relatively stable and familiar office situation (Harvey & Wiese, 1998; Haslberger & Brewster, 2008). Nevertheless, knowledge of expatriate partners' experiences is relatively limited and therefore more research is needed.

International relocation can cause changes in the lives of the partners of expatriates. Those changes might include increased feelings of insecurity and unfamiliarity (Brown, 2008), perhaps caused by changes in their employment situation (Cole, 2011; Kupka & Cathro, 2007; McNulty, 2012; Mohr & Klein, 2004) and family dynamics (Kupka et al., 2008; McNulty, 2015; Rosenbusch & Cseh, 2012). International relocation can also diminish social support networks (Brown, 2008; Copeland & Norell, 2002; Kupka et al., 2008; Kupka & Cathro, 2007; Mäkelä et al., 2011). Overall, studies show that international relocation triggers significant change in an expatriate partner's life (Brown, 2008; Haslberger & Brewster, 2008; Rosenbusch & Cseh, 2012). In general, major changes in life have been shown to have short-term, intermediate-term, and long-term influences on an individual's subjective well-being (SWB) (Fujita & Diener, 2005) defined as individuals' own evaluation of their moods and emotions and how satisfied they are with life (Diener & Lucas, 1999). While many prior studies are loosely connected to expatriate partners' well-being or the issues behind it, only a few empirical studies focus directly on those questions (Ali et al., 2003; Bikos & Kocheleva, 2013; Herleman et al., 2008; Rosenbusch & Cseh, 2012; Van der Zee et al., 2005).

We currently know that expatriate partners' SWB is affected by their family related issues, including the expatriate's well-being (Van der Zee et al., 2005), family adaptability, and family cohesion (Ali et al., 2003). The partner's own traits and attitudes such as open-mindedness and emotional stability (Ali et al., 2003) and the importance of various life roles (Bikos & Kocheleva, 2013) have been reported to influence expatriate partners' SWB. Living conditions and environment plays an essential role in expatriate partners' SWB too; the annual income of the expatriate family, a longer stay in the host country (Ali et al., 2003), and being comfortable psychologically with the living environment (Herleman et al., 2008) can improve an expatriate partner's SWB, whereas stressors specific to a particular living environment (e.g. communicating in the native language) are found to undermine it (Herleman et al., 2008).

In order to explore what issues affect expatriate partners' SWB, we adopt the conservation of resources theory (COR) (Hobfoll, 2002) as our theoretical framework. COR theory states that an individual's SWB is affected by different kinds of resources people have,

acquire, or lose. Resources are things that individuals strive to obtain, retain, foster, and protect (Hobfoll et al., 2018) and they are usually classified into four different resource groups: condition resources (e.g. employment and marriage), object resources (e.g. car and house), personal resources (e.g. key skills and personality traits), and energy resources (e.g. time, knowledge, and money) (Hobfoll, 1989, 2012). Resource losses often lead to negative resource loss cycles and reduced SWB (Hobfoll 2002) and resource gains in positive resource gain spirals and increased SWB (Hakanen et al., 2008; Hobfoll, 2002, 2012).

The overarching goal of this study is to expand and enhance our understanding of expatriate partners' subjective well-being and how changes in resources caused by international relocation relate to SWB. Earlier literature on partners' SWB is quite fragmented and a more holistic understanding of the wide range of antecedents for SWB as well as the related underlying mechanisms is needed. Therefore, the current research contributes by providing new insights into the resources related to well-being among expatriate partners with the help of the COR model. In addition, despite the fairly pessimistic views on expatriate partners' well-being presented in previous research, this study will also examine the positive effects of relocation on partners' well-being. The paper starts by introducing its key theoretical framework, namely the COR theory, then offers a review of the literature linked to expatriate partners' well-being and related antecedents. Then, the paper continues by describing the methodology and the findings of the study, finally closing with a discussion and conclusions.

Conservation of resources theory

Previous studies on expatriation have demonstrated that long-term expatriation and international relocation are processes that occur over a quite long time period, covering the phases of pre-departure arrangements, time spent abroad, and repatriation (Harvey et al., 1999). The COR model is useful to explain SWB in this process and the overall expatriation context because its focus goes beyond sudden events (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Additionally, COR offers a broad range of resources to focus on in different situations while considering both environmental processes and the internal processes of an individual (Hobfoll, 2001), thus highlighting and explaining the interconnectedness of resources.

Conservation of resources theory is one of the leading and most widely cited theories of stress in the area of organizational psychology and organizational behavior studies (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Hobfoll (2001) states, 'The basic tenet of COR theory is that individuals strive to obtain, retain, protect, and foster those things that they value' (p. 341). The theory addresses the idea that available resources and changes to them have an impact on an individual's SWB. As an integrated resource-based stress theory it addresses both the individual's internal processes and those related to their environment. Resources are characterized as things people value in their lives in their own right (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001). Resources are also valued because with their help individuals are able to acquire new resources or protect those resources they already possess (Hobfoll, 2002). Hence, resources play a motivational role in an individual's life (Xanthopoulou et al., 2009).

Stress and reduced well-being are considered to be a result of resource loss or the threat of resource loss or failing to acquire resources an individual expects to acquire (Grandey & Cropanzano, 1999). The COR model typically argues that resource loss has a more powerful effect on individual's well-being than resource acquisition and resource

losses may result in resource loss cycles. In addition, if individuals invest significantly in acquiring resources, but fail to do so, the consequence can be stress and a reduction of SWB (Hobfoll, 2001, 2002). However, acquiring resources may result in gain spirals (Hakanen et al., 2008) and positive resource caravans (Hobfoll, 2002, 2012), that is, resources do not exist individually but are interrelated (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

Consequently, among the focus group (i.e. expatriate partners) of our study, we see that partners' well-being defining resources do not exist individually either. The interconnectedness of resources is apparent in an expatriation situation where the lives of many close individuals (i.e. the expatriate partner's core family, extended family and even friends), change concurrently. It has been argued that international relocation has a significant effect on the number of stakeholders (Lämsä et al., 2017) and can mean the loss of social support networks, of employment, of a familiar living environment, of a familiar family role, and of friends (for school age children), that is, changes in work, family, and life overall. Most of these losses apply to all family members (Rosenbusch & Cseh, 2012).

Resources can be classified into four different resource groups (Hobfoll, 1989, 2012): condition resources, object resources, personal resources, and energy resources. *Condition resources* relate to an individual's life circumstances and as valuable work and family resources are sought after. *Object resources* such as car and house are valued by their physical nature, and for example '[a] mansion has increased value because it indicates status' (Hobfoll, 1989, p. 517). *Personal resources* include an individual's key skills and personality traits such as self-efficacy – people's belief in their capability to influence events that affect their lives (Bandura, 1994, 2002, 2012). In the expatriate partners' international context, in addition, intercultural personality traits: emotional stability, cultural empathy, social initiative, open-mindedness, and flexibility, can be regarded as resources. Among those traits, social initiative describes how actively an individual engages in social situations, whereas open-mindedness describes attitudes toward new cultural experiences, values, and associated members (Van der Zee & Van Oudenhoven, 2000; Van Erp et al., 2014).

