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Career Capital Development and Career Expectations of Self-Initiated Expatriates

Case of Finnish Self-Initiated Expatriates in Asia

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ABSTRACT:

Globalization has significantly transformed career paths and workforce mobility, and international work experience has become one of the most central competitive advantages in today's labor market. Today, self-initiated expatriates, who move abroad to work without organizational support, make up the majority of the global expatriate population and are therefore a significant yet understudied group. In particular, Western expatriates working in Asia and their career capital have received little attention in research, despite Asia's growing economic importance having made it an attractive destination for many self-initiated expatriates. Addressing this research gap, the aim of this thesis is to examine what type of career capital Finnish self-initiated expatriates develop in Asia, and how they expect the acquired career capital to impact their future career development. The theoretical framework of the thesis is DeFillippi and Arthur's (1994) career capital theory.

The study was conducted as qualitative research, and the data was collected using semi-structured in-depth interviews. The sample consisted of six Finnish self-initiated expatriates who worked or had previously worked in Asia. The in-depth interviews focused on the participants' experiences of career capital development in Asia and their expectations on how the acquired career capital would impact their future career development. The analysis was conducted based on the three ways of knowing of the selected theoretical framework: knowing-how, knowing-why and knowing-whom. The findings suggest that Finnish self-initiated expatriates develop significant career capital across all three ways of knowing. Knowing-how developed in a culturally demanding environment, enhancing the participants' cross-cultural communication skills and broad Asia-specific business knowledge. Knowing-why deepened, strengthening the participants' professional identity. Knowing-whom, while the most challenging of the developed dimensions, was reflected in the participants' extensive multicultural networks. The most unexpected finding was the value of Finnish identity as a form of knowing-why that activated as a professional asset in Asia. Furthermore, the sample consisting of long-term self-initiated expatriates demonstrated more positive career trajectories than prior research would suggest. Regarding future career expectations, the participants considered the career capital they had accumulated to be valuable particularly in external labor markets, but were pessimistic about how the value of their career capital would be understood in Finland.

The study extends the research on career capital theory by applying it to a previously understudied context. From a practical perspective, it also highlights the gap between the career capital accumulated by Finnish self-initiated expatriates in Asia and Finnish employers' ability to recognize it. Finally, the study offers perspectives for further research taking into account the limitations of the study.

KEYWORDS: self-initiated expatriate, career capital development, knowing-how, knowing-why, knowing-whom, career development, expatriate Finns

VAASAN YLIOPISTO**Johtamisen akateeminen yksikkö**

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TIIVISTELMÄ:

Globalisaatio on muuttanut merkittävästi työuria ja työvoiman liikkuvuutta, ja kansainvälisestä työkokemuksesta onkin tullut yksi keskeisimmistä kilpailuvalteista nykypäivän työmarkkinoilla. Tänä päivänä oma-aloitteiset ekspatriaatit, jotka muuttavat ulkomaille työn perässä ilman organisaation tukea, muodostavat enemmistön maailman ekspatriaattipopulaatiosta ja ovat siten keskeinen, mutta vähän tutkittu, väestöryhmä. Erityisesti Aasiassa työskenteleviä länsimaalaisia ekspatriaatteja ja heidän urapääomaansa ei ole juuri tutkittu, vaikka Aasian kasvava taloudellinen merkitys on tehnyt siitä houkuttelevan kohteen monille oma-aloitteisille ekspatriaateille. Tutkimusaukkoon vastaten tutkielman tavoitteena on tarkastella millaista urapääomaa suomalaiset oma-aloitteiset ekspatriaatit kehittävät Aasiassa ja miten he odottavat sen vaikuttavan heidän tulevaan urakehitykseensä. Tutkielman teoreettisena viitekehystenä toimii DeFillippin ja Arthurin (1994) urapääomateoria.

Tutkimus toteutettiin kvalitatiivisena tutkimuksena ja tutkimusaineisto kerättiin puolistrukturoituja syvähaastatteluja hyödyntäen. Syvähaastatteluihin osallistui kuusi suomalaista oma-aloitteista ekspatriaattia, jotka työskentelivät tai olivat työskennelleet eripuolilla Aasiaa. Haastatteluissa keskityttiin osallistujien kokemuksiin urapääoman kehittymisestä Aasiassa ja heidän odotuksiinsa urapääoman vaikutuksista tulevaan urakehitykseen. Analyysi tehtiin valitun teoreettisen viitekehysten kolmen tietämisen tavan, miten-tietämys, miksi-tietämys ja ketä-tietämys, pohjalta. Tutkimustulokset osoittavat, että suomalaiset oma-aloitteiset ekspatriaatit kehittävät merkittävää urapääomaa kaikilla kolmella osa-alueella. Miten-tietämys kehittyi kulttuurillisesti vaativassa ympäristössä osallistujien kulttuurienvälisiä viestintätaitoja ja laajaa Aasia-osaamista. Miksi-tietämys syveni vahvistaen muun muassa osallistujien ammatillista identiteettiä. Ketä-tietämys, vaikka kehitetyistä ulottuvuuksista haasteellisin, näkyi osallistujien laajoina monikulttuurisina verkostoina. Odottamattomin havainto oli suomalaisen identiteetin arvo miksi-tietämyksen muotona, joka aktivoitui ammatillisena vahvuutena Aasiassa. Lisäksi pitkäaikaisista oma-aloitteisista ekspatriaateista koostuva otos osoitti positiivisempia urakehityskulkuja kuin aiemmat tutkimukset antavat ymmärtää. Tulevaisuuden uraodotusten osalta osallistujat arvioivat kerryttämänsä urapääoman arvokkaaksi kansainvälisillä työmarkkinoilla, mutta suhtautuivat pessimistisesti siihen, miten heidän urapääomansa arvo ymmärrettäisiin Suomessa.

Tutkimus laajentaa tutkimusta urapääomateoriasta soveltamalla sitä aiemmin vähän tutkittuun kontekstiin. Käytännössä se tuo esiin kuilun oma-aloitteisten ekspatriaattien kertyneen urapääoman ja suomalaisten työnantajien kyvyn tunnistaa kertynyt urapääoma välillä. Lopuksi tutkimus tarjoaa näkökulmia jatkotutkimukselle ottaen huomioon tutkimuksen rajoitukset.

KEYWORDS: self-initiated expatriate, career capital development, knowing-how, knowing-why, knowing-whom, career development, expatriate Finns

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Abbreviations

AE – Assigned expatriate

SIE – Self-initiated expatriate

1 Introduction

In this first chapter, the rationale behind the study is presented, giving insight into the motivation and significance of the research. Firstly, the background of the study is covered, and the identified research gap is explained. This is followed by the introduction of previous studies, research questions and objectives. Lastly, the structure of the thesis is introduced.

1.1 Background of the study

Globalization and the development of technology have significantly changed the nature of work and the mobility of the workforce. The last few decades have seen a rise in interest in international career opportunities as international work experience is becoming increasingly more important and is generally acknowledged as a crucial asset and a possible source of competitive advantage for multinational corporations (Shaffer, Kraimer, Chen, & Bolino, 2012; Andresen, Al Ariss, Andresen, Walther & Wolff, 2012, pp. 3-4). Thus, as an increasing number of talents are relocating abroad in search of employment possibilities, researchers have recognized the increased need for studies on expatriates, including self-initiated expatriates (Shaffer et al., 2012).

During the last decade, the COVID-19 pandemic substantially disrupted traditional expatriation patterns. In 2020 the number of permanent migrants to Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries fell by more than 30% to approximately 3.7 million people, the lowest since 2003 (OECD, 2021; Andresen, Suutari, Muhr, Barzantny & Dickmann, 2023). Consequently, companies' international labor mobility decreased drastically by 53%. In response to governmental immigration and health policies, organizations increasingly adopted more pronounced use of technology in international work as alternatives to physical relocation (Andresen et al., 2023).

Studies have highlighted how important the international experience of expatriates is. In fact, previous international experience has become one of the most important

prerequisites for promotion to higher-level managerial positions across various countries (Davoine & Schmid, 2022; Schmid & Baldermann, 2021). CEOs with more international experience are typically in higher demand than those without international work experience. Schmid and Baldermann (2021) propose that international experience enhances an individual's professional assets, as it improves their skills, knowledge and competencies. Furthermore, the presence of executives with diverse nationalities and international experience contributes to a wide range of skills, competencies and qualities to the team (Piaskowska & Trojanowski, 2012). In decision making, the diversity of a team is seen to help in understanding a larger range of issues and the decision making by offering a wider viewpoint. Professionals with international experience are more confident in their abilities and their positive attitude may influence the team into taking more risks and preferring larger acquisitions. International assignments are an important and valuable set of work experiences for ambitious executives who are expanding their careers and for international companies. In that way, expatriates also directly benefit the company ROI (McNulty, De Cieri, & Hutchings, 2013).

Today, due to globalization and increased workforce mobility, highly qualified individuals may seek work in practically any country of their choice (Froese, 2012). The phenomenon of competent professionals independently seeking more attractive opportunities abroad based on one's own intention and initiative has demanded new definitions, such as "self-initiated expatriates" (SIEs). SIEs are individuals who independently initiate their international relocation by securing employment and managing their expatriation, instead of being assigned abroad by an organizational employer (Suutari & Brewster, 2000). According to Finaccord's (2018) statistics the total number of expatriates worldwide was around 66.2 million in 2017. In 2013 the same number was 52.8 million, but the number of expatriates has increased at a compound annual rate of 5.8% since then. By 2021, the number of expatriates was forecasted to reach 87.5 million. Studies have shown that a substantial portion, up to 73%, of the global expatriate population are SIEs (Haldorai, Kim, Seo, & Cai, 2021). The tremendous importance and number of SIEs can explain the demand for research on them in practice.

In recent decades, the number of expatriate Finns has been increasing, too. As a matter of fact, according to the Ministry of the Interior (2021), some 300,000 Finnish citizens live abroad. While not all of these individuals are working expatriates, since the end of the 20th century, accession to the European Union, globalization and the improved education level of Finns have been key drivers of the growing phenomenon of emigration of Finnish citizens. From the beginning of the 2000s to 2020, approximately 9,000-10,000 Finns emigrated each year, making the net migration rate negative. However, Brexit and the recent COVID-19 pandemic have changed the situation drastically, but it is difficult to estimate what the potential long-term effects of these changes are.

On top of the quantitative changes of the emigration trends of Finns, qualitative changes have been notable since the 1990s (Ministry of the Interior, 2021). Some of the most significant trends include individual reasons for emigration, as goal-oriented highly educated Finns seek work abroad. Lately, the destinations of expatriation have become more diverse than before. While most Finns still expatriate to the countries within European Union, one of the most notable inbound directions has become Asian countries, such as China and Japan, which are both among the top 20 destinations for expat Finns. Overall, economic indicators point to an increase in Asia's influence as the countries are projected to outperform global GDP (McNulty et al., 2013). What is more, by 2030, China is predicted to become the world's largest economy. It is clear that Asia's economic growth is expected to result in demand for a more globalized workforce, making it the most likely destination of expatriation in the next decade.

All in all, with the rapid speed of globalization and increased labor mobility, it is crucial to gain better understanding of expatriates and the benefits of international careers. As majority of expatriates are SIEs, there is a clear demand for research on them. What is more, the number of expat Finns continues to rise, and the importance of Asia's economy becomes more evident. As Finland and Asia are both culturally and geographically far apart, it is important to gain understanding of Finnish SIEs and the career capital they possess in the context of Asia.

While existing research has examined the development of career capital, the impact of future career development among expatriates, let alone among SIEs, has not been thoroughly explored (Mello, Suutari & Dickmann, 2023). There is a significant gap in literature, as current research offers limited information on SIEs' career development. Development of career capital impacts career development as the greater the accumulation of career capital, the greater the potential for career development and career success in today's shifting career climate (Guan, Arthur, Khapova, Hall & Lord, 2019). When researching career development through career capital accumulation, one commonly used theoretical framework is career capital theory (Dickmann, Suutari, Brewster, Mäkelä, Tanskanen & Tornikoski, 2018). Career capital theory explains that career capital portrays personal assets that are built over time through three ways of knowing: knowing-how, knowing-why and knowing-whom. The framework provides for understanding how the change in environment affects individuals' – in this thesis SIEs' – knowledge and skills and career development. Therefore, the theoretical foundation for this thesis is career capital theory as it helps to explain how SIEs develop and build their international careers through gained career capital.

1.2 Previous studies

While the phenomenon of expatriation has been significantly studied since the 20th century, researchers have overlooked SIEs for decades and existing literature has offered limited research on them despite their significant importance in the international workforce (Froese & Peltokorpi, 2013). Further research on the concept of SIEs is in demand. As of now, previous research has primarily concentrated on organization assigned executives, commonly referred to as assigned expatriates (Haldorai et al., 2021). In comparison, it is only in recent years that the research on SIEs has increased and gained prominence, despite SIEs' prevalence.