Interestingly, Hobfoll (1989) stated in his earlier research that 'social support does not fit in any one category above. Rather, social relations are seen as a resource to the extent that they provide or facilitate the preservation of valued resources, but they also can detract from individuals' resources' (p. 517), he later indicated that social support is essential in acquiring other valuable resources (Hobfoll, 2002). For instance, if they are unemployed, individuals need social capital (i.e. a network of social relations) to be able to find a new job (Huffman et al., 2015). Drawing on Hobfoll's later argument, in this study social support is considered as an example of *energy resources* along with time, credit, knowledge, and money which all are valuable in aiding the acquisition of other kinds of resources (Hobfoll, 1989, 2012).

Previous research confirms the relationship between international assignments and stress (Ward & Kennedy, 2001). We suggest that relocation-related stress occurs when partner's resources are threatened or lost, and if or when stress arises it reduces an expatriate partner's well-being. For example, when an expatriate's personal control over work and free time decreases, he/she may not be able to provide sufficient social support (energy resource) to a partner, which in turn reduces the partner's well-being. Or if an expatriate partner gives up his/her work (a condition resource) due to the expatriate's career, he/she not only experiences a loss of salary (an energy resource) and financial independence but

in the worse case also the loss of personal resources such as self-esteem, optimism and a sense of self-efficacy which are often correlated (see, Hobfoll et al., 2018).

Although the severity of resource losses has been highlighted in the COR model, it is also possible that resource gain might be an equally important explanatory factor contributing to improved well-being (Freund & Riediger, 2001). We assume that those expatriate partners with a positive personal orientation to the situation and who are open to cultural experiences and focus on resource gains rather than losses will experience enhanced SWB. For example, engaging in social situations helps an expatriate partner to build new social support networks (an energy resource) that can lead to information (an energy resource) on work opportunities (condition resource) and increased self-esteem (a personal resource). Hobfoll (2002) argues that in stressful circumstances people seek to identify resources and mobilize them. Hence, resource gain spirals are also more likely to emerge. Without seeking and recognizing these resource gains that result in gain spirals, a partner's adaptation to the situation might become more difficult, leading to reduced overall well-being.

Expatriate partners' well-being and related antecedents

As noted above, available resources and any changes to them have an impact on an individual's SWB (Freund & Riediger, 2001). Subjective well-being refers to people's evaluations of their lives, life satisfaction, and moods and emotions (Diener & Lucas, 1999) and represents an individual's desirable psychological state (Schmutte & Ryff, 1997). SWB includes issues such as happiness, fulfillment and positive affect and it describes well-being from the respondent's own perspective (Diener, 1984; Kim-Prieto et al., 2005). Life situation plays a central role in SWB (Diener, 1984) and international relocation can be considered as a change in life situation.

Previous studies have identified several different challenges related to relocation to a new environment. Daily challenges such as interaction with local people, different obligations, the frustration related to living in a foreign culture, and concerns over health and security have been highlighted as potentially problematic for expatriate partners (Brown, 2008; Herleman et al., 2008; Rosenbusch & Cseh, 2012). International relocation can affect a partner's sense of belonging and his/her personal control of environment, circumstances, and life (Ali et al., 2003; Baumeister & Newman, 1994; Baumeister & Wilson, 1996; Black & Mendenhall, 1991; Caligiuri & Tarique, 2009; Kelly & Morley, 2011; Peterson, 1999). More specifically, studies directly focusing on SWB among expatriate partners have reported that psychological comfort with the living environment is positively correlated with expatriate partner's life satisfaction and negative correlation was found in relation to perceived stress and depression (Herleman et al., 2008). It has also been found that stressors specific to that particular living environment (e.g. communicating in the local language) were negatively correlated with life satisfaction and positively with perceived stress and depression (Herleman et al., 2008). Accordingly, leaving a familiar living environment (i.e. condition resource) behind is likely to affect the SWB of an expatriate's partner.

Traditionally expatriates are assumed to be scheduled to work abroad for a set period. Today, however, that assumption is challenged by the large numbers of SIEs among the expatriate population. Some SIE families even make their stay permanent (Al Ariss,

2010; Doherty et al., 2011). However, with respect to the length of stay, a longer stay in a host country has been shown to relate to higher levels of life satisfaction among expatriate partners (Ali et al., 2003). Drawing upon this finding, it might be possible that the intended length of stay affects an expatriate partner's willingness to invest resources.

One of the biggest changes to an expatriate partners' life relates to their employment situation (i.e. condition resource). In most cases, moving abroad means that partners give up their careers and adopt new roles, usually that of the traditional stay-at-home parent (Lauring & Selmer, 2010) and also become financially dependent on their spouse or partner (Mohr & Klein, 2004). Indeed, paid employment can have a substantial impact on most individuals' experiences and their well-being (Bluestein et al., 2013; Warr, 1999). Therefore, being without work can become one of the major stressors that partners encounter during a relocation (Bikos & Kocheleva, 2013; Haslberger & Brewster, 2008). Losing a partner's salary is likely to affect a family's income. It has been shown that the improved annual disposable income (i.e. energy resource) often available to an expatriate family is positively related to an expatriate partner's life satisfaction (Ali et al., 2003). In addition to the financial perspective, the difficulty of continuing one's career can challenge a partner's ability to maintain his/her levels of self-worth (Kupka & Cathro, 2007), self-esteem (Brown, 2008), and identity (Collins & Bertone, 2017; Kanstrén, 2019; McNulty, 2012), and in worst case, result in reduced self, in other words, lowered self-esteem flowing from feeling less valued and competent (Brown, 2008). Earlier literature has shown that the importance of different life roles is central to expatriate partners' SWB. There is evidence that the more important the occupational role is for the expatriate partner the greater will be the potential for their suffering psychological distress (Bikos & Kocheleva, 2013). Overall, during periods of unemployment, social support and psychologically meaningful leisure activities can foster partners' SWB and prevent their psychological stress (Celen-Demirtas et al., 2015; Handler & Lane, 1997; Huffman et al., 2015).

In terms of close relationships, family is also among those commonly valued resources (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Family can be regarded as a social system in which members of the family are linked to each other, and where change affecting one member will affect changes in others (Westman, 2001). Family cohesion, which can be defined as 'the emotional bonding that family members have toward one another' (Olson, 2000, p. 145), family adaptation, and the stability of the couple's relationship have been said to be significantly related to partners' well-being (Ali et al., 2003; McNulty, 2015). It has been argued that expatriate family members can experience various negative spillover effects (e.g. Lauring & Selmer, 2009) and/or crossover effects (e.g. Van der Zee et al., 2005). Grant-Vallone and Ensher (2001) note that long working hours, extensive travel, and professional demands negatively affect expatriates' personal lives and family responsibilities. It has also been reported that if an expatriate partner perceives that the expatriate is satisfied with their job, the partner's life satisfaction is in turn higher (Ali et al., 2003). Moreover, it has been shown that the psychological well-being of an expatriate is related to their partner's psychological well-being, thus if an expatriate's well-being is impaired so is their partner's well-being (Van der Zee et al., 2005); however, positive events can also cross over to the partner creating positive feelings (Westman, 2001). In addition to family relationships, other important relationships are also affected. It has been stated that the social resources are lost due to relocation (Cantor & Sanderson, 1999) because of loss of contacts and isolation from friends and family (Brown, 2008; Rosenbusch &

Cseh, 2012). A study concerning expatriate partners' SWB reported that social support was negatively linked to depression, but no statistically significant relationship was found between social support and life satisfaction or perceived stress (Herleman et al., 2008).

There are also some earlier studies focusing on the partners' own traits and attitudes as antecedents for SWB. They have reported that partners' open-mindedness and emotional stability are positively linked to their life satisfaction (Ali et al., 2003). In addition, it has been shown that if the parental and home care life roles are important for the expatriate partner, the partners' psychological well-being are also higher (Bikos & Kocheleva, 2013).

In light of the above, it seems that international relocation is such a life changing situation that is likely to affect expatriate partners' resources and through thus their SWB.

It should be noted that the reviewed literature has typically concentrated on individuals in high-status positions, that is, expatriates and their accompanying partners. Those individuals include both traditional assigned expatriates and in later studies also self-initiated expatriates. The literature has recently distinguished SIEs from migrants, and also directed attention to whether an expatriate's stay is temporary or permanent (e.g. Al Ariss, 2010; Haak-Saleem et al., 2019), although there remains a need for a deeper understanding of those two concepts. We might, for example, expect assigned expatriates and SIEs to have markedly different well-being issues to so-called low-status migrants. It is highly likely that the type of mobility affects the extent to which individuals can invest resources to secure a satisfactory level of SWB. Therefore, we suggest that research should be extended to include such migrants. In addition, there are other under-researched areas, such as diversity within the expatriate population and expatriate research often overlooks ethnic groups, multicultural populations, LGBTQ people, disabled employees, and expatriate entrepreneurs. Previous research has also largely concentrated on how its subjects identify or adjust to challenges and the negative impact of relocation on partners, while neglecting positive impacts. In sum, because research has largely focused on high-status and high-income workers and their families, the available findings are very specific to those population groups. Next, we move on to our empirical study.

Method

Data gathering

This study draws on the experiences of the partners of high-status Finnish expatriates. As its aim is to give voice to the partners and find out how they make sense of the effects of relocation on their SWB, interviews are the most appropriate means of acquiring the research material. The research data were collected among Finnish expatriate partners by semi-structured in-depth interviews. The majority of the participants were the partners of the members of professional and labor market organization TEK (Academic Engineers and Architects in Finland) who were on international assignment. Some of the participants were selected from the researchers' own network of expatriate partners. The snowball method was employed to extend the number of interviewees.

The final data sample comprises 20 interviews, mostly conducted in November and December 2016. All of the interviews were face-to-face and were conducted using Skype, except one which was conducted during a partner's visit to Finland. The interviews

lasted between 46 and 114 min. Among the partner sample, 17 partners were women and three men. Their ages ranged from 35 to 50 and 17 of the partners had children. The partner group generally had higher education with 14 reporting a master's degree and four a bachelor's degree. Among the participants were eight assigned expatriate (AE) partners (whose expatriate partner had been sent abroad by their employer) and 12 partners of SIEs (who had organized their own employment abroad). Only two of the partners (Oliver and Hannah) knew when they would return to their home country (Oliver in the next year and Hannah within the next three years). The remaining partners had no planned return date and some were willing to continue to live abroad, perhaps even permanently. See Table 1 for full information on the interviewees.

In order to facilitate a conversational style interview situation, the interviews followed an interview agenda rather than a restrictive set of questions. This ensured the interviewees could express their emotions and experiences more freely than would be possible in a restrictive format. After background information questions, the interviewees were asked to describe their relocation history and motives for moving abroad and accepting the assignment. In order to capture participants' well-being experiences, the well-being theme covered inquiries about changes in well-being during the different phases of relocation, reasons for change (e.g. specific important events), and effects on self-esteem. Additionally, issues related to the interviewees' careers, employment situation, and social relations were addressed. Since the topics of the interview were very personal and even emotional for some participants, the interviewer had to ensure a sensitive and empathic atmosphere in the interview situation. All interviews were conducted personally by the authors enabling observation of the interviewees' emotional state revealed

Table 1. Description of the participants.

Pseudonym	Age	Education degree	Children	Host countries	Years abroad in total	Assignment type
Sandra	37	Master's	2	The Netherlands	8	SIE
Emma	43	Master's	3	Germany, USA, Germany	5	AE
Olivia	37	Master's	2	The Netherlands	6	SIE
Anita	35	Bachelor's	No	Germany, USA	5	AE
Oliver	37	Master's	2	Belgium	1.5	AE
Katrina	46	Master's	2	Canada	7	SIE
Ava	35	Master's	2	Switzerland	2	SIE
Heidi	37	Master's	2	Switzerland	1.5	SIE
Thomas	42	Other[a]	2	China, UK	8	AE
Hannah	35	Master's	1	The Netherlands	1.5	SIE
Katie	38	Master's	2	China, USA	4	AE
Eva	41	Other[b]	1	Chile, Canada, USA	5	AE
Maria	36	Bachelor's	No	USA	2	AE
Jack	46	Other[c]	2	France	4	AE
Emilia	36	Master's	2	UK, France	4	SIE
Sofia	48	Bachelor's	2	Sweden, The Netherlands, Canada	12	SIE
Joanne	36	Master's	2	Germany, The Netherlands	6	SIE
Amelia	37	Master's	No	The Netherlands	1.5	SIE
Julia	50	Bachelor's	2	UK, Germany, Canada	11	SIE
Nina	37	Master's	2	UK, The Netherlands, Switzerland	9	SIE

Note: AE: assigned; SIE: self-initiated.
[a]Post-secondary education.
[b]Vocational upper secondary qualification.
[c]Master's degree studies (not graduated).

through both verbal and non-verbal expressions that could be considered in the subsequent data analysis. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Data analysis

The data were analyzed by adopting a qualitative approach, thematic analysis, with systematic coding and categorizing of transcripts. This included actively exploring patterns of talk, the words used and their relationships and identifying potential similarities and differences between emerging themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis started with the researchers reading the interview transcripts several times in order to acquire a sense of the whole. During that reading process, the researchers annotated the margins of the transcripts with initial observations and comments on the data revealed. In addition, comments and themes were recorded in separate files. Next, through this open coding, the notes on, comment lists and potential preliminary themes emerging from each transcript were compared to each other and in relation to the entire dataset. Based on that comparison process, themes and observations were further integrated into larger themes and subthemes across the whole dataset, and then labeled and organized in a table (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). The interviews were conducted in Finnish, so verbatim quotes were translated into English. In order to ensure validity, the data were read and reflected upon several times, cross-checked across multiple interviews, and compared to previous research results by both researchers (e.g. Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). To ensure reliability, the researchers followed a semi-structured interview agenda, all interviews were recorded and transcribed in full for analysis, and in the report the extracts of data are presented to illustrate the analytic claims and researcher's interpretations (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Silverman, 2001). Trustworthiness was further ensured by providing the participants the opportunity to check the transcripts and give feedback on the information contained therein, and to contact the researcher at a later date to provide complementary descriptions of their experiences (e.g. Kohonen, 2008). Transcriptions were saved and collected to form a database for evidence and possible later checks. Below we describe each of the themes elicited and their relationships with each other, with brief illustrative quotations.

Findings

We start the review of our findings by showing how SWB was expressed by our interviewee participants, before reporting our more detailed analysis focusing on resources for expatriate partners' positive and negative SWB development processes.