Moreover, McNulty et al. (2013) highlight the need for further research on Western expatriates in Asia. Despite the shifts in global economic power towards Asia, scholars have primarily concentrated on expatriates in North America and Europe, with limited

research on Western expatriates in Asia. McNulty et al. (2013) also point out the gap in current research for alternate theoretical lenses, such as career capital, for individual ROI benefits of expatriates particularly in the Asia Pacific region.

The most notable studies on the topics of this thesis have been conducted by a variety of scholars. SIEs were first introduced by Inkson, Arthur, Pringle and Barry (1997) and labelled as “overseas experience” (OE). Since then, SIEs have been studied by a number of researchers. Career capital theory, pioneered by DeFillippi and Arthur (1994), has been widely applied in expatriate research. Since its introduction, the career capital framework has been further developed through the intelligent career framework (Arthur, Claman & DeFillippi, 1995; Inkson & Arthur, 2001). Career capital framework has been utilized by many scholars, including Jokinen (2010) and Dickmann and Doherty (2010), to analyze expatriates’ professional competencies and career trajectories.

Previous research has shown that both SIEs and AEs develop their career capital extensively during their expatriation, benefiting from the international experience (Dickmann et al., 2018; Kanstrén & Suutari, 2021). Additionally, in their systematic review compiling and analyzing 20 years of SIE literature, Brewster, Suutari and Waxin (2021) identify the growth of comparative research and emphasize the diverse theoretical perspectives used to understand the distinct characteristics and experiences of SIEs and AEs. More recent studies have examined career capital development among both SIEs and AEs (Dickmann et al., 2018; Kanstrén & Suutari, 2021), demonstrating that career capital developed during expatriation positively impacts perceived marketability and the number of promotions (Mello et al., 2023). Acknowledging these authors’ esteemed research, this thesis builds upon their foundational studies on career capital theory and its application to SIE experiences.

1.3 Aim and research questions

As previously noted, there is a research gap in existing literature on SIEs’ career capital development, particularly in the context of Western expatriates in Asia. So, this thesis

aims to identify SIEs' career capital development and how such development impacts expectations on career development using the theory of career capital in the context of Finnish SIEs in Asia. In order to fulfil the research objective, the thesis seeks to answer the addressed research questions:

- 1. What type of career capital do self-initiated expatriates develop during their expatriation?*
- 2. How do they expect the acquired career capital to impact their future career development?*

By addressing these research questions, this thesis aims to explore new perspectives on SIEs' career capital development and expectations on career development, especially in the context of Finnish SIEs in Asia, a context largely absent from existing literature.

1.4 Key concepts

For a more comprehensive understanding, the key concepts of thesis are defined in this subchapter. These definitions are applicable throughout the thesis.

Self-initiated expatriate

A SIE is an individual who independently takes charge of their career and chooses to relocate and work abroad on their own initiative without direct organizational support (Selmer, Suutari & Brewster, 2022, pp. 114-115). Therefore, instead of being directed by an employer, the decision of relocation and seeking opportunities in a foreign country is made by the individual. This sets SIEs apart from AEs, whose expatriation is ordered by the employer. Upon their departure from their home countries, SIEs initiate to repatriate one day (Dorsch, Suutari, & Brewster, 2012).

Career capital

Career capital theory defines career capital as a “stock” of knowledge and skills valued within the career field (Mello et al., 2023). This “stock” represents the investments people make in their careers using the three “ways of knowing”: knowing-how, knowing-why and knowing-whom. Inkson and Arthur (2001, p. 51) describe the three ways of knowing as the “forms of currencies” of career capital. Development of career capital impacts career success as the higher career capital stock corresponds to a higher chance of career success (Mello et al., 2023).

Career capital development

Career capital development can be defined as a continuous process during which one gains and improves their career capital including the three ways of knowing (Kanstrén & Suutari, 2021; Rodriguez & Scurry, 2014). Therefore, career capital development involves demonstrating self-management skills, personal initiative and personal agency as expatriates work in new environments. Through international experience expatriates access opportunities to gain self-awareness, self-confidence and recognition of personal strengths, values and career interests, which all help with their career development.

1.5 Structure of the thesis

This thesis is organized as follows. The study consists of five main chapters, which also include subchapters. In the first chapter, the topic of the thesis is introduced, and the importance and relevance of the study are justified. Additionally, the thesis’ research questions, objectives and aim are discussed. The second main chapter reviews the relevant literature and provides the theoretical framework of the study. First, it examines the phenomenon of expatriation and self-initiated expatriation. Second, it introduces the career capital framework that will be adopted to analyze the career capital development experiences of SIEs. Third, it covers career capital development and its impact on career success of SIEs.

In the third main chapter of the thesis, the methodology of the study is presented. The fourth chapter presents the key findings from the conducted interviews. In the final chapter, the theoretical and practical contribution of the research will be discussed. This chapter also concludes the thesis by discussing the limitations of the study as well as providing avenues for further research.

2 Literature review

In this second main chapter, the theoretical background of the thesis is provided. The chapter consists of subchapters on SIEs as well as career capital and the development of it. The literature review covers the career capital theory by DeFillippi and Arthur (1994) which is utilized later to compare to the methodological results and findings.

2.1 Self-initiated expatriates

2.1.1 The four conceptual criteria of a self-initiated expatriate

SIEs were first introduced by Inkson et al. (1997) and given a label “overseas experience” (OE). Since then, several other labels have been used, and there is a lot of variation in the conceptual terminology used in the literature on SIEs as researchers have defined them in various ways (Cerdin & Selmer, 2014). Therefore, Cerdin and Selmer (2014) sought to provide a coherent definition of a SIE, basing the definition on existing definitions and criteria of being considered one.

As a result, Cerdin and Selmer (2014) formed four conceptual criteria of a SIE by combining the definitions in the existing conceptual and empirical research. The four conceptual criteria that must be attained simultaneously in order to be considered a SIE are self-initiated international relocation, skilled/professional qualifications, intentions of a temporary stay and regular employment. Figure 1. illustrates how individual can only be classified as a SIE if they attain all four conceptual criteria of a SIE:

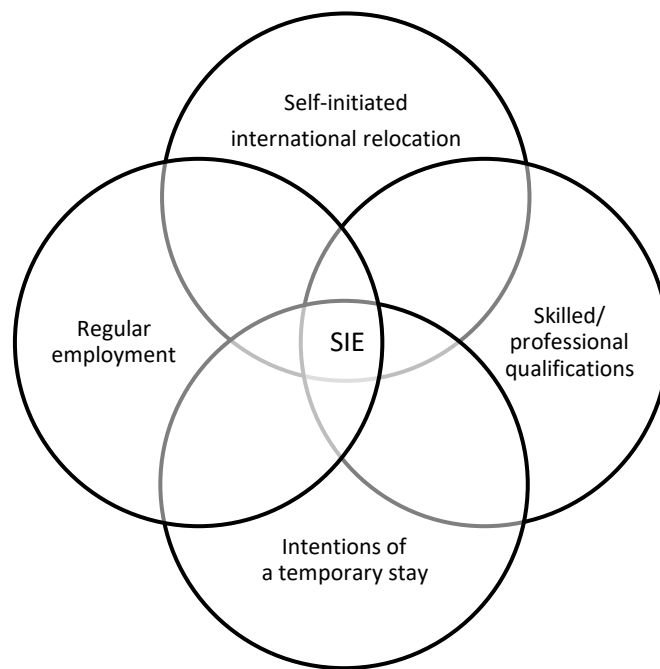


Figure 1 The four conceptual criteria of a SIE (Cerdin & Selmer, 2014, p. 1290).

The first of the four conceptual criteria of a SIE is *self-initiated international relocation* (Cerdin & Selmer, 2014). This criterion is due to SIEs' independent relocation to a country of their choice (Froese, 2012). AEs may also have initiated their own expatriation, but what makes SIEs different from them is the lack of home company assistance and support when moving abroad (Cerdin & Selmer, 2014). Therefore, the criterion of self-initiated relocation of a SIE also includes the fact that a SIE moves abroad without the organization's assistance in the home country. Essentially, the criterion of self-initiated international relocation encompasses relocating abroad out of one's own volition and without the assistance and support of a home country organization. As SIEs leave their home countries with the premise to repatriate one day, their move is considered expatriation (Dorsch et al., 2012).

The second conceptual criterion of a SIE is *regular employment* (Cerdin & Selmer, 2014). By reason of meeting this criterion, SIEs can be excluded from short-term travelers and other groups with no intention of seeking employment in the host country, such as international students and trailing others. Although, the partners of SIEs, also known as

“trailing spouses”, often end up becoming SIEs themselves, making them dual career couples, which are discussed in more detail in the next subchapter, 2.1.2 Types of self-initiated expatriates.

For an individual to be classified as a SIE, they intend to repatriate one day (Cerdin & Selmer, 2014). Therefore, the third conceptual criterion of a SIE is *intentions of a temporary stay* in the host country. With this criterion SIEs can be differentiated from immigrants, who are relocating abroad permanently. What is more, while immigrants might view their host country their new home and intend to temporarily settle there, SIEs might view themselves as “little more than guests”. Additionally, with the intentions of a temporary stay, SIEs may maintain their fundamental norms and values and only briefly pick up new social and language skills to make life in the host country easier.

However, despite intentions of a temporary stay being a criterion to be considered a SIE, not all SIEs have a clear time frame in mind for relocation (Suutari & Brewster, 2000; Cerdin & Selmer, 2014). These SIEs may become immigrants and no longer be qualified as SIEs. Such individuals have also been referred to as localized professionals, who will be introduced in further detail in subchapter 2.1.2 Types of self-initiated expatriates.

High skill level and professional qualifications appear as a necessity when pursuing a global career. Therefore, the fourth and last conceptual criterion of a SIE is possessing *skilled/professional qualifications* (Cerdin & Selmer, 2014). In fact, according to Cerdin and Selmer (2014) individuals with those qualifications have primarily been awarded with the expatriate status. Generally, SIEs obtain a high skill level and seek a global career centered on their individual aspirations.

These four conceptual criteria help define and identify a SIE (Cerdin & Selmer, 2014). While the definition proposed by Cerdin and Selmer (2014) may not be perfect or without criticism, it is a positive step towards the conceptual coherence of a widely recognized term. It is also worth noting that SIEs cannot be viewed as a homogenous

group of expatriates solely because there is a definition that applies to all of them. In the following subchapter, the diversity of SIEs will be covered.

2.1.2 Types of self-initiated expatriates

As the literature review thus far suggests, SIEs should be differentiated from AEs. Moreover, SIEs are also not a homogenous group (Suutari & Brewster, 2000). For that reason, it is necessary to identify potential SIE subgroups in order to gain deeper understanding of their significance. The following six subgroups were identified by Suutari and Brewster (2000) and it is to be noted that it is possible for an individual to meet the criteria of more than one group. The identified six subgroups of SIEs are young opportunists, job seekers, officials, localized professionals, international professionals and dual career couples.

According to Inkson et al. (1997), *young opportunists* are individuals who are in the early stages of their careers when going overseas. They go abroad for extended periods of time to work and travel. Research conducted by Suutari and Brewster (2000) found that the Finnish education system and societal emphasis on foreign trade and languages as well as the increased popularity of studying abroad have made self-initiated expatriation a viable option for Finnish young opportunists. For young opportunists it is common to still have a relatively independent family situation, and they are, therefore, able to leave their home countries more easily, which sets them apart from other SIE subgroups. In the study conducted by Suutari and Brewster (2000) they also found that 15% of SIEs are below 30 years old, which makes them young opportunists. Motives for expatriation of young opportunists include professional development and career progress and they have positive expectations on international experience's effect on future career development.

Job seekers are SIEs who are dissatisfied with their career development or have experienced unemployment at home (Suutari & Brewster 2000). Therefore, this group of SIEs shows motivation for seeking employment overseas due to limited opportunities

for career development in their home countries. In the study conducted by Suutari and Brewster (2000) 23% of SIEs belonged to this group. Their primary motive for relocation was poor work situation at home alongside with financial benefits. In the same study, they found that job seekers are less optimistic about finding employment at home after repatriating. However, job seekers have a positive attitude towards international experience's effect on their future career.

Officials are significantly different from other subgroups of SIEs as they are employed by international organizations such as the United Nations or the European Union (Suutari & Brewster, 2000). Additionally, officials are often older than an average SIE, since a majority of officials are over 40. Moreover, their motivations also differ from those of an average SIE's; officials seek economic benefits, have personal interest toward internationalization and hope to gain new experiences. Suutari and Brewster (2000) found that officials have negative expectations for their future career if they repatriate home to Finland as they are unlikely to find similar work in international organizations there.