Expatriate partners' subjective well-being

Expatriate partners' mood, emotions, and satisfaction with their life as indicators of their SWB evolved during the period they lived abroad. All our participants recalled both positive and negative SWB experiences but the extent to which each was emphasized varied greatly among the interviewees' narratives.

A decline in SWB was identified when our interviewees talked about harshness and negative experiences during the different phases of the relocation process, examples of

which included moving and the beginning of the stay: ' … that relocation was quite a stressful time' (Thomas), whereas negative emotions such as fear, loneliness, and insecurity were described as being a problem in the period a partner was already living abroad as exemplified by two respondents, ' … I have to say, this loneliness I feel right now, having very few contacts … I have to say that this loneliness and staying at home negatively impacts my well-being' (Hannah), and ' … I have cried so much here' (Julia).

Partners also used strong expressions when talking about negative emotions and moods indicating that these have been very impactful for them; for instance, Julia described her emotions toward her husband in the following: 'There was a time when I hated my husband immensely'. The severity of these negative experiences varied from short-term negative moods and emotions to longer term depression.

Nevertheless, positive SWB was represented in remembering general joy and happiness related to the time living abroad. How partners felt about their situation and the positive emotions attached to them were clearly expressed: 'There may have been a time when I was five years old, playing in the sandbox, when I was happier. This has been like living a dream' (Jack) and 'In general, I can say that I am very happy' (Maria).

Our participants also described the positive state of their SWB relating happiness and satisfaction to specific events or circumstances: 'It was a very important for me [that I found my own friends]. I am still very happy and content about that' said Sofia. 'I am also very happy [to be part of the company's Global Marketing team]' (Katrina).

Many participants reported that in a foreign environment both positive and negative emotions felt stronger, deeper, and more profound: ' … in a foreign environment and culture, the strength of feelings … grows to different proportions. This is how I feel' (Olivia). The exacerbation of feelings presumably explains why some interviewees portrayed their time abroad as an emotional rollercoaster. Quite surprisingly, despite the assembled challenges, all our participants emphasized that they were happy with their decision to relocate and that they were not willing to change their experience of living abroad:

> I have seen many things. Gained new experiences. If I had only stayed in my home city in Finland, I believe I would not have gained as many life enriching experiences as I have gained from living abroad. (Emilia)

How international relocation affects resources and expatriate partner's SWB

We found that when expatriate partners were talking about their SWB their explanations were typically related to changes to their resources when they moved abroad, or were living abroad. All of our interviewees' resource gain and loss cycles were different but we were able to identify certain patterns that emerged repeatedly in their stories.

First, we found out that moving and living abroad changed expatriate partners' condition resources; especially their familiar living environment, employment situation, and personal relationship dynamics (including marriage, other family members, relatives, and friends). Changes in these fundamental condition resources were related to negative and positive changes in energy resources (e.g. time and money) and personal resources (e.g. language- and culture-related skills and knowledge).

Furthermore, personal and energy resources seemed to be important to how expatriate partners' SWB was affected by the changes in condition resources; so for example, if our

interviewee reported having good language skills, it eased the negative effect of changes to the familiar living environment. We illustrate our interpretation of the relationship between resources and expatriate partners' SWB in Figure 1.

Interestingly, our interviewees did not refer directly to object resources such as a house or car or any other material objects that could reveal the expatriate family's socioeconomic status and social standing. One possible explanation for this may be that Finnish expatriate partners do not generally find it socially acceptable to talk about high-status material resources or luxury goods, as bragging is considered rather gauche in the Finnish culture. Nevertheless, although the expatriate partners did not directly refer to these physically valuable objects, they did emphasize the overall lifestyle that their financial stability enables. Therefore, we also added object resources to Figure 1 in order to suggest they might play a role in expatriate partners' SWB. The figure facilitates making sense of the results of the data analysis, that is, the resources that affect expatriate partners' SWB, when reading the findings.

Next, we will present our findings in detail by revealing the links between changes to the three condition resources mentioned above and expatriate partners' SWB via loss of those resources and the accumulation of others.

Changes in condition resources and how they link to other resources and SWB

Changes to a familiar living environment

Relocation to a new country indisputably changes individuals' familiar living environment, an essential condition resource. Personal resources such as knowledge of culture and language skills played an important role in how changes in the familiar living environment affected expatriate partners' SWB.

Loss cycles related to changed living environment

For some of our participants, moving to a new country with a high cultural distance from their homeland made life difficult if the expatriate partner did not have sufficient knowledge of the culture (personal resource). Some of our interviewees felt that they did not have relevant and realistic information on and expectations of the culture they moved

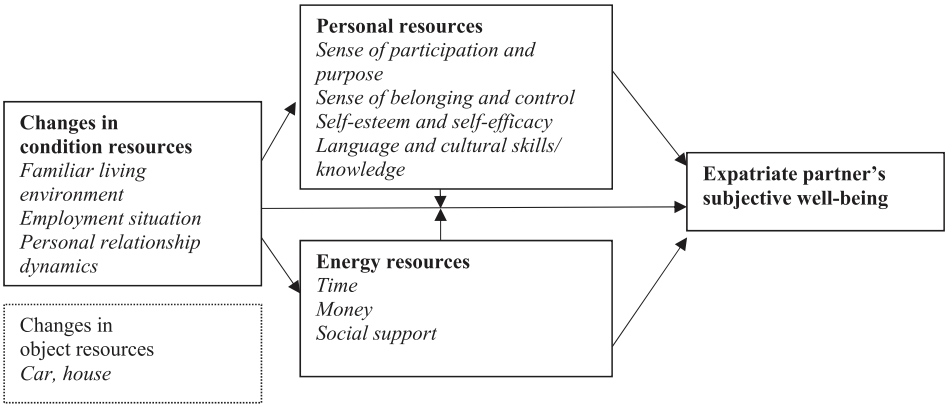

Figure 1. Resources affecting expatriate partners' SWB.

into and that caused them considerable stress. Moreover, unexpected gender roles related to the cultural differences of some countries were sometimes overwhelming for female partners and had caused negative effects to their well-being.

In addition, living in a new environment caused a need for new or better language skills (a personal resource) that, in turn, strongly affected expatriate partners' self-esteem (a personal resource) and well-being. For example, lacking sufficient vocabulary reduced their ability to express themselves as they would have wished, which in turn increased stress and could even make the person feel stupid, as Jack commented on this point: 'Damn, am I this stupid, why can't I learn this language?'

Furthermore, relocation to a new living environment due to an expatriate's work also led partners to have expectations of the company employing their partner. Company support can be interpreted as one type of energy resource. If the expatriate's partner felt such support was not satisfactory, they were likely to express fairly negative attitudes, such as disappointment and irritation: 'No, nothing (support). Absolutely nothing, so … in that sense, the company sucks' (Julia). Actual social support such as mentoring or involvement in social events was rarely mentioned, and hence, some partners felt that they were totally ignored. In some cases, the receiving organizations organized welcoming parties for their new expatiate employees to which partners were not even invited. Nevertheless, partners felt that the company assumed they would take care of all everyday chores in a new living environment, and thus ensure the work performance of the expatriates remained high-quality.

Gain cycles related to a changed living environment

The counterpoint to the effect of weak cultural knowledge is that if the partners have good knowledge of the host culture they are able to function well in the foreign environment and thereby strengthen their personal resources including a sense of belonging, control, and independence. Additionally, intercultural personality traits such as a sense of openness and courage in social situations positively affected partners' other personal resources like their self-esteem and optimism, and hence benefited their well-being.

Moreover, in the context of an expatriate assignment, skills-related personal resources such as the individual's organizing, problem solving, and coping skills seemed to become another key resource. Those who felt that they had successfully coped through different every day challenges caused by a changed living environment experienced increased self-confidence. As Amelia puts it, 'Taking care of, and researching things, reinforces the feeling that I can make it. I will survive all things. It really enforces my self-esteem and independence'. It is a sentiment supported by Katie who said:

> When you live in different places and new countries without any support network, you find in yourself a certain kind of strength. I will adapt everywhere and survive everywhere. I have acquired self-confidence. I have learned to deal with uncertainty because I always live in uncertainty.

Some partners also argued that their extrovert and open personality traits fitted better to the host country culture than their home one: 'I have felt at home here all the time. This smiling, laughing, character of mine just did not fit in in Finland' (Maria).

Furthermore, if our participants acquired organizational support from the expatriate's employer it was usually offered in the form of comprehensive pre-departure training

including cultural training and psychological tests. Some of these partners were included in after checks following three months stay, and in that case the support was regarded as substantial:

> Lots of support. First there was a full day's training on all these cultural differences that one can experience. We had a test to see who is an introvert and who is an extrovert, to help me understand how my husband will react to something, and he will understand how I will react in different ways. It was brilliant … and the follow-up was in three months via a Skype-meeting. With the same trainer, who then asked how we have fared. (Maria)

Very practical level support, such as relocation services was appreciated and eased the changes that happened due to changes in living environment.

> This was a turnkey relocation, where everything was taken care of. We have a ready furnished home waiting for us. Everything was brought on a silver platter. Our package included the relocation service packing our things … We simply pointed that OK, this goes to Brussels, and this goes to storage … This has been a real luxury on that side. (Oliver)

Changes in employment situation

Employment is a typical condition resource, and as such, partners considered it important for their well-being. It also seemed to be closely connected to personal resources and energy resources. The majority of the partners had left their jobs behind to support the expatriate's career. Again, changes in their employment situation due to relocation were described as being either negative or positive. For some, relocation meant a career move from stable employment to a fragmented or stagnated career, or total loss of career (four partners), while for others it meant having a well-deserved break from working life or finding new career opportunities.

Loss cycles related to changed employment situation

For those who considered unemployment undesirable, the situation created negative emotions, such as fears of sacrificing both career and career identity, and such fears exerted negative effects on personal resources such as self-confidence and self-esteem. Hence, it seems that for partners in that situation, the loss of employment directly impaired well-being but also led to the loss of other important resources. Unemployment also meant the most evident energy resource loss, namely the loss of their own income and financial independence:

> Being home, one has to look into the mirror. I can see it now that a Finnish woman's identity and even self-esteem is partially built on professional identity. Here I am just a mother. My part is to stay at home … I feel like having had a specific skill and making my own money, it was a pretty big thing. (Heidi)

> And it does bother me, I had a very good salary and very good [career] prospects [in the home country but not in the host country]. (Hannah)

The change to their employment situation meant some career-oriented female partners had difficulty accepting their new role as a stay-at-home mother. Those partners found themselves in a role that they did not find satisfying; constant scheduling and organizing, and sole responsibility for domestic chores and child related duties (hobbies, school, and homework) affected their energy resource, time, and also their personal resources such as

sense of personal agency, all of which affected their SWB. Heidi, Nina, and Sandra described that situation:

> My situation is pretty much that I run this household, and 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)

> I have no say in what I do during my day … In fact, I had a breakdown a year ago, requiring doctor's visits and therapy. I had to get medication [anti-depressants] for that. (Nina)

> My personal well-being has been too dependent on my husband's job. If he stresses too much over work … We have come here for his job, and in a way I should now be flexible. But where is the line in my personal well-being and flexibility? When can I say, hey you need to help too, I cannot do this anymore? (Sandra)

Some female partners found themselves living in countries with strong cultural norms dictating that mothers should remain at home. Those in that situation realized how difficult combining work and family could be, which in turn diluted their willingness to even search for jobs. Finding suitable jobs was challenging, and in some cases, working visa restrictions and uncertainty over the length of the assignment made future plans difficult. Consequently, uncertainty reduced the strength of the personal resource of a sense of being in control of their own life, which had a negative effect on well-being:

> If I am constantly speculating about where we will live next, when we will go, where to find schools for the kids, and what am I going to do next, then I will be stressed. Then I will lose sleep. (Katie)

Furthermore, changes in the employment situation also affected expatriate partners' employment related social networks (an energy resource). Some participants had given up their well-paid managerial level jobs, that had led to changes in their employment related high-status roles and thus limited their access to necessary professional networks. Moreover, those partners who, usually in the beginning of relocation, worked remotely for their former Finnish employers started to miss the social support provided by co-workers, group membership, participation in meetings and discussions, and the possibility to meaningfully affect their work. Professional networks and contacts became more distant, leading to a loss of employment related social capital, something that is often necessary to find a new job. This impaired our participants' SWB as they felt lonely and excluded, as Hannah put it, 'I felt I could not do my job as well as I would have wanted. That caused stress for me'. Further, one respondent described her distress caused by trying to maintain her job role while abroad:

> I could not have much of an impact from here. Really, the amount of stress. I remember lying on the floor. Heart beating in a way that this will never work, I just cannot do this remotely, this is too stressful. (Maria)

Gain cycles related to changed employment situation

Fortunately, changes in employment situation was not only considered a loss, because sometimes there were gain cycles too. Changes in their employment situation due to relocation enabled some of our participants to take a break from stressful work in the home country. Sofia described the resulting reduction in stress as benefiting the family, '[Prior to

this] my kids thought I was a monster; I was always so stressed out [by her work in her home country]'. Amelia also highlighted a benefit:

> He [her husband] saw how tired I was of my work in Finland. So, he has more like encouraged me during the last year, to take all the time I have. That there is ample time now, to reflect on what I want to do, and there is no need to do anything if I don't want to.

Hence, not spending time (an energy resource) working, gave some of the expatriate partners a greater sense of personal agency and allowed them to fill their free time with interesting hobbies. Accordingly, those partners with a less stressful lifestyle overall enjoyed greater SWB. Self-efficacy, including setting their own personal goals, achieving them, and participation in various activities created positive gain spirals and increased the sense of personal control and sense of purpose. Partners commonly undertook diverse activities such as charity work, volunteer work (teaching in a Finnish school, giving private language lessons, being a board member of a Finnish school), doing sports (horseback riding, running, yoga, and gym) and having all kinds of other hobbies, studying remotely at an open university, attending language and culture courses, and networking with friends or with professional networks. These kinds of activities offered a getaway from daily routines and also the opportunity to socialize with other adults. In addition, activity created a sense of being part of particular community and of a group of people in a similar situation, as Amelia describes: 'With them [fellow language course participants] I was starting to have something of my own, my own friends, a small community I was part of here'. Independent activity was considered very important to help mitigate loneliness, isolation, lack of contacts, and alienation.