Localized professionals are individuals that have decided to stay abroad for an extended period of time and transition to a permanent role after their expatriation assignment finished and therefore are no longer considered expatriates within the company (Suutari & Brewster, 2000). Localized professionals often have no set plans to repatriate to their home countries. In fact, this SIE subgroup is characterized by their motivators to stay abroad; localized professionals may prefer the local environment, consider the better career possibilities abroad or have personal relationships like having married a local. Therefore, an indication of a membership of this subgroup is that many of localized professionals have no prediction for how long they will work overseas and when they will repatriate. Another important motive for localized professionals is interest in internationalization. In the study by Suutari and Brewster (2000) it was found that these SIEs have relatively positive expectations for their future career.

International professionals, also known as global specialists or “mercenaries”, are SIEs who have extensive experience of working abroad on international operations (Suutari & Brewster, 2000). Moreover, international professionals are individuals who are not interested in building a long career at a single organization, but rather switch employers based on the offers they get. Members of this SIE subgroup often reside outside of their home country almost permanently. Despite not meeting the criteria of an AE, international professionals may receive compensation packages like those of traditional expatriates. Important motives for international professionals are economic benefits, while career development is not among their main motives. These SIEs have pessimistic expectations about their international experience promoting their future career development if repatriated.

For the SIE subgroup of *dual career couples*, the expatriate assignment of the spouse is the primary motivator for seeking employment abroad (Suutari & Brewster, 2000). Often “trailing spouses” attempt to find employment in the country their spouse has relocated to, which shows that dual career couples want to feel equal in the working life. The trailing spouse has important role during the expatriation by being willing to leave their home country as they affect the expatriate adjustment and performance positively (Lazarova, Westman & Shaffer, 2010).

As stated, SIEs are not a homogenous group and several subgroups appear. Selmer et al. (2022, p.123) highlight the importance of specifying which SIE subgroups are being studied, as “there are different antecedents, different experiences, and different outcomes depending on which category is being explored” and aggregating these subgroups would “risk either ignoring some key factors or of 'averaging out' some of the distinctions”. These six subgroups of SIEs are different based on their “individual background variables, employer and task variables, motives, compensation and repatriation and future career issues” (Suutari & Brewster, 2000). To conclude, the main features of each SIE subgroup are presented in Table 1. Types of self-initiated expatriates and their characteristics below:

Young opportunists	Job seekers	Officials
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In the early stages of their careers • Going abroad for extended periods of time to work and travel • International opportunities during studies have made self-initiated expatriation more attractive • Independent family situation • Below 30 years of age • Motives: professional development and career progress • Expect international experience to have a positive impact on future career 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dissatisfaction with career development and limited opportunities at home • Motives: poor work situation at home and financial benefits • Less optimistic about finding suitable employment after repatriating • View international experience positively 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employed by international organizations • Usually older than 40 years of age • Motives: economic benefits, personal interest toward internationalization and gaining new experiences • Negative expectations for career development after repatriation
Localized professionals	International professionals	Dual career couples
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decision to stay abroad longer • Transitioning to a permanent role abroad after expatriation assignment • No plans or prediction of repatriation • May prefer local environment and career possibilities, or have family abroad • Motive: internationalization • Positive expectations for career development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possess a lot of experience of international operations • Do not want to have a long career in a single organization → switches employers frequently • May receive compensation packages like an AE • Motive: economic benefits • Negative expectations for future career if repatriated 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Trailing spouses” aim to find employment in the host country of their expatriate spouse • Motive: relocation of the spouse

Table 1 Types of self-initiated expatriates and their characteristics (Suutari & Brewster, 2000).

2.1.3 Review of existing research on self-initiated expatriates

Suutari and Brewster (2000) introduced the concept of SIEs two decades ago (Dorsch et al., 2012). However, SIEs are not new; they have existed for a long time. While SIEs have been utilized in the workforce for years, scholars have become aware of their existence but started studying them only in this century. The studies on SIEs build upon the findings of previous research. According to Dorsch et al. (2012), the seminal research was conducted by Inkson et al. (1997). The research studied young people who travelled abroad for a short period of time taking advantage of fewer visa requirements to gain international experience.

While the development of SIEs have received limited scholarly attention until recently, some aspects of self-initiated expatriation have been topics for extensive research. Researchers have used various theoretical perspectives to study SIEs, and some of the most notable include motivation theory, cross-cultural adjustment frameworks and boundaryless career theory. Therefore, SIEs' motives, adjustment and adaptation, organizational mobility and repatriation are among the most researched theoretical constructs applied in the studies of SIEs (Doherty, 2013; Froese, 2012; Madi, Alsoussi & Shubailat, 2023). What is more, the body of research on SIEs has expanded significantly in recent decades, as many researchers who previously focused on AEs have turned their attention to SIEs (Doherty, Richardson & Thorn, 2013). As a result, some researchers have published comparative research revealing the differences between SIEs and AEs by applying different theoretical perspectives to the studies. In their systematic review of 20 years of SIE literature, Brewster, Suutari and Waxin (2021) recognize the growth of comparison studies and highlight the diverse theoretical perspectives used to understand the characteristics and experiences of SIEs and AEs.

The primary distinction between SIEs and AEs is where the initiative to work overseas comes from (Dorsch et al., 2012). SIEs choose independently to search employment abroad and to leave their native country as well as when to repatriate, while AEs are sent by their internationally operating organizations. Moreover, according to Jokinen, Brewster and Suutari (2008) there are some additional, notable differences between SIEs and AEs. For instance, when it comes to length of international assignment, SIEs tend to work at lower hierarchical levels within organizations compared to AEs. Additionally, AEs typically develop stronger organizational knowledge and broader professional networks due to their higher organizational positions and responsibilities. Previous research states that SIEs are more often unmarried and, on average, younger than AEs. What is more, the proportion of females is larger in SIEs than in AEs.

Regarding academic achievement, there appears to be no distinct difference between the two expatriate groups (Dorsch et al., 2012). According to Jokinen et al. (2008), the

majority of expatriates work in middle or senior management roles. However, SIEs are likely to work in lower organizational positions below their qualification levels compared to AEs, who tend to have more senior positions (Dorsch et al., 2012; Selmer et al., 2022). Furthermore, SIEs are more likely to take on more foreign assignments. SIEs tend to have a higher organizational mobility compared to AEs. Despite of their differences, according to Jokinen et al. (2008) both SIEs and AEs believe that working abroad has improved their career capital and competencies, and both groups of expatriates report similar outcomes of their international assignments.

According to Madi et al. (2023), SIEs' motivations have been studied and discussed in previous literature extensively by a variety of authors. Actually, the research on SIEs have found a wider range of motivational factors and reasons for expatriation than studies on AEs typically reported (Froese, 2012). Still, SIEs and AEs tend to have very similar motivations for gaining international experience (Dorsch et al., 2012). However, the relative importance of specific motivations seems to vary. For instance, lifestyle is a primary career anchor for both SIEs and AEs but weighs more for SIEs. Different lenses can be used to examine motivation than career anchors. For example, career factors are as important to both SIEs and AEs, but location and the reputation of the host country is an especially important factor for SIEs.

The existing research mentions several individual and environmental push and pull factors, such as the desire for adventure and exploring new countries and cultures, challenging labor market conditions in home country, financial and economic benefits and social factors (Froese, 2012; Madi et al., 2023; Richardson & McKenna, 2002). While additional motivational factors for self-initiated expatriation may include pursuing personal growth and development as well as career advancement, AEs relocate to achieve organizational goals and seek financial benefits (Doherty, Dickmann & Mills, 2011). For instance, Suutari and Brewster (2000) studied the traits of a diverse group of 448 Finnish expatriates, of which 33% were SIEs and the remaining 67% AEs. The study found that the most important motivational factors for both SIEs and AEs were desire for

internationalization, new experiences and career advancement. However, compared to AEs, for SIEs the interest in internationalization and poor employment situation at home were far more important motivations for expatriation (Froese, 2012).

Considering the cross-cultural adjustment of SIEs compared to AEs, existing research suggests some key findings. The existing research suggests that when it comes to the adjustment, SIEs benefit more from mentoring and supportive relationships with colleagues than cultural training (Dorsch et al., 2012). Research conducted by Peltokorpi and Froese (2009) found that comparing SIEs to AEs, SIEs typically exhibit better overall and interaction adjustment. Peltokorpi and Froese (2009) speculated that SIEs' higher motivation and potential previous social networks with locals might positively affect SIEs' general cross-cultural adjustment. Selmer et al. (2022) further note that SIEs are more willing to adjust to the host country culture and form relationships with the locals, which both contribute to their better cross-cultural adjustment compared to AEs. And, as SIEs have no pre-determined time frame for their expatriation, they tend to spend longer in the host country, which, again, contributes positively to their motivation to adjust to the local environment. But at the same time, Peltokorpi and Froese (2009) also speculate that SIEs might get less support at the workplace, which negatively affects their job satisfaction. Therefore, it can be implied that despite of adjusting to the new cultural environment and social interactions more effectively than AEs, SIEs face dissatisfaction related to their working environment more often.

While SIEs are known to change organizations more often than AEs, it is not related to their working environment, as there is no difference in subjective or objective career success or satisfaction between the two expatriate types (Suutari, Brewster, Mäkelä, Dickmann & Tornikoski, 2018). According to Suutari et al. (2018), SIEs rather have an internal impulse to change organizations more frequently and therefore exhibit higher organizational mobility compared to AEs. In existing research, SIEs have often been connected to ideas of boundaryless careers (Inkson et al., 1997; Jokinen et al., 2008; Mello et al., 2023). Individuals pursuing boundaryless careers define their own career

and consciously gain portable capabilities, as well as intentionally create social networks that advance their careers (Jokinen et al., 2008). The term “boundaryless career” has also been used to describe career opportunities not constrained by organizational or national boundaries (Jokinen et al., 2008; Mello et al., 2023).

The boundaryless career tendencies are evident in SIEs’ professional identity as well, as it is shaped by their skills and competencies rather than by organizational affiliation (Cerdin & Selmer, 2014), and they exhibit more protean career characteristics (Jokinen et al., 2008). What is more, SIEs are distinguished by their independent career identities and their willingness to move not just across national borders, like AEs, but also between several different workplaces, as they tend to be less committed to one particular organization (Cerdin & Selmer, 2014; Doherty et al., 2011; Suutari et al., 2018). Overall, SIEs view their international experience as highly valued in the external labor market (Cerdin & Selmer, 2014).

When it comes to repatriation, a large amount of SIEs never return to their home countries (Dorsch et al., 2012). Many SIEs take up the lifestyle of their host country and start considering it home. Unsurprisingly, the SIEs that are more integrated into their workplace and community are less likely to want to return to their home countries. Still, some return home, and existing research suggests some reasons for these SIEs’ desire to repatriate: career and lifestyle issues, such as loss of work or family separation, often prompt thoughts of repatriation. In general, comparing SIEs and AEs, AEs are more likely to repatriate for they have organizational repatriation support and clarity about job arrangements upon return, which SIEs lack, making their repatriation process more uncertain and self-directed (Selmer et al., 2022).

Published research has developed the necessary discussion on SIEs. However, as stated in introductory Chapter 1, additional information on SIEs is in demand and would help building knowledge on these individuals’ professional experiences. Moreover, additional research on SIEs could further develop the existing research on the characteristics of SIEs

as well as their behaviors. Table 2 Comparative summary of the existing research and key findings on SIEs and AEs summarizes the existing research on SIEs compared to AEs covered in this subchapter:

Perspective of existing research	SIEs	AEs
Initiative for expatriation	Make their own decision to work overseas and whether to repatriate	Sent abroad by their internationally operating organizations
Demographic characteristics	Tend to be younger, more often single and include a higher proportion of females	Typically older, more often married and mainly male
Educational background	Previous studies have found no significant differences in the academic achievements of SIEs compared to AEs.	Previous studies have found no significant differences in the academic achievements of AEs compared to SIEs.
Organizational position	Often in lower organizational positions and have more frequent job transitions	More often hold senior or managerial positions
Motivations for expatriation	Tend to have more motivation and reasons for expatriation: seeking personal and professional growth, international experience, adventure and improved career opportunities are among the most common motives	Motives are primarily organizational and financial
Organizational mobility and career orientation	Associated with boundaryless careers and self-directed management of career as they show higher organizational mobility	Mobility tends to be limited to corporate assignments and are therefore more organizationally bound
Cross-cultural adjustment	Typically exhibit better overall adjustment but rely on mentoring and own social networks instead of organizational cultural training	Exhibit less flexible adjustment, benefit more from organizational support and training
Repatriation tendencies	Integration into host country often leads to permanent relocation and therefore many do not repatriate	Likely to repatriate after completing overseas assignment
Theoretical perspectives applied	Limited scholarly attention until recent years: mainly studied through lenses such as motivation theory, cross-cultural adjustment frameworks and boundaryless career theory	Already a widely established subject of study

Table 2 Comparative summary of the existing research and key findings on SIEs and AEs (Doherty, 2012; Dorsch et al., 2012; Froese, 2012; Jokinen et al., 2008; Madi et al., 2023; Peltokorpi & Froese, 2009; Richardson & McKenna, 2002; Suutari & Brewster, 2000).

2.2 Development of career capital during self-initiated expatriation

This subchapter introduces DeFillippi and Arthur's (1994) career capital theory. The theory is complemented by theoretical overviews on the development of career capital of SIEs and the impacts of career capital development of SIEs. Lastly, this subchapter is followed by a subchapter, that summarizes and concludes the theory section of this thesis.

2.2.1 Career capital theory

According to DeFillippi and Arthur (1994), in essence, career capital refers to the skills and competencies an individual must possess to be successful in their work. Career capital is like capital that is valued in the career field, where everyone has a "unique portfolio of capitals" (Lamb & Sutherland, 2010). As an individual progresses along their career path, the interaction between the social context and inclinations influences the individual's career. Career capital is accumulated in different ways and at different stages of an individual's career and, therefore, takes a variety of forms. Hence, the skills, competencies and knowledge are personal assets, unique capital, that the individual builds over time.

The seminal work on career capital, DeFillippi and Arthur's (1994) conceptualization of career competencies, draws from other scholars and their work on firm competencies, and their strategic and competitive implications. The theory was first known as intelligent career theory but was then re-labelled by Arthur et al. (1995) (Parker, Khapova & Arthur, 2009). According to career capital theory, individuals develop three interdependent types of career capital, also known as the three "ways of knowing", from their work experience (Valk, Van Engen & Van Der Velde, 2014). These three ways of knowing reflect their skills and expertise (knowing-how), motivation and identity (knowing-why) and relationships and reputation (knowing-whom). The three types of career capital interact with each other, and investing in one way of knowing may also result in increase in other ways of knowing.

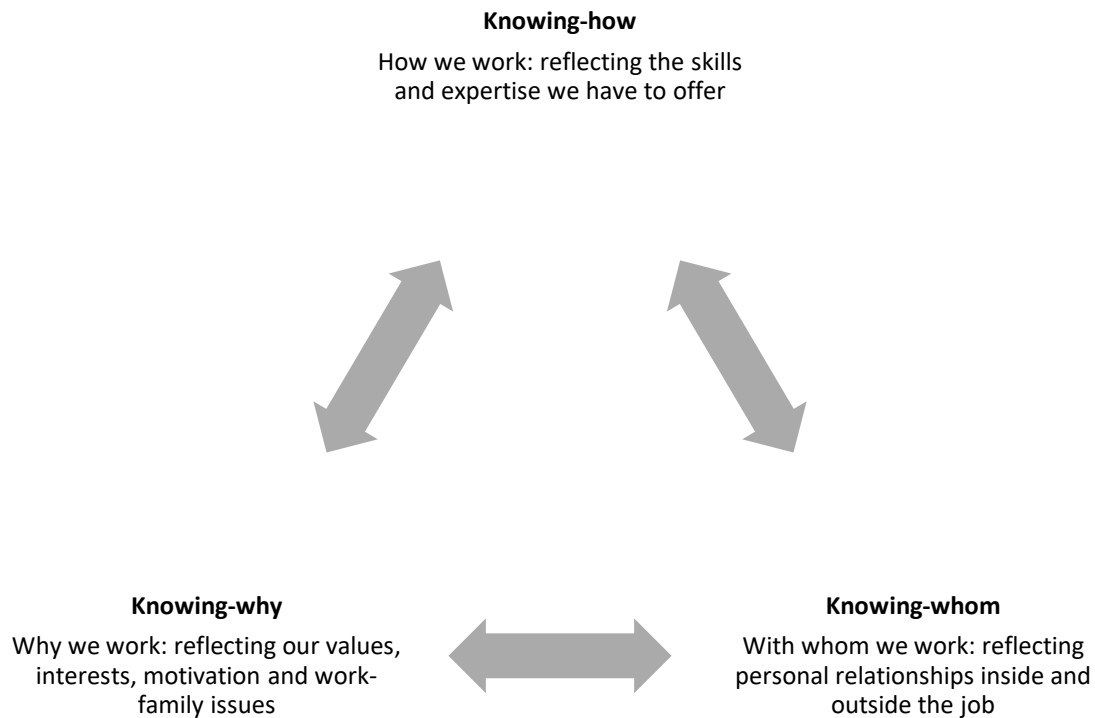


Figure 2 The three ways of knowing (Parker & Arthur, 2004).

International experience is an effective way to develop career. Noteworthy development of career capital occurs when employees take on work that is demanding or unfamiliar to them, which influences future career expectations (Jokinen, 2010). According to Dickmann and Doherty (2010), individuals are more likely to take on an international assignment if they expect to be able to develop valuable career capital during the assignment. Therefore, developing career capital appears to be one of the main goals for individuals during international assignments. Jokinen et al. (2008) identified that increased career capital is often an outcome of international work experience which then influences future career expectations and impacts (Jokinen, 2010).

Many researchers have made use of the three ways of knowing. For instance, the three ways of knowing have been used as a paradigm for studying global careers and the building of career capital. Next, the three ways of knowing will be covered individually including how each way of knowing is developed and the impacts of such development.

2.2.1.1 Knowing-how

Knowing-how can be defined as the assets such as the skills, expertise and both implicit and explicit knowledge gained from work experience (Inkson & Arthur, 2001). Knowing-how answers the question “How we work?” by reflecting on the skills and expertise the individual has to offer (Parker & Arthur, 2004). Moreover, according to the definition of Inkson and Arthur (2001) one’s possessed knowing-how can be technical, interpersonal or conceptual. While some knowing-how skills are specific to one company, some are transferrable across boundaries to new workplaces and situations. Therefore, Inkson and Arthur (2001) suggest that knowing-how can be divided into narrow knowing-how and broader knowing-how. Possessing adaptable knowing-how that can be adopted to different industry contexts, such as understanding of the industry dynamics, may have wider applicability than narrowly focused knowing-how, such as understanding of specific details of the production and administrative system of a single employer.

According to Jokinen (2010), knowledge of tasks, organization and business are considered knowing-how that is developed by being involved in given contexts. The level of knowledge and development are a result of being exposed to new tasks and environments. Jokinen (2010) found that all interviewees in her study felt their knowledge had increased during expatriation. Their claims of improvement could be placed into categories of people-related cultural knowledge, task-related knowledge unique to their role and tasks, organizational functioning knowledge and business knowledge. In addition, respondents developed management and leadership knowledge and their ability to take action. What is more, without exception, all interviewees highlighted that their social skills developed greatly during face-to-face interaction with people.

According to study conducted by Dickmann and Doherty (2010), developed knowing-how has a strong, positive performance impact. The study showed that expatriates gained increased capabilities to their performance, including “business insights”, “higher political sensitivity” and “improved communication skills”. Additionally, international

assignments were seen to help individuals to gain increased commercial experience, abilities to achieve results and overall development as adding to their career capital.

2.2.1.2 Knowing-why

As an individual begins their professional journey, one of their principal assets is “knowing-why” (Inkson & Arthur, 2001). Knowing-why is defined as the drive, sense of purpose, motivation and identification we feel towards our work. Knowing-why encompasses the underlying reasons and motivators that direct an individual’s career. Initially, knowing-why answers the question “Why we work?” by reflecting on personal values, interests, motivation and work-family issues (Parker & Arthur, 2004). For example, knowing-why may be expressed as developing new skills aligned with personal interests, ambition to attain power and career progression, or desiring to support one’s family (Inkson & Arthur, 2001). Knowing-why is a dynamic aspect of career capital that changes over time with career maturity and personal circumstances.

Majority of expatriates embark on their international assignment for being highly motivated by the international aspects of the job, as well as to seek challenge, development and career advancement (Jokinen, 2010; Dickmann and Doherty, 2010). The expatriates’ initial motivation shows a strong knowing-why. Additionally, expatriates developed increased knowing-why while becoming more aware of what they seek in their professional lives. Jokinen (2010) found that after gaining some international experience, individuals become more rational toward future international assignments and refine their career and personal development objectives. For most, the first international experience reinforces the understanding of why the expatriate wants to work abroad and therefore confirms and strengthens the aspiration.

According to Dickmann and Doherty (2010), perceived impact of developed knowing-why can be described as development of self, a “rounding” experience. Changes in knowing-why over time, such as challenging own norms and values, impacts the career path and development of expatriates. Career capitalists develop self-awareness by

learning about their strengths, weaknesses and drives, which are crucial parts of knowing-why (Jokinen, 2010).

2.2.1.3 Knowing-whom

The third aspect of career capital, knowing-whom, refers to the valuable attachments, relationships, reputation, sources of information and mutual obligations that individuals cultivate as they pursue their careers (Inkson & Arthur, 2001). Knowing-whom answers the question “With whom we work?” and therefore reflects on personal relationships not only inside the job but extend also outside the job (Parker & Arthur, 2004). In other words, knowing-whom contacts include professional contacts such as supervisors, peers and subordinates inside the company, but also the contacts outside the company such as customers, suppliers, consultants and other professionals relevant in the industry (Inkson & Arthur, 2001). Knowing-whom contacts may also be nonwork related, such as family members, friends and fellow alumni. What is more, knowing-whom connections are rarely tied to a single space, but rather extend beyond the boundaries of individual’s workplace and transitions from one job to another are often facilitated by network connections.

Developing knowing-whom involves building, maintaining and expanding social networks mainly through workplace relationships but also social networks outside work and external circumstances (Jokinen, 2010). Jokinen (2010) found that expatriates mainly initiate their networks at their workplace. However, for those with children, social networks could expand outside of work through activities where they could meet other parents. It was also found that despite of the opportunities provided by modern technology, networks built face-to-face in external circumstances were considered more important. Each new international assignment usually requires building new professional social networks from scratch, but private networks are seen to last. Over time, expatriates become more intentional in building networks and understand the value networks can bring both professionally and personally.

Developing knowing-whom has a significant impact on both professional and private life of an expat (Jokinen, 2010). Professionally, the networks can provide for information, expertise and even career advancement. Privately, networks offer support and practical help such as accommodation and travel tips. However, as living abroad can be straining, maintaining the networks is challenging (Dickmann and Doherty, 2010). But despite the challenges, expatriates emphasize the development of social skills and the importance of them, as they perceive developed knowing-whom highly transferable and beneficial for enhancing career capital.

2.2.2 Development of career capital of self-initiated expatriates

Throughout their career, SIEs develop and utilize their career capital (Dickmann et al., 2018). The concept of career capital incorporates the development of competencies via knowing-how career capital, protean career aspects via knowing-why career capital and networking and relationship aspects via knowing-whom career capital. Since SIEs independently initiate their international assignments, their personal agency is crucial to how they develop and use their career capital (Brown, Hooley & Wond, 2023; Suutari & Brewster, 2000). The accumulated career capital enhances SIEs' career mobility, allowing them to pursue diverse opportunities across organizational contexts (Brown, Hooley & Wond, 2020).

Personal agency can be defined as one's own initiation and ability to mobilize career capital necessary for career development, to navigate constraints in the workplace and to achieve career objectives (Brown et al., 2023). In this sense, professionals with high levels of personal agency are more able to shape their role transitions to fit their personal interests and career objectives. These highly agentic individuals are typically self-determined and aspiring and demonstrate autonomy and perseverance. Therefore, for highly agentic SIEs, who independently initiate their own international assignments, personal agency is crucial in creating opportunities and developing their knowing-how, knowing-why and knowing-whom career capital even without a company-backed international assignment (Brown et al., 2023; Suutari & Brewster, 2000).

Like discussed earlier in this chapter, knowing-how career capital refers to one's skills, knowledge and abilities (Dickmann et al., 2018). Knowing-how career capital is primarily developed through social situations such as involvement in new organizational and cultural contexts, and the level of development depends on the exposure to unfamiliar tasks, cross-cultural interactions and how challenging the work environment is (Jokinen, 2010). Compared to AEs, SIEs are more exposed to their local environment and have more learning opportunities due to their holistic attitude towards living abroad, broader motivational patterns and openness for local engagement (Dickmann et al., 2018). However, SIEs may develop less career capital compared to AEs when it comes to organizational knowing-how and business knowledge because AEs tend to have stronger work-related motivation and, on average, higher status and position in the workplace. The findings of Dickmann et al. (2018) show that SIEs' knowing-how increase significantly during their overseas assignment. On the other hand, the study demonstrates that while SIEs do develop their knowing-how over time, their skills develop slower compared to AEs, who benefit from organizational training and development opportunities.

According to Dickmann et al. (2018), having a strong network can have a positive effect on both knowing-how and knowing-why development. Since knowing-why explores the question of what drives expatriates in their careers, it is linked to identity and the self-concept, personal characteristics, values and interests as well as the commitment one puts into their career. As working abroad influences SIE's identity, their confidence in their abilities, sense of belonging in the workplace, as well as goals and motivational patterns may be affected. Changes in knowing-why are connected to the experience of culture shock and adjustment that expatriates undergo. Knowing-why career capital is primarily developed through the reflective journey into oneself, as SIEs assess their motivations, strengths, weaknesses and reactions to different situations (Jokinen, 2010).