In addition, on the positive side, for some being in the host country provided a sense of freedom to find a new career, for example, in becoming self-employed or an entrepreneur. Overall, those partners emphasized their newly discovered freedom in finding fresh professional opportunities. Moreover, a spell abroad could help create new networks that could be professionally valuable, and the partners also emphasized the benefit of acquiring much needed social capital through their own activity. In the following extracts Julia relates the importance of social networking for finding employment and Olivia highlights the benefits of being active both professionally (starting her own business) and socially for her self-esteem and SWB:

> Then, at some point, I got this feeling, that I started to push myself into everywhere [social events] … and through this I made contacts elsewhere. It is very important to know someone here; it opens opportunities to get into places. (Julia)

> The most important thing is to have my own thing here. I have realized it before, but even more so here, that it has been good for me to have my own thing, to work or do things … And being active from the start was very important for my well-being. I created my social network around me … It has been important for my self-esteem to have my own place and content in life. (Olivia)

Finally, when the partners were asked if any of them would rather have stayed in their home country instead of moving abroad and risking jeopardizing their careers, the answer was quite surprising; everyone thought that the experience of living abroad was more rewarding than their career and living abroad offered greater opportunities, for example, for self-actualization.

Changes in personal relationship dynamics

Relocation caused changes in expatriate partners' personal relationship dynamics, including the relationship with the partner, other family members, relatives, and friends left behind.

Loss cycles related to changes in personal relationship dynamics

For some of our participants, changes to the dynamics between partners (e.g. the change from being a dual-earner couple to a single-earner model) had caused some problems and had demanded flexibility from the partner as Heidi explains:

> That's the thing. The working partner does not change. Their life goes on the same, if not better, while the wife staying at home has to look into a mirror and that change hurts very much.

In Julia's case, relocation only for the sake of her husband's career, had at one point caused her to hate him:

> Hatred came … How can you do this to me, without asking me. So, we have also experienced the hell of marriage here … the worst years of our marriage have been here. But luckily, we have now gotten past those.

The nature of some expatriates' work forced them to invest considerable resources – especially time – into their work. Due to their demanding work with busy schedules, they had experienced stress that had strongly affected their partner's well-being. In addition, expatriates taking frequent business trips and being away from home and family reduced their partner's well-being.

The stress experienced by both expatriates and their partners seemed to be mutually reciprocal forces that affected both parties. For Ava, this was an important factor, she said, 'To be honest, the biggest factor affecting my well-being has probably been my concern for my husband'. It is a view supported in the following quotations where partners explain how the expatriate's work stress affects them:

> I have noticed that when my husband is highly stressed at work, and situations there are bad, alcohol enters the picture for him. He says, he uses it to try to calm his stress … When my husband has had a really tough time at work, big projects, or difficulties, it has also impacted me very badly. (Eva)

> If my partner is stressed out at work and cannot sleep, it also impacts me. But if I am in a bad mood, it will also have and equal, or even bigger, impact on my husband. (Emma)

Expatriate partners also told that the support from other Finns or other expatriates, both via Facebook groups and/or face-to-face meetings was important. Lacking a network at the beginning of the relocation made some partners feel sad and lonely. The feelings of loneliness and isolation were quite severe for Emilia.

> When my social contacts started to disappear one by one, there came a moment, where I was really alone. I have certainly suffered loneliness. At some point, home started to feel like a prison.

For some partners, several relocations had made them wary of making friends with new expatriates and, consequently, having local friends had become more important. Expatriate friends became expendable because people just come and go. Making friends with

newcomers and saying goodbye after a while had become an increasingly negative experience. In addition, temporary/fixed term stays in a host country seemed to lead to a reduced desire to make friends since having good friends made leaving more difficult. Partners wanted to protect themselves from repeating goodbyes:

> Friendships have become disposable; they come and go. There are no lasting ones any more … You sort of protect yourself from constant goodbyes … Then you prioritize keeping in touch with the people who are staying in the country for a longer time. (Joanne)

Gain cycles related to changes in personal relationship dynamics

The participants' narratives revealed that both the stability of a couple's relationship and the expatriate's work had significant effects on the partner's well-being. In general, partners experienced increased levels of well-being and most of the participants considered their marriages stronger than before they had moved abroad. The couples spent more time together and the challenges they faced together served as strengthening forces, as Sofia reported, 'It does make you stronger … When we came here and I stayed at home, there was more together time. There is a common cause to work for'. The partners felt closer to each other and the expatriate partner was often regarded as a best friend: 'Here my own husband is my best friend' (Katrina) or the only person a partner could truly trust, as Emilia stated, ' luckily, we are good and strong as a couple, a good team. We both believe in this thing that we are doing'.

Some partners considered being a supportive partner an important role, thus strengthening their sense of meaningfulness, because being supportive made it possible for the expatriate to fully concentrate on work. Other reasons for increased well-being related to energy resources (mostly time) and the changed nature of the expatriate's work. In some cases, the number of business trips had reduced, meaning less traveling and time spent away from home. Additionally, some expatriates' working hours had become more regular, meaning more time shared with the partner and other family members.

For some families, living abroad had indeed offered an opportunity to spend more time (an energy resource) together and do things such as taking trips together. Living abroad was regarded as a family's shared experience with shared moments that had strengthened the closeness of family members as a unit. Participants shared the same experiences of increased family cohesion, as the following two statements illustrate: 'We are a separate unit here from the outside world … Yes, absolutely, our family ties have become stronger' (Oliver), and 'Now I feel we are our family. We four are somehow a stronger unit' (Olivia).

Accordingly, in some cases the well-being of the nuclear family also became the central source of the partner's well-being and stronger family cohesion became a source of gain spirals. For some partners, stronger nuclear family ties provided a natural way to replace lost home country support networks:

> We have certainly become a tighter family unit. Especially at the beginning, when I had no friends, family, or support network to help, I leaned on my spouse much more heavily. (Eva)

However, making friends and building networks was not easy if the partner considered him-/herself to be an introverted type, as, for example, Heidi did: 'Here you have to be social. Otherwise you end up sitting home alone all day if you are not working. This has been challenging for an introvert … ' Owing to her husband's sociable personality she now also has a large circle of friends. For some of our interviewees, social life had

become even more active and vibrant than it was in the home country: 'I actually have a much broader social network than I did in Finland' (Ava).

Discussion

The present study aimed to expand and increase our understanding of SWB among partners of expatriates and how changes in resources caused by international relocation are associated with SWB. The study provided new insights into the well-being related resources among expatriate partners with the help of COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001, 2002) and thus its focus is not only on negative resource loss but also on the positive gain spirals experienced by the partners of expatriates. It contributes to the extant expatriation literature by broadening the focus from the partners' adjustment perspectives to identify the self-management skills that assist in replacing lost resources that underpin well-being. Based on the findings we can conclude that an international assignment presents a critical life event that affects the essential resources in the partners' lives and through that leads to positive and / or negative SWB experiences. Although gain and loss cycles of resources were individual and uniquely experienced, certain recurring patterns in partners' stories were identified.