Since SIEs have made their own decision of moving abroad and lack the benefit of organizational support that AEs tend to have, SIEs often go through more reflective process and face doubts when it comes to their motivations, capabilities and self-

concept in the workplace (Dickmann et al., 2018). Additionally, while culture shock affects both SIEs and AEs, AEs may experience “greater emotional adjustment gaps and due to the shorter preparation time, they may have a greater cognitive difference to the host country” (Dickmann et al., 2018, pp. 2360-2361). This is because unlike SIEs, AEs may have never seriously considered working abroad before the opportunity arose (Doherty & Dickmann, 2012; Dickmann et al., 2018). On the contrary, SIEs navigate the adjustment process independently making it more personally challenging. Nonetheless, the longitudinal study by Dickmann et al. (2018) found that while SIEs did develop knowing-why career capital over time, in the long term they had more difficulty maintaining and deepening their sense of career purpose compared to AEs, who typically have more organizational support mechanisms that help them better understand what motivates them in their career.

Knowing-whom refers to the relationships that can be beneficial to SIE’s work and career. Therefore, having large social networks can lead to greater career opportunities (Dickmann et al., 2018). Knowing-whom career capital is developed primarily through establishing professional relationships within the organization, connecting with local business partners and maintaining networks at home (Jokinen et al., 2008). For SIEs, this process of development requires active personal agency, as they need to create networks without the pre-existing organizational connections that AEs typically have to their advantage. According to Bozkurt and Mohr (2011) expatriate managers typically have more social capital compared to their non-expatriated colleagues. The gained social capital makes expatriates valuable as they act as knowledge brokers, transmitters and boundary-spanners.

However, according to Dickmann et al. (2018), SIE’s develop less useful knowing-whom compared to AEs during their international assignment. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, SIEs have lower access to valuable networks. As SIEs expatriate on their own initiative and therefore are new hires in their host country, they do not have the same level of organizational support or pre-established connections with colleagues, which

makes it more challenging for them to foster significant professional networks. Secondly, SIEs may take on positions below their skill level or status of their previous roles in their home country, limiting their access to senior roles that AEs, on the other hand, tend to have. Finally, according to Dickmann et al. (2018), SIEs simply tend to be significantly less motivated by networking considerations than AEs. All in all, SIEs face challenges in building the knowing-whom that is critical for long-term career capital development, and therefore career progression. While SIEs may build larger networks across variety of organizations, these connections may not be as strategically useful as those that AEs develop within a single organization.

2.2.3 Career impacts of long-term career capital development of self-initiated expatriates

International work experience has been shown to have significant impacts on the careers of expatriates. The career impacts of international experience can be categorized into objective and subjective forms (Suutari et al., 2018). Subjective success refers to the feelings experienced by the expatriate towards their career, whereas objective success refers to directly observable and measurable outcomes (Suutari et al., 2018; Mello et al., 2023). In essence, subjective career success is measured through job or career satisfaction and fulfilment, and objective career success can mean promotions, pay or employability.

International experience has a positive effect on both types of career success, objective and subjective, but the extent of the positive impacts varies by context. As found in a large-scale 30-country study, international work experience positively correlates with promotions and subjective financial success in various national contexts (Andresen, Lazarova, Apospori, Cotton, Bosak, Dickmann & Smale, 2022). After working overseas, expatriates are perceived as more employable, and this increased employability results in more promotions and career advancement. At senior levels, executives with international experience are more likely to be recruited externally and receive higher compensation, suggesting that international experience is valued by external labor

markets and translates into tangible career rewards at the highest organizational levels (Carpenter, Sanders & Gregersen, 2001; Daily, Certo & Dalton, 2000).

However, according to Ramaswami, Carter and Dreher (2016) international work experience does not guarantee career benefits. In fact, higher pay following expatriation has been only observed among those who have worked abroad on multiple assignments, who use their skills acquired abroad actively upon repatriation and who work in mid-level or senior positions. Moreover, according to Mäkelä, Suutari, Brewster, Dickmann and Tornikoski (2016), as expatriation increases external marketability more than internal marketability, internationally developed competencies are more recognized in the external market than by one's own employer. This explains why especially SIEs commonly encounter underemployment and lack of recognition of skills developed abroad upon return (Ellis, Thorn & Yao, 2020). Consequently, according to Suutari et al. (2018) repatriates felt less optimistic about their future career prospects compared to while on assignment. While SIEs believe their international experience will be of high value and result in opportunities to advance in their careers, in reality employers do not always recognize SIEs' international competencies (Crowley-Henry, 2007; Cerdin & Selmer, 2014; Mello et al., 2023). Even though expatriates are associated with these short-term disappointments and challenges, the long-term impacts are generally positive (Suutari et al., 2018). According to Mello et al. (2023), most studies find that expatriates have greater career success and promotions in the long-term compared to professionals that have no international experience due to the internationally developed career capital.

2.3 Summary of the theory section

This chapter has reviewed two main bodies of literature, self-initiated expatriation and career capital theory, and has established the theoretical framework for this thesis as well as provide the conceptual foundation for addressing the research questions of this thesis.

The first part of the literature review examined the phenomenon of self-initiated expatriation. SIEs were defined using Cerdin and Selmer's (2014) four conceptual criteria. SIEs are individuals who have self-initiated their international relocation, possess professional qualifications, have intentions of a temporary stay and have regular employment. Despite the clear definition, SIEs are not a uniform group. Suutari and Brewster (2000) have divided SIEs into six subgroups: young opportunists, job seekers, officials, localized professionals, international professionals and dual career couples, each of which is characterized by different motives, career orientations and expectations on future career development. Moreover, while AEs have been studied for decades, research on SIEs has remained scarce until recent years even though their significant presence in the workforce is recognized globally (Doherty, 2013; Brewster et al., 2021). While SIEs do share characteristics with AEs, SIEs tend to seek more boundaryless careers and therefore their professional identity is shaped rather by their skills and competencies than by organizational affiliation (Cerdin & Selmer, 2014; Jokinen et al., 2008).

The second part of the literature review introduced DeFillippi and Arthur's (1994) career capital theory as the theoretical framework for this thesis. Mello et al. (2023) define career capital as a "stock" of career field specific knowledge and skills, which can be divided into three "ways of knowing": knowing-how, reflecting professional skills and expertise, knowing-why, reflecting motivation and identity, and knowing-whom, reflecting networks. All three ways of knowing can be developed effectively through expatriation. Exposure to unfamiliar tasks and cultural contexts furthers development in ways that domestic experience could not (Jokinen, 2010; Dickmann & Doherty, 2010). While SIEs do develop all three ways of knowing, existing research suggests they follow different trajectories compared to those of AEs (Dickmann et al., 2018; Jokinen et al., 2008). According to existing research, SIEs develop broader knowing-how but more slowly, face more independent and personally challenging knowing-why development and build wider but less strategically useful knowing-whom networks.

When it comes to the career impacts of internationally developed career capital, they can be both objective, such as promotions and pay, and subjective, such as career satisfaction and sense of fulfilment (Suutari et al., 2018). In the short term, upon repatriation, SIEs typically face underemployment and lack of recognition towards their internationally acquired competencies as their internationally developed career capital tends to be more highly valued in the external labor market compared to their own employers (Mäkelä et al., 2016; Crowley-Henry, 2007). On the other hand, in the long term, studies have found that expatriates achieve greater career success and more objective career impacts compared to those without international experience (Mello et al., 2023). Even though the long-term career outcomes of expatriates are generally positive, there is little research on Finnish SIEs in Asia, which forms the research gap for this thesis. Based on this theoretical foundation, the following methodology chapter outlines the research design and data collection methods used to empirically examine the type of career capital Finnish SIEs develop in Asia and how they expect the acquired career capital to impact their future career development.

3 Methodology

The third chapter outlines the designed research method. In this chapter, the key research features including the research philosophy, methodological approach and strategy, data collection and data analysis are presented. Finally, the reliability and validity of the research conducted are considered.

3.1 Research philosophy

In this subchapter, different research philosophies are explained and the best suited one for this thesis is selected. In conformity with Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2023), research philosophy means “a system of beliefs and assumptions about the development of knowledge” (p. 131). The chosen research philosophy outlines the world view that guides the study. Moreover, research philosophy shapes the entire research process by influencing the forming of interview questions, choice of methods and data analysis techniques as well as how the findings are interpreted. Hence, it is important to take into account the assumptions about knowledge and nature in research to foster a credible research philosophy.

Research philosophies in business and management range between two extremes: objectivism and subjectivism (Saunders et al., 2023, pp. 135-138). Objectivism aims to discover ‘the truth’ about the social world by drawing law-like generalizations. Subjectivism, on the other hand, aims to understand how individuals’ own unique viewpoints and actions shape our diverse views of the social world. In this thesis, subjectivist research philosophy is used for its suitability when researching subjective experiences and diverse interpretations by different individuals. Additionally, subjectivism was chosen for being suitable for researching multiple perspectives in-depth.

Moreover, according to Saunders et al. (2023, p. 145), there are five major philosophies in business and management research: positivism, critical realism, interpretivism,

postmodernism and pragmatism. First of the five identified philosophies, positivism, works with observable social reality and aims to create causal relationships and law-like generalizations, which often involves collecting and analyzing quantitative data through strictly scientific, empirical methods. Positivism aims to produce knowledge focusing on observable and measurable facts uninfluenced by researcher's interpretation or bias. Secondly, critical realism that developed as a critique of positivism aims to explain our observations and experiences by exploring "the underlying structures of reality that shape the observable events" (pp. 148-149). Research that uses critical realism as a research method may utilize either quantitative or qualitative methodologies. Thirdly, interpretivism, which like critical realism, also emerged as a critique of positivism, aims to create new, developed understandings and interpretations of social environments and contexts (pp. 150-151). Interpretivists believe that "different people of different cultural backgrounds, under different circumstances and at different times make different meanings" (p. 150) and therefore do not believe in law-like generalizations. For business and management researchers doing interpretivist research this means using qualitative methods to study the different perspectives of people.

The next philosophy, postmodernism, aims to challenge established knowledge and to give voice to alternative, suppressed perspectives (Saunders et al., 2023, p. 152). In postmodernist research, a range of data types are used, and qualitative methods of analysis are typical. Lastly, the fifth philosophy, pragmatism, places a higher priority on practical outcomes and adapts different methods to fit the needs of the research regardless of philosophical distinctions (pp. 153-154). Pragmatic research uses mixed methods and is value-driven sustained by researcher's doubts and beliefs.

The selected research philosophy for this thesis is interpretivist. As previously stated, rather than seeking law-like generalizations, interpretive research aims to execute in-depth exploration of social phenomena and to understand different perspectives of different people of different cultures (Saunders et al., 2023, pp. 150-151). Therefore, interpretivist research philosophy was best suited for this research, as the study focuses

on the different, personal perspectives of the interviewees in the context of self-initiated expatriation, career capital and future career development. Typically to interpretivist research philosophy, the empirical research is carried out by using qualitative methods that emphasize in-depth exploration.

3.2 Research approach, method and strategy

After selecting the most suitable research philosophy for the research, introducing the research approach, method and strategy is essential. According to Saunders et al. (2023, pp. 154-161), there are three methodological approaches to choose from and they differ in terms of the extent to which answering set research questions involve theory testing. The three methodological approaches are deduction, induction and abduction. For deductive research, an established theory serves as the foundation of the research, which is then tested through a research strategy. Conversely, inductive research starts by data collection to examine a phenomenon, and then theory is developed based on observations. Finally, in abductive research, data is collected in order to observe a phenomenon, after which themes are identified and used to create a new or modify an existing theory based on observations. The theory is then tested by collecting additional data.

In this thesis, the abductive methodological approach is followed. Abduction was chosen for the flexibility of the approach, as it allows for moving between data and theory, making comparisons and interpretations (Saunders et al., 2023, pp. 154-161). Additionally, abduction is a useful approach when explanation of empirical observations is required. Moreover, this methodological approach is suitable for qualitative research contexts where rich, detailed data is available, like in a semi-structured interview, and the research deals with a phenomenon the research commits to explain throughout the research process.

After choosing the methodological approach, the three different research designs are explained, and the methodological choice is made. The three methodologies are

quantitative, qualitative and mixed (Saunders et al., 2023, pp. 181-191). Quantitative research is used to examine relationships between variables, and the data collection is structured in a standard manner, measured in numbers, and analyzed through statistics and diagrams. Qualitative research, on the other hand, is used to study the relationships between participants' meanings, and the data is collected in an unstructured or semi-structured manner using different techniques and analytical procedures, such as spoken words, videos, audio recordings, and other similar material. Mixed method uses an equal or unequal combination of both methodological approaches in the same research project. All three methodological choices can result in valuable insights, but the choice of the method depends on the research question and what type of data is needed to answer it.

For this thesis, qualitative method was seen as most suitable method. Conducting a semi-structured interview can generate rich, in-depth data through which the research questions "*What type of career capital do self-initiated expatriates develop during their international assignment?*" and "*How do they expect the acquired career capital to impact their future career development?*" can be answered. What is more, qualitative research facilitates the exploration of different perspectives and refining existing theoretical frameworks (Saunders et al., 2023, p. 185). Additionally, because of the nature of the research, it is an exploratory study (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 187). In exploratory studies, research questions often start with 'What' and 'How' like in this thesis. Exploratory research is suitable for conducting in-depth individual interviews to understand a phenomenon and it is adaptable to change when the data produces new results and insights.

When it comes to research strategy, the choice is also guided by the research questions as well as research objectives, approach and purpose and more pragmatic concerns such as time and resources available (Saunders et al., 2019, pp. 189-190). A research strategy aligns the philosophical ideas with the practical approach of gathering and analyzing data in order to coherently answer the research questions and meet research objectives. The

different research strategies discussed by Saunders et al. (2019, p. 180) are experiment, survey, archival and documentary research, case study, ethnography, action research, grounded theory and narrative inquiry. When the first two research strategies are exclusively linked to quantitative research design, the last four are exclusively linked to qualitative research design. The remaining two, archival and documentary research and case study, may utilize either research design or a combination of both.

Since this thesis follows a qualitative research design the choice of research strategy was between archival and documentary research, case study, ethnography, action research, grounded theory and narrative inquiry. For this thesis, case study is the most suitable choice of strategy. According to Saunders et al. (2019, pp. 196-199), a case study offers for an in-depth analysis on specific topic or phenomenon within its real-life setting. The 'case' in case study research may be a range of things, including a group of people, an organization, or an event. Defining the case and setting the boundaries for the research are key factors in establishing case study. As this thesis studies SIEs and their career capital development as well as their expectations for future career development by interviewing Finnish SIEs in Asia, the case is Finnish SIEs working in Asian countries. The goal of case study research is to understand the dynamics of the topic being studied within its setting or context and to generate rich empirical descriptions and developing existing theories (Saunders et al., 2019, pp. 196-199).

In this thesis the career capital and expectations on future career development of Finnish SIEs are analyzed holistically looking at the overall experience of Finnish SIEs across Asian countries as a single, integrated case (Saunders et al., 2019, pp. 198-199). By analyzing the case holistically, this thesis can offer a cohesive view of the Finnish SIEs' experience across the region by highlighting the common career capital factors of Finnish SIEs. Additionally, holistic analysis offers a unified approach focusing on the broader context rather than detailed country-specific differences.

The time horizon of this research is cross-sectional. Cross-sectional time horizon fits time and resource constrained research and was therefore most suitable for this research (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 212). Even though a longitudinal study would produce additional data on the phenomena, the time constraints for finishing the master's thesis hinder the conduct of such research.

To conclude, thus far, this main chapter has outlined the research philosophy, approach, method and strategy adopted in this thesis. The subjectivist and interpretivist philosophical stances form the base for the research reflecting the personal perspectives of the interviewees in the context of self-initiated expatriation, career capital and future career development. The abductive research approach allows for moving between detailed empirical data and theory, ensuring comparisons and interpretations of the phenomenon. Qualitative method combined with semi-structured interview for data collection and case study as a research strategy, provide for gaining in-depth and rich data. All in all, the chosen approach facilitates the exploration of the complex perspectives of the interviewed Finnish SIEs in Asia and refining existing theoretical frameworks.

3.3 Data collection

As previously noted, the data collection technique that best aligns with the objectives of this research is interviews. For case studies, interviews have typically been used as the primary data, as it produces unique and in-depth data (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015, p. 138). Therefore, personal interviews focusing on the SIEs' experiences on career capital development and expectations on future career development fit the research design and the research questions of the thesis.

There are three types of qualitative interview study: positivist, constructionist and emotionalist (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015, p. 92). Positivist research views 'social facts' as independent of the activities of both participants and researchers, and it aims to produce data that is both valid and reliable while being independent of the research

setting (Silverman, 2021, p. 604). Constructivist research, on the other hand, is a model that looks closely at interactions in different contexts and thus encourages researchers to pay attention to how phenomena come to be what they are (Silverman, 2021, p. 600). Emotionalist studies primarily aim to produce data that gives an authentic picture of participants' experiences (Silverman, 2021, p. 600). This thesis adopts the constructivist approach. Constructivist research is the type of qualitative interview study best suited to this thesis as it seeks to understand how SIEs interpret and make sense of their career capital development during expatriation. This approach makes it possible to explore how participants interpret their experiences working abroad in different organizational and cultural contexts.

The interviews for this thesis were semi-structured with open-ended questions. According to Saunders et al. (2019, p. 444) if the purpose of the research is to undertake an exploratory study, establishing personal contact is important, and the questions are open-ended, collecting data using a semi-structured research interview is preferred. When conducting a semi-structured interview, the interviewer begins the interview with certain preplanned themes and questions in the interview guide but is prepared to change the order of questions and ask follow-up questions that may arise depending on the research situation to gain deeper understanding (Saunders et al., 2019, pp. 455-464). Majority of the interview questions were open questions, since this type of questions allow participants to define and describe situations and events from their perspective (Saunders et al., 2019, pp. 458-459). The design of open-ended questions encourages the interviewees to reply as they wish and to give detailed answers, which produces rich data that enables participants to communicate their interpretations of their experiences. The semi-structured interview guide with the main questions is presented in Appendix 1. The questions presented were sent to the interviewees prior to the interviews in order to give them time to familiarize themselves with the interview themes.

3.3.1 Sample

The interviewees for this study were selected using purposive sampling, as it allowed for selecting cases that were informative as well as met the research objectives (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 321). The selection criteria for the participants were to be Finnish, to have self-initiated their expatriation to Asia without organizational support, to currently or previously have worked in a professional role in Asia and to have at least initially planned for a temporary stay in Asia. These criteria were used to ensure the participants met Cerdin and Selmer's (2014) four conceptual criteria of a SIE. The interviewees were found through personal networks and by initial contacts suggesting further potential participants. Six interviewees were considered sufficient for this thesis, as the aim of this qualitative case study is not to form statistical generalizations but generate rich, in-depth insight into the career capital development of Finnish SIEs in Asia. The final sample consists of five Finnish male SIEs and one Finnish female SIE. All interviewees are anonymized and referred to as SIE1 through SIE6 in the thesis. The key characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 3 below:

	Gender	Age	Host country / countries (from oldest to most recent)	Job title, industry	Years of working abroad in Asia	SIE subgroup
SIE1	Male	46	Singapore, Hong Kong SAR	Managing Director, IT consulting	22	Young opportunist → Localized professional
SIE2	Male	53	South Korea, Hong Kong SAR, China	Managing Director, logistics	13	International professional
SIE3	Male	44	China, South Korea	Global Supply Chain Manager, semiconductor materials	16	Young opportunist → Localized professional
SIE4	Male	42	China, repatriated recently	General Manager, machinery and industrial equipment	15	Young opportunist → Localized professional
SIE5	Male	55	China, South Korea	Co-founder, technology consulting	20	International professional
SIE6	Female	51	Hong Kong SAR	Lecturer and entrepreneur, education	9	Trailing spouse

Table 3 Key characteristics of the sample.

To note, the participants have experienced and are at different stages of the SIE trajectory. While all six participants initiated their own expatriation and met Cerdin and Selmer's (2014) four conceptual criteria of a SIE, five have transitioned toward localized professionals and international professionals as defined by Suutari and Brewster (2000). Two of the participants, SIE2 and SIE5, had been sent to Asia as an AE prior to their self-initiated expatriation later on, and SIE4 had repatriated to Finland just a month before the interview. These different trajectories provided unique perspectives and these variations within the SIE phenomenon are natural and add analytical depth to the sample rather than disqualify participants from the study. SIE6 is a trailing spouse and relocated to Asia and sought employment there on her own initiative without organizational support, meeting the criteria of a SIE. The subgroup of trailing spouses is one of the six subgroups identified by Suutari and Brewster (2000) and represents one important, yet often overlooked, perspective within the SIE research.

3.3.2 Implementation of the interviews

All the interviews were conducted as one-to-one interviews over Microsoft Teams since the interviewees live around Asia. The Teams interviews took place during April 2026. The length of the interviews varied from 1 hour and 7 minutes to over 2 hours, making them in-depth interviews. The length allowed the participants to share their experiences in detail producing rich and nuanced data. As the interviewees had been given a brief introduction to the topic and an explanation of the research objectives and key terms over email a few days before the interviews, there was only a short briefing at the beginning of the interview. All the interviews were conducted in English following the interview guide presented in Appendix 1., according to which the interviews focused on two main sections allocating the most time for Part 4 Career capital development and Part 5. Expectations and impact on future career. However, like earlier noted, the length of the interviews varied greatly from the initiated length of the interviews, as some interviewees had the availability to accommodate longer interviews and preferred to answer in more detail.

3.4 Data analysis

All the interviews were recorded and transcribed for the analysis using Microsoft Teams' recording and transcription tools with the consent of the interviewees. The Teams-created transcriptions were reviewed for any inaccuracies before the analysis began. Then, the collected data was analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was chosen as the analytical method for this study for its suitability for identifying patterns across the six interview transcripts as well as for its flexibility to accommodate the interpretivist research philosophy (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 651). The analysis was organized similarly to the theoretical frameworks of the three ways of knowing and SIEs' expectations on future career development established in the literature review. At the same time, the analysis remained open to unexpected findings to emerge from the data. In practice, after each interview, the transcription was read several times to become familiar with the data. Then, the interview transcripts were coded by printing them out

and highlighting significant answers by hand and grouping them into themes to reflect on the research questions and the theoretical framework of this study. The analysis was also partly concurrent with data collection as the researcher identified emerging themes already during the interviews in real time and asked additional questions to gain deeper understanding of significant answers. All in all, this approach allowed the analysis to develop progressively throughout the six interviews instead of beginning only after all the data was collected.

3.5 Ethical considerations and trustworthiness of the study

Ethics are a crucial part of any social research, including business research (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015, pp. 64-78). Informed consent, avoiding deception, harm or risk and other ethical principles correspond with how the researcher's relationship to the research topic is viewed. Regardless of the researcher's own approach to knowledge production, all research activities are guided by ethical principles as research ethics covers the ways in which research is carried out and reported.

People are not required to participate in a study, as participation should always be voluntary (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015, pp. 64-78). Therefore, informed consent of the research participants, participant's right to withdraw from the research process, confidentiality and respecting the professional integrity are all important ethical considerations. For this thesis, all interviewees were informed about the voluntary nature of the study upon first contact. Additionally, the purpose of research, right to withdraw and anonymity of the research were explained. Only the necessary personal information was collected and stored in such a way that it cannot be accessed unauthorized. All participants appear in the thesis in such a way that they cannot be identified.

Evaluating the quality of research in natural sciences quantitative research in social sciences relies heavily on reliability and validity (Saunders et al., 2019, pp. 213-218). While reliability refers to replication and consistency, validity encompasses the suitability

of used measures, accuracy of the analysis of the results and generalizability of the findings. However, while reliability and validity are suitable for assessing quantitative research, they are inappropriate for qualitative research as it is based on interpretive assumptions, where reality is viewed as being socially constructed, multifaceted and complex. For that reason, the quality of this study is evaluated by four aspects: credibility, dependability, transferability and conformability (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015, p. 308).

Credibility emphasizes ensuring that the participants' socially constructed realities are represented in the research in a way that corresponds to what the participants intended and meant (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 217). Credibility can be achieved for example by building trust throughout the research by being involved and connecting with participants. Therefore, during the interview process for this thesis as well, the researcher checked the data, analyses and interpretations with the participants by sending the interviewees the transcriptions to confirm accuracy.

Dependability means recording the research process and its changes to modify the research as it progresses in order to provide reliable and dependable account of the emerging research focus that is understandable and may be evaluated by others (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 217). Hence, the research process has been described in detail in this chapter to indicate its logicality and traceability.

In essence, transferability refers to the extent to which the study and its findings are applicable to other settings in which the reader is interested to conduct research (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 217). Transferability is ensured by providing a profound description of the research questions, design, context, findings and interpretations. These aspects have been provided in this thesis allowing the reader to form judgements of the transferability of the research.

Finally, conformability adds trustworthiness to qualitative research by creating links between the findings and interpretations and the data in a way that is easily

understandable to others (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015, p. 308). To ensure that the interpretations are derived directly from the data collected and it is interpreted similarly by the reader, direct quotes from the interviewees support the findings.

4 Results and findings

This chapter presents the findings of the semi-structured interviews of Finnish SIEs in Asia. The findings are organized according to the research objectives of this thesis: the development of knowing-how, knowing-why and knowing-whom career capital of Finnish SIEs in Asia, and the expectations on how the acquired career capital impacts future career development. The key themes emerging from the interviews are presented and further illustrated with interviewees' direct quotes.

4.1 Developed knowing-how career capital

The interviews revealed that the participants developed knowing-how extensively during their time in Asia. Key areas of knowing-how development that came up several times throughout all six interviews were cross-cultural communication skills, cultural intelligence and sensitivity, time management and availability, and business and operational knowledge specific to the Asian context.