Theoretical implications

First, relocation abroad seem to particularly affect partners' condition resources, covering a familiar living environment, employment situation, and personal relationship dynamics (e.g. marriage, other family members, relatives, and friends) by changing them, in some cases extensively. In particular, changes in condition resources result in negative and positive changes in energy resources (e.g. time and money) and personal resources (e.g. language- and culture-related skills and knowledge). Therefore, to a large extent, our study results are aligned with previous literature on expatriate partners and with the basic assumptions of COR as it becomes clear that resources play an important role in an expatriate partner's life and they need to replace resources they have lost with new ones in order to maintain or develop their SWB. However, so far, COR theory has presented different types of resources as being relatively equal to each other (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2018). The findings of the current research contribute to previous studies on expatriate partners' well-being and work on COR theory by suggesting that it is possible that in certain circumstances some types of resource play a more important role than others. Specifically, we propose that condition resources are likely to play a more important role than other types of resources in the context of changing life situations, such as relocation to another country.

Second, according to COR, negative loss spirals begin more easily than the positive resource caravans and the effects of losing resources are more critical than the effects realized following resource gains (Hobfoll, 2012). However, COR also states that individuals intentionally take risks and invest their resources in order to acquire new ones (Hobfoll, 2001) and therefore the resources one expects to gain need to be valuable to warrant the investment (Halbesleben, Neveu, Paustian-Underdahl, & Westman, 2014). Our results suggest that it is very likely that expatriate partners take an intentional risk when they relocate abroad as they know that their condition resources will change. A majority of our

study participants managed to replace the lost resources with new ones, for example, by replacing unemployment with various other activities, or by replacing lost social relationships with new ones. The partners' acting to replace the lost resources often resulted in resource gain spirals and enhanced SWB. For instance, if the partner had left career and work-related networks behind, they could actively network in the host country to build a new network that provided information necessary to find work or even to start a successful business, thus increasing self-esteem and overall SWB substantially. Our findings indicate that despite the challenges and resource losses, relocation-related resource gains and gain spirals had a more powerful effect on partners' SWB than the loss of resources. This was emphasized in the partners' accounts indicating they were all happy with their decision to move and that they were not willing to change their experience of living abroad. In addition to participants' verbal accounts, the atmosphere in the interview situation and observations of the non-verbal expressions of the interviewees' indicated that, with only two exceptions (Heidi and Hannah), the partners' emotional states were positive and reflected a satisfaction with life at the time. Even some of the partners who had faced substantial challenges early in the assignment described themselves as happier and more satisfied with their lives now than previously. This finding conveys the power of gain spirals and is quite surprising if we compare it to the existing literature that typically highlights the negative effects of international assignments on expatriate partners' overall well-being. It therefore seems that a risky investment of resources (Freund & Riediger, 2001) was seen as worth doing. That might also indicate that if people are prepared for change affecting their resources and they know they need to strive to replace the lost resources, the gain spirals are more likely to emerge compared for example to the situation with unpredictable life changes. The questions around the predictability of resource losses could be addressed in future studies.

Furthermore, in line with previous research on expatriate partners, our results indicate that relocation to an unfamiliar culture and foreign environment is linked to different kinds of emotional reactions and the feeling of having control over one's life (Bikos et al., 2007; Brown, 2008; Herleman et al., 2008; Rosenbusch & Cseh, 2012). Our results show that the potential challenges seem to arise from a mismatch between the host country culture and the partner's aspirations (quite often professional ones) relating to what he/she would like to do, and what kind of resources are available. It can be argued that the extent of cultural distance, or the level of psychological comfort with the living environment (Herleman et al., 2008) can be determinant factors and a source of either loss cycles or gain spirals. Here, it was clear that for an expatriate partner having knowledge of the host country culture and language were clearly connected with that partner's sense of control, independence and, most importantly, a higher SWB level. The partners surveyed here experienced several positive gain spirals stemming from coping in an unfamiliar environment, which in turn boosted self-confidence and self-esteem (i.e. personal resources). The starting point of a gain spiral could be a simple everyday situation such as running errands and speaking a few words of the local language successfully. Hence, increased SWB seems to be the result of several small positive experiences of overcoming the obstacles that together create powerful gain spirals.

In terms of the second important condition resource, employment and career, the findings of this study align somewhat with those in prior research that offer evidence of the importance of available resources (such as social capital and support networks) to

unemployed individuals' psychological well-being (see Huffman et al., 2015). In the case of unemployment, the prevalent resource loss was related to financial independence and a person having their own money (Mohr & Klein, 2004). Interestingly, the partners responding in our study did not mention money as an energy resource that aids acquiring object resources (e.g. a good car or house) but specifically as a resource that helps deliver a sense of independence and control over one's own life (personal resources). Earlier research has shown that the improved income often available to an expatriate family is connected to expatriate partners' life satisfaction (Ali et al., 2003) but the mechanism behind that result was not revealed. Future studies might direct attention to that question, and perhaps investigate whether the SWB of partners is predicted by the family's income per se, or if SWB improves primarily because the increase in family income reflects a situation in which both partners are working and therefore the expatriate partners' SWB is higher.

Furthermore, in line with previous literature (see Hobfoll, 2001; Kupka & Cathro, 2007) our findings suggest that for some career-oriented female partners the cessation of a career can become a source of role conflict and reduce feelings of self-worth. The employment situation also affected partners' personal resources such as self-esteem, optimism, sense of belonging, and sense of purpose. In addition, although only three of our participants were male, it is worth mentioning that all of them seemed comfortable with the situation and were unconcerned by being stay-at-home fathers (Cole, 2012). This study does not focus on gender differences, but that observation differs from some in previous literature (Harris, 2004; Harvey & Wiese, 1998; Linehan & Scullion, 2004; Mäkelä et al., 2011; Punnett et al., 1992; Richardson & Zikic, 2007; Selmer & Leung, 2002, 2003; Van der Velde et al., 2005; Tharenou, 2008) and thus might merit further study in the future. To sum up, even if partners did not work when abroad, they were able to find and replace well-being generating resources from several non-paid work domains such as volunteer working, studying, and networking. They were also free to explore new professional and career opportunities and enjoyed the opportunity for self-actualization offered by living abroad. This supports the idea that partners should seek meaningful activities to protect against psychological stress (Cantor & Sanderson, 1999; Celen-Demirtas et al., 2015). Accordingly, future studies should direct attention to the use of time and if expatriate partners find those activities meaningful or a fit with their own goals.

With regard to the third significant condition resource, personal relationships, the stability of a couple and family cohesion were also affected by relocation. The findings support previous research results showing that expatriates and their partners experience both negative and positive spillover and crossover effects (see Grant-Vallone & Ensher, 2001; Lauring & Selmer, 2009; Takeuchi et al., 2002; Van der Zee et al., 2005). Changes in an expatriate's employment conditions were connected to their family's shared energy resource, that is, time. Importantly, once again, the effects were twofold. In terms of negative effects, an expatriate's demanding working hours (in terms of their regularity, length, flexibility, etc.) and substantial amount of time spent on business trips that left fewer resources available to devote to the demands of the family domain (see Grandey & Cropanzano, 1999) reduced the partners' SWB. Consequently, our results reveal that for many families of our sample, family cohesion (see Olson, 2000) had become even stronger than it was before in the home country. For these

families, living abroad became a source of gain spirals. It was a shared experience that strengthened closeness among the family members as they spent more time together during the expatriate's free time and did more things together such as leisure trips. Additionally, stronger family ties and support from family members can be an important resource to replace some of the resources lost with the disappearance of home country support networks and employment (see Huffman et al., 2015). At best, stronger family ties can offer resources such as security, trust, purpose, and a sense of belonging. These findings prove that there are significant positive gain spirals and crossover effects between partners in contrast to the mostly pessimistic views presented in previous research (e.g. Grant-Vallone & Ensher, 2001; Gupta et al., 2012; Kupka et al., 2008; Kupka & Cathro, 2007).

Furthermore, other personal relationships were greatly affected by the relocation. Leaving familiar networks behind was a source of stress and negative emotions and so too could be relying on short-term new friendships as shown in previous literature (see Bikos et al., 2007; Kupka & Cathro, 2007). Consequently, partners started to protect themselves from repeated goodbyes by searching for more permanent relationships with local friends. In line with previous research, the findings reveal that sometimes a partner's personal resources, including personality traits such as social initiative, were not sufficient for building social networks (Van der Zee & Van Oudenhoven, 2000). As a result, a partner utilized the expatriate's more developed social initiative to acquire a circle of friends. This finding supports Van Erp et al.'s (2014) findings and the idea of a resource compensation effect where one partner's lack of a certain personality trait is compensated for by the others partner's high level of that same personality trait, which can eventually lead to a positive gain spiral for other resources.

The results offer a valuable finding to complement previous research in indicating that staying or even intending to stay in a host country might contribute to investing more in resources and appreciating the gain cycles that those investments create. This was especially the case with career-related resources as a feeling of continuity motivated partners to more actively build important networks and/or to learn new skills such as those facilitating start their own business. In this specific group (where only two partners knew when they were returning home), the length of stay abroad did not fully explain how much individual partners were willing to invest in resources, although it seemed to affect partners' willingness to form lasting social contacts with locals. Nevertheless, for some partners uncertainty over the length of the assignment was the factor that made making future plans challenging and also affected the willingness to invest resources. In terms of the assignment type the results were surprisingly similar, indicating that among these partners the type of assignment was not a significant factor in resource investment. In summary, while these findings improve understanding of the impact of living in several host countries, the impact of the length of stay and different types of expatriate assignments on accompanying partners' willingness to invest resources to stimulate gain cycles requires further research.

Practical implications

There are several practical implications that can be drawn from our study findings. First, we suggest that it is clearly important for partners to be aware of and understand that

relocation will affect their condition resources and quite often in a challenging way. That said, on a positive note partners can utilize multiple effective ways to replace the lost resources. Obviously, this demands quite considerable effort and self reliance on the part of the partners. Those efforts might include searching for specific country information, finding out about cultural differences, learning some basics of the local language, and planning a meaningful schedule and agenda (covering potential volunteer work, hobbies, networking events etc.) in advance of the arrival in a new country. In addition, seeking peer support and sharing thoughts with other partners who are going or have gone through similar relocation experiences would help to understand the upcoming events and might protect partners from foreseeable difficulties. Peers support can be found by joining, for example, various expatriate support groups with a presence on social media. Further, since the partner's role in their family can change dramatically, it might be a good thing for the couple to clarify this change and its effects well before leaving for a new country. Essentially, all likely assignment-related changes should be discussed with family members because they will probably affect all parties even long after repatriation. Overall, arranging time for communication among the family and especially arranging time to support the marital relationship is valuable for the SWB of both partners.

In terms of organizations, our findings indicate that some partners are disappointed in the level of organizational support they receive. We propose that partners' concerns should be taken into account from the pre-departure phase until repatriation. That might involve their partners' employers paying attention to the partners' employment situation. This point becomes more pressing as dual-career expatriate couples – where both partners have their own careers – become increasingly common and therefore accompanying partners must consider their own careers. A forward-thinking firm might therefore involve partners in the decision-making process and even offer career support and guidance that might include inquiring about the partner's career aspirations during the assignment, such a firm might even go one step further and assist in finding work opportunities. Additionally, various coaching and mentoring programs might be considered. Pre-departure training should include language training and provide a realistic overview of the host country culture. Partners should also be advised where to find further information and help if needed. If working is not an option for partners due to, for example, work permits or qualifications, a company might encourage and help those partners to find leisure activities that could foster building social networks, of both friendship network and professional network forms. Further, the findings indicate that an expatriates' flexible work arrangements, for example in relation to the length of working hours or the amount of time spent on business trips enhance their partner's well-being and can be beneficial for both parties. It would be also beneficial if companies provided expatriates and their family members clear and timely information on factors like the length of stay and/or possible relocation to another host country or repatriation home. Overall, taking some of these measures could help an expatriate family feel more valued and supported.

Limitations

When interpreting the results of this study, some limitations should be considered. First, the small sample size, which is quite typical for qualitative research, prevents drawing

any generalizations from the findings and future studies could benefit from working with different kinds of samples, such as longitudinal survey data. Secondly, all participants were highly educated high-status Finnish expatriate partners, thus the experiences of these partners may not be generalized as being similar to the experiences of partners from other cultural contexts and/or with different demographic backgrounds. In Finland women working is the norm, gender equality is extremely well established, and being a stay-at-home parent is an accepted role even for men. For this reason, research with a more internationally diverse sample should be conducted. Third, the results regarding personal resources and the cause and effect direction should be studied more deeply. Future researchers might for instance investigate whether self-efficacy and activity create optimism or if optimistic people are more likely to be self-efficient. It also should be considered if partners describing volunteer work or new hobbies and social networks as opportunities describe them as fantastic because there is no alternative and/or there is no other way to convince themselves they are happy with the arrangement. Although self-reported nature of the data brings a danger of bias and partners might want to be seen in a good light, we can only rely on our interpretations of their accounts. Fourth, because this study focused only on the experiences of partners who were abroad at the time of the interviews, partners with repatriation experiences should be included in future research. Because accepting an international assignment can create both opportunities and issues for partners, it might be necessary to investigate long-lasting effects of assignments on partners' well-being and life satisfaction. It is likely that international assignments with resource loss cycles and gain spirals have several impacts on partners' SWB over a longer period. Negative effects may include personal financial problems caused by possible prolonged unemployment, marital issues, or other emotional challenges triggered by the repatriation situation and reverse culture-shock, but also positive effects including long-term career development and career capital development, and other gains acquired through family's shared experience.

Conclusions

To conclude, the present research extends our knowledge of expatriate partners' SWB with the help of the Hobfoll's COR theory. The results contribute to the understanding of partners' well-being experiences and indicate that expatriate partners experience significant resource losses and gains that affect their SWB. Our study findings show how international assignments particularly affect partners' condition resources by changing them extensively and how those changes result in negative and positive changes in both energy and personal resources. Further, it highlights partners' ability to replace lost resources, and the importance of self-efficacy, self-directed activity, and personal initiative in order to thrive in a new environment. The results also reveal partners' strategies such as active networking and volunteer working in order to replace both social relationships and career-related lost resources. A valuable finding provided by the study results is new evidence that resource gains and gain spirals have even more powerful effects on partners' SWB than resource loss cycles. The relocation experience itself outweighs the resource losses encountered. Essentially, all partners were happy with their decision to relocate and with the benefits that living abroad could offer themselves and their families.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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