4.1.1 Cross-cultural communication skills

Cross-cultural communication skills refer to the ability to adapt one's language, expression and communication style to work effectively across different cultural and linguistic contexts. Unsurprisingly, cross-cultural communication turned out to be one of the most significant areas of knowing-how development for all participants. Working in different parts of Asia's highly multicultural professional environment exposed the participants to a wide variety of English accents, communication styles and business vocabularies. Through immersion in multicultural environments, they developed a level of communicative versatility that many of the interviewees felt surpasses the level one could gain in an only English-speaking environment. SIE1 described learning to understand and adapt to the English of other non-native speakers and local varieties such as "Singlish", a mix of English, Chinese and Malay spoken in Singapore, during his first international assignment in Singapore. He reflected:

“I have no difficulty understanding a Scottish person, understanding an Irish person, understanding an Indian, understanding Singlish.”

Furthermore, SIE1 noted that skill to adapt to different languages and accents is something that even native English speakers often struggle with, suggesting that non-native speakers, such as Finns, who develop their English professionally in Asia may in fact gain a broader and more flexible command of the language compared to those who develop it in a single-culture environment.

Beyond language, the interviewees had developed deep cross-cultural communication skills by learning to navigate culturally different situations. SIE3 described having felt completely illiterate at the start of his self-initiated expatriation in China, not only because he could not understand Chinese, but because he did not understand the fundamentally different cultural logic of China. He articulated his feelings about having learnt that there is no universal concept but culturally specific one of common sense:

“I am now absolutely sure that there is no such thing as common sense. I learnt that common sense is tied to the group or the culture we’re in.”

SIE3’s insight actually captured something that many participants described experiencing during their early stages of self-initiated expatriation in Asia: what once felt correct to them in a Finnish context, was no longer shared or even understood by their Asian colleagues. For SIE3, this development of cross-cultural competence was the most transformative aspect of his self-initiated expatriation in Asia, and he described it as having fundamentally changed his professional mindset. SIE5 reflected on similar experiences and described working in Asia as constantly putting yourself outside your comfort zone when it comes to people, culture and ways of working. He said that this continuous exposure is precisely what shapes SIEs in Asia as professionals:

“You are all the time putting yourself out of the comfortable zone when it comes to the people and the culture and the ways of working... That's kind of shaping what we become as a professional.”

4.1.2 Cultural intelligence and sensitivity

While cross-cultural communication competence refers to the ability to adapt one's own expression and communication style, cultural intelligence concerns the deeper ability to read and understand the unspoken rules of different cultural contexts. The results of the interviews also indicated the participants having developed significant cultural intelligence during their time in Asia through exposure to situations where Finnish cultural assumptions failed. The interviewees brought up Asian culturally specific norms and expectations for behavior, that are notably different from those in Finland. A recurring theme was the importance of learning how to read between the lines and understanding the importance of paying attention to what is not said as much as what is said.

SIE1 and SIE2 described having learnt that direct refusal is virtually absent in Japanese business culture, and how their Asian colleagues would rarely ask clarifying questions to avoid losing face:

"Japanese never say no. That's almost not part of the vocabulary, although there is a word... That's "ie", that means "no", but you're not supposed to say [that]."

"She doesn't have the answer, but she's not able to say that. She cannot because then she loses the famous face."

SIE3 described having developed what he called the ability to read the temperature of the room. He described having become more sensitive to Asian unspoken tensions because of being thrown into unfamiliar multicultural situations his career in Asia. He expressed that:

"I've been thrown into so many situations where I don't know anything about it, and I just have had to learn to be comfortable with it and listen and see what's going on and then move forwards from there."

SIE6 offered a concrete example of cultural intelligence from her experience of working as a university lecturer in Hong Kong: She noted the significant power distance between

teachers and students in Asian schools and universities, which is fundamentally different from the more conversational Finnish classroom culture. SIE6 described having needed around half a semester to break down the authority gap enough for the Asian students to feel comfortable enough to participate in discussions. Her experience shows how cultural intelligence in Asia goes beyond the business context and requires adaptation to differences in authority, hierarchy and participation that affect all professional settings in the region.

Many of the interviewees described the ability to adapt depending on the cultural context as one of the most valuable and transferable skills developed during their time in Asia. SIE1 summarized his feelings about developed cultural intelligence best:

“The biggest, most important thing is to understand the cultural differences, being able to switch your mindset depending with whom you are working and collaborating with.”

4.1.3 Time management and availability

Another specific competency identified that two interviewees specifically mentioned having gained was learning how to adapt to the pace and intensity of Asian working culture. Time management and availability as a theme therefore refers to the adaptation of one’s relationship with work time, pace and responsiveness to the intensity of Asian professional culture. SIE1 and SIE2 described having developed a new relationship with time and availability compared to the Finnish working culture. SIE1 recalled how he had to learn to adapt as he was working from 8am until 11pm during his first months in his junior role in Singapore and how tasks were expected to be completed the same day regardless of the hour. SIE2 summarized the intense Asian working culture they all had had to adapt to:

“In Asia, basically anywhere, they are 24/7. Life is work, work is life in many, many places in Asia.”

While this finding emerged mostly among the participants working in business and IT consulting, interviewees in other professional contexts described similar pressures of continuous availability, long workdays and self-directed workload management in Asia. For example, SIE6 described the entrepreneurial nature of her work in Hong Kong to require a level of availability and flexibility that would not be expected of her if she worked as a teacher in Finland.

4.1.4 Business and operational knowledge

Business and operational knowledge refers to the technical and contextual expertise that the participants developed through working directly in Asian markets. While all six of the participants felt that job-specific technical skills could be developed domestically, or in any professional context, the findings suggest that working in Asia specifically develops skills that would be difficult to gain elsewhere. SIE2 shared that the basics of operational and technical skills are mainly the same everywhere:

“If you talk about general skill set like sales, operational, technical things, they are basically the same. The basic logics are always the same. So those are the things that happen anywhere.”

However, it is the Asia-specific technical knowing-how that makes the difference in applying the skills successfully in Asia. A recurring theme was that the interviewees had seen how Western approaches, systems and business models could not be transferred to Asian contexts unchanged. SIE3 confirmed this from a technology-perspective, as in his experience China operates largely with domestic technology systems, which required him to become familiar with local technologies. As SIE1 and SIE3 reflected:

“They open shop in Asia. They say it's the same as in US. This is the template what you do... And they fail every single time.”

“Especially in China, they tend to have domestic solutions. There are some clear restrictions that Western technology, especially American technology, is not used in certain things. You have to be comfortable with some non-Western technologies as well.”

Beyond these broad competencies and understanding, the interviewees had developed also practical Asia-specific skills through their self-initiated expatriation in Asia. Participants described having learnt about local tax systems, hands on expertise in company incorporation processes and what SIE3 called “world class processes”. The findings suggest that the extent of the interviewees’ developed knowing-how is, to some extent, a result of the self-initiated expatriation itself. With the lack of structured roles AEs tend to have, the participants recalled having to take on a variety of tasks and responsibilities in the beginning of their careers in Asia, which forced rapid learning. SIE1 told that his first role in Singapore had required him to do far more than what was in the job description. SIE1 and SIE4 described vividly their accelerated and broad duties in the beginning of their careers in Asia:

“You do trainings, you do configuration, you do development, you do this, you do that, whatever is required. And that taught me quite a bit of IT actually as a whole. Sometimes we had to set up servers which is completely unrelated to my job, but it gave me an idea and specific knowledge of pretty much everything and anything that a corporate requires. It was hard work at that time, but it was a good, very quick crash course training also on how things work.”

“Because when I was in GM roles, when you are alone there, you have to fix everything. So, you have to learn legal, finance, metallurgy, technology, sales, everything. So, you're kind of alone there and either you make it or you leave.”

A finding that emerged from the interviews with SIE4 and SIE5, who had both looked for employment in Finland during their time in Asia, was that Asia’s professional environment is considerably more flexible than Finland’s when it comes to career mobility and role changes. Both SIEs felt that according to their experiences, Asian organizations are more willing to give professional opportunities in roles outside of their educational background or previous work experience, which they could not achieve in Finland. As SIE5 reflected:

“I am much more a generalist than if I would have stayed in Finland. The culture there is pushing you to be something very specific, but here you can just change to

another position, another challenge. In Asia, the working culture is more flexible to give you an opportunity to move to a new position which is not exactly according to your education or previous experience. Finland especially is quite rigid... You did not study this, you did not do this before, so we are not going to hire you."

Additionally, SIE6, as a trailing spouse who arrived in Hong Kong without organizational support, described having to develop an entirely new skillset. She had learnt entrepreneurial and self-promotional skills from scratch to turn her experience as a Finnish teacher into lecturer and entrepreneur opportunities in Asia. She felt that this knowing-how development was something she would have never come across had she not self-initiated her expatriation to Asia.

4.2 Developed knowing-why career capital

The interviews revealed that the participants had developed significant knowing-why career capital during their time in Asia. However, the nature of this development was more reflective and personal compared to knowing-how. Three key forms of developed knowing-why came up during the interviews, and they were strengthened professional identity and self-awareness, shifts in values and motivation and, unexpectedly, the discovery of the value of Finnish identity as a professional asset in Asia.

4.2.1 Strengthened professional identity and self-awareness

A theme that came up in multiple interviews was the notable effect of long-term self-initiated expatriation in Asia on the participants' sense of their professional identity and self-awareness. Strengthened professional identity and self-awareness therefore refer to the deepened understanding of one's own strengths, weaknesses and ways of working that the participants described developing through exposure to Asia's professional environment. The interviewees described becoming more self-aware and having a stronger sense of their strengths and weaknesses. SIE1 reflected on his tendency to be unable to say no to tasks as a weakness, but recognized his confidence in broad understanding of versatile business functions in Asia as a strength:

"I wouldn't say I'm best in any area of business. I don't think in any of them I'm the best of the best, but I'm also quite good in all of them. And that gives me the ability to assist my team."

Possibly the most interesting description of strengthened professional identity came from SIE3, who described having transformed from a "know-it-all" young professional into someone who deals with uncertainty comfortably after being constantly thrown into unfamiliar situations. He said:

"Working in China changed that. I am very comfortable these days saying that I don't know. Whereas maybe the young me was different, but nowadays probably one of the most common things I say at work is that I don't know, we have to find out."

SIE3 felt that the time in Asia had made him a better person overall. SIE2 felt similarly and described himself as someone with a "confused" professional mindset in a positive sense. Having built his mindset from bits and pieces of different cultures and experiences and willingness to take risks and face uncertainty, he no longer felt scared by the possibility of failure. He reflected on this as the most important form of career capital he has developed:

"I can go anywhere in the world and be okay."

"I'm not afraid to jump. Just not being afraid to go into situations that you have not been... I think that's one of the things that will impact my future."

SIE6's experience was contrasting. She described the development of her professional identity as a trailing spouse honestly, constantly facing rejection and having promote herself, resulting in strengthened self-awareness. Unlike the other participants who described growing confidence, SIE6 identified the limits of her resilience as her key self-discovery:

"Often, when the answer is no, you kind of realize that you have to be continuously moderating yourself. And that's something that I've learned that is not my strength definitely. When something doesn't work out or the answer is not what I wanted, then going out there again is very... it's always more and more difficult. Some people might get more of a fighting spirit, but I personally don't like it. So that's definitely something I've learned that is not my strength. But then kind of the flexibility has been... I'm positively surprised, whether it's not always something I want, but it's a must-do situation."

At the same time, SIE6 described being positively surprised by how flexible she had become through the constant reinventing of herself, and she saw this development as a strength she was not aware of possessing before moving to Hong Kong. She also reflected on the broadening of her professional identity and now seeing herself as an expert in education rather than a classroom teacher.

4.2.2 Evolved motivation and values

Moreover, most of the participants described shifts in their motivations and values over the course of their self-initiated expatriation in Asia. Therefore, evolved motivation and values refer to the shifts in the participants' priorities over the time they have spent in Asia. Interestingly, core personal values had remained mostly the same despite the life changes some of the interviewees had gone through. Some of the interviewees had found their spouses and started families during their time in Asia, yet changes in family values were not brought up by any of the interviewees independently and the topic was mostly disregarded after prompting, suggesting that these changes had not significantly shaped the professional values or motivations of most of the interviewees with families. Still, interviewees felt they had experienced valuable changes in what they look for and prioritize professionally and personally.

SIE1 reflected on first seeking employment in Asia as a young man driven by curiosity and love for travel. Over the years in Asia these motivations have changed, as he described being now more motivated by family stability and the goal of financial independence. He reflected on travel as a simply functional part of work:

“As of today, I don’t enjoy traveling that much. It’s not as glamorous anymore.”

SIE4’s motivational arc was the clearest of all interviewees. He described having gone through three distinct stages: from adventure and excitement in the early years of his career in Asia, to career ambition and rising to more senior roles, to finally progressing in his career becoming meaningless and focus shifting to financial security and quality of life:

“Beginning was just adventure, the first couple of years, everything was new, kind of a honeymoon time. Then after a few years, it became more career motivation. Maybe someday I would get a GM role or a bigger role, a bigger company. Once you get that, it was more a bit bigger company, a bit bigger role. But in the last eight years, career motivation was pretty much zero. It was just more making money, enjoying life.”

SIE2 told that he has gained more respect for others and saw that as the most significant change in values he could identify. He felt that the different perspectives and ways of thinking of his colleagues had broadened his worldview. Similarly, SIE3 felt that his time in Asia had made him more tolerant towards different values and ways of thinking. He reflected:

“There is not one right way to do things. You have to be comfortable with someone else’s value system conflicting with yours.”

4.2.3 Discovering the value of Finnish identity

The most unexpected, yet repeating, theme that came up when talking about professional identity was the role of Finnish national identity as a form of knowing-why career capital. Unlike the other forms of developed knowing-why, Finnish national identity worked as a pre-existing form of career capital that activated as an asset in the multicultural environment of Asia. All six interviewees described how being from Finland immediately generated trust and credibility in Asia. As SIE1 and SIE3 put it:

“From the very start when I came here, people have always respected my ideas, what I say, and they have trusted on what I say.”

“Asians tell me things that they don't tell Americans, and Americans tell me things that they don't tell the Asians. Both sides trust me with things they wouldn't trust each other.”

SIE5's experiences added to this finding. He had noticed that typical Finnish personality traits of observing before acting are admirable traits in many Asian professional cultures:

“We Finnish people are usually a little bit introvert, a little bit shy. When going to a new place, instead of bringing themselves out, they observe how the things are going, what people are doing and then thinking about how you should behave in this society. And that helps really a lot with the Japanese, Taiwanese and Koreans. They have a feeling that the Finns are a little bit same with us. Most Asians think that Finnish people are very honest, and they are not trying to take advantage of you.”

SIE6 confirmed the finding from a different perspective. Working as an entrepreneur in education, she felt that being Finnish had put her in “high demand” in Hong Kong due to the global reputation of Finland's education system. She described sometimes feeling like an impostor because of how highly she was valued for her Finnish background:

“I am very highly valued because I am from Finland. Even sometimes more than I personally believe in myself. So sometimes is that the imposter syndrome or something. I have been in kind of high demand in a way, which is something again new that I did not... That has happened only here.”

Four of the interviewees felt that they realized the value of being from Finland over the time they spent in Asia, as the advantage is not simply being Finnish, but Finnish reputation in Asia being strongly rooted in neutrality and trustworthiness. According to SIE1's experience, being Finnish carried a reputation that opened doors and established trust even before a word had been spoken. But, as this finding goes beyond what existing literature has researched, it will be discussed in detail in chapter 5.

4.3 Developed knowing-whom career capital

When it comes to knowing-whom career capital, the interviews revealed that this was the most challenging dimension of career capital for the Finnish SIEs in Asia to expand. While all participants had developed broad professional and social networks during the time in Asia, the processes of building those relationships were rather difficult. The lack of organizational support, temporary nature of expatriate friendships and connecting with people across cultural and linguistic boundaries came up in several interviews.

4.3.1 Professional networks

Professional networks refer to the work-related relationships and contacts the participants built during their time in Asia. A key finding across the interviews regarding knowing-whom development of the participants was that their professional networks were built primarily through direct colleagues rather than through networking activities. Without the pre-existing networks available to AEs, the participants had to build networks organically through day-to-day professional contacts. For example, SIE1 described himself as a “typical Finn” who dislikes formal networking. However, his 22 years in Asia have resulted in a large professional network including approximately 600 customers across the region. Similarly, SIE3 mentioned his colleagues and team as his most valuable form of knowing-whom, as in his experience colleagues had helped him find further opportunities in Asia and connected him with employers from other companies. As he reflected on the value of networks:

“The network kind of acts as an insurance policy... It helps to find other opportunities.”

Maybe the most interesting finding regarding knowing-whom came from SIE2, who had started as an AE in South Korea for a large MNC, and after repatriation to Finland, self-initiated his expatriation first to Hong Kong and then to China as self-employed. He compared his experiences in networking as a SIE to how it was as an AE:

“When I handed my business card, even that logo opened up doors. And as a self-initiated expatriate, trying to find my way over here, it was way more complicated because nobody basically knows me. I actually had to sell the company before the doors open.”

Surprisingly, SIE5 was the only participant that explicitly stated that professional networks were his most important form of career capital in his current role. Having built his own company providing project management and manufacturing services to Nordic companies operating in Asia, he described his entire business depending on the networks he had developed during his time in Asia. He described his network as strong and durable and, for example, his previous work communities had continued giving him business opportunities long after leaving said companies:

“The [redacted] community is actually quite strong. Even if you had a vague memory about them, you can still contact them and say, is there anything I can help? And sometimes it turns out to be real business later on. Network is your safety net here. If you don't have a network, you cannot really make any business here.”

SIE4 saw formal networking as overestimated in today's professional world and in his experience new opportunities came through customers and suppliers rather than through deliberate networking activities. He reflected:

“In the beginning, I tried to go to business chamber meetings, Finnish or others, young professionals. But then later it became more like passive networking. You just know people and then they introduce you to somebody by playing golf or drinking together or whatever. I never got a job due to those networks. That's surprisingly rare in my opinion. In nowadays world, it's quite risky to bring somebody to a company because you are friends... Networking is overestimated in nowadays world.”

Additionally, SIE4 recalled getting into established networks being especially difficult in the beginning of his career in Asia as a less experienced SIE. In his experience, for example Finnish chambers were dominated by long-term residents who were reluctant to welcome newcomers. The challenge eased up over time as he became more rooted in Asia. He reflected:

“When you are young or inexperienced, if you join a Finnish event, it's hard to get to the inner circle, the old guys. Over time when you become one of the group, it comes naturally. But it takes time. If somebody comes too obviously pushing, it feels just not natural.”

SIE6 had built her professional networks differently as a trailing spouse. Her first professional connections in Hong Kong came through the Finnish consulate, which connected her with a local university for a role as a lecturer. Rather than building her networks through colleagues, other teachers or lecturers, her networks expanded through entrepreneurs primarily in the education sector. She felt that her professional network in Hong Kong is drastically more diverse than it would have been as a classroom teacher in Finland:

“In Finland it would have been quite a lot related to your own school and within that maybe the publishers or some activity providers, but here definitely from very different sectors the networks are building up.”

Rather surprisingly, five of the participants described having no or very limited professional networks left in Finland. They felt that keeping in touch online regularly was difficult and no longer beneficial for their primarily international careers and gradually disengaged from networks at home. SIE4 had the most notable description of his shrunken professional Finnish network: he described having gone from hundreds of people in his network to a network of five core contacts in Finland.

4.3.2 Personal networks

Personal networks refer to the social relationships outside of work that participants built during their self-initiated expatriation in Asia. All interviewees described the social aspect of knowing-whom as complex even beyond the professional networks. SIE2 explained his experiences of trying to make lasting connections in the expatriate communities in Asia, but feeling disappointed, as people constantly move on to their

next destination after a few years. He reflected on the cycle of making friendships that ended eventually:

"I've been in so many farewell parties that I can't even remember. Because you meet people, they come and they go, they come and they go. And then there's only a very, very limited amount of people who actually stay like me."

SIE2 further summarized his thoughts on networking in Asia as a SIE:

"Meeting people easy, making friends hard."

SIE6 had experienced a slightly different social dynamic as a trailing spouse. She told that her social networks had been partly shaped by her husband's networks and partly by her own networks in education. Therefore, she described her personal networks in Hong Kong as diverse and enriching, but also somewhat fragmented and occasionally isolating.

4.4 Career impacts and future career expectations

This section addresses both subjective and objective career impacts. The most notable dimensions of subjective and objective career impacts that emerged in the interviews were career satisfaction, career progression and employability, and therefore the findings focus primarily on those dimensions. Additionally, this section covers the goals and expectations the interviewees had for their future careers.

Across the interviews, participants felt like their current career positions were directly attributed by their time in Asia. For the long-term nature of their self-initiated expatriation, the question of how they expect their acquired career capital to impact their future careers was difficult to answer purely looking forward, as some felt that the expected impacts had already become reality. SIE3 reflected on his career in Asia so far as follows:

“This where I am now would have never been possible if I had not been here. None of this would be possible at all if I had not been here.”

This was a consistent theme across the interviews. The participants felt that being in Asia and the career capital they had developed there had affected their careers in ways that having worked in Finland could not, especially when it came to reaching positions that would have been harder to achieve within the Finnish career system. SIE4 reflected:

“I kind of went from blue collar in Finland to GM in China in five years, just by being in the right country at the time. In Finland, if I would have gone that path, I would probably be a site supervisor or manager in a construction company. Now because of my time there, I'm looking at upper management. My career was way elevated by China.”

Compared to other themes across the interviews, the participants' plans for the future had the most varied answers. This could be because of their different personal situations and different stages in career. Three of the interviewees expressed intentions to remain in Asia, as they could no longer see careers in Finland meaningful or fulfilling to them. Especially SIE1 stated clearly, that he has no plans for repatriation, unless for retirement. SIE2 estimated he is 90 percent sure he would stay in the region:

“I'll be very surprised if I don't stay in Asia.”

SIE4 and SIE6, however, provided different perspectives. SIE4 had repatriated to Finland just a month prior to the interview. He had planned on return for several years and described his repatriation as a deliberate and well-prepared decision mainly motivated by the birth of his daughter and a desire for a stable life in Finland. As a trailing spouse, SIE6 described her situation as one of ongoing uncertainty. However, SIE6 told that she had repatriated once previously for a few years and it had been unexpectedly difficult, which ultimately led her to seek another opportunity in Asia instead of repatriating for good:

“Returning to the Finnish life, it's actually quite demanding. All of a sudden, with working at the same time, both parents working, young children, running everything. It is not impossible, but it is quite tough. And then if you have an option, we chose the option. If we don't have to be sort of that type of thing, we opted for something else.”

The reasons given for staying in Asia were both personal and professional. Several of the interviewees had built their family lives in Asia and over time, their careers had become so deeply rooted in the Asian context, that returning to Finland had started to feel impossible. SIE1 and SIE2 expressed that they no longer felt equipped or motivated to start over in the Finnish market. SIE1 also mentioned that he saw a practical barrier, that made repatriation difficult regardless of his personal desire:

“When you are earning salaries in countries with a low income tax, it would be very hard to then go back to a country like Finland that actually charges very high income tax, because that would more likely than not mean that you could not actually even pay your mortgages.”

SIE5 felt similarly as he described the prospects of Finnish salaries and taxation representing a potentially unworkable change in lifestyle. SIE3 felt like the Finnish retirement and pension systems are not built for people with international careers, which would make returning even less appealing. He reflected:

“The retirement systems are not built for people with international or global careers. Every time you change country, you kind of reset the button.”

SIE4, who had recently returned to Finland, confirmed the financial dimension of repatriation challenges. He described the transition to Finnish salaries and taxation as brutal. However, SIE4 was optimistic about Finnish employers valuing his experience in Asia and finding a job in Finland, especially if the company has Asian operations. He suggested that at lower and middle management levels, international experience translated to adaptability and flexibility that employers see as valuable:

“If you are an engineer or team leader, it values more because it shows you are flexible, you can adapt, you can work with different people. But if you go to upper management, if it's not China specific, it might not be really a plus.”

SIE1, SIE2, SIE3 and SIE5 felt more pessimistic about how their accumulated career capital would be valued by Finnish employers. SIE5 described the gap between what Finnish employers had said and what actually happened in practice:

“In every speech and article in Finland, people are saying that we appreciate the people coming back, they have potential, they have connections, they understand how to work with people from other cultures. And then when you get to the interview for some position, it suddenly there is a different tone: “What can you actually do because you have been so many years away?” The reality is much more harsher than all the nice talks. They have this kind of disbelief about the experience that you can gain here. Sometimes I even sense that they are a little bit afraid that we come with some ideas that are not fitting into the culture in Finland.”

Interviews of SIE1 and SIE2 confirmed this consistent finding:

“They only see the tip of the iceberg. They don't understand how much experience and how much knowledge you actually have.”

“Finnish companies do not understand the value of a person coming from a different country. And that's something I never got my head around.”

On the contrary, SIE6 felt that the problem is not that Finnish employers view international experience as worthless, but rather that Finnish culture in general makes it difficult to acknowledge that something good could come outside Finland:

“I think in Finland what happens more is that it's not shown that it's valuable. We have a bit of that mentality that we know best how to do it.”

SIE3 confirmed the pattern described by SIE1 and SIE2 and recalled a time he meant to repatriate and applied for jobs in Finland. He recalled his career capital being poorly understood and undervalued by Finnish employers. He felt that Finnish business leaders tend to have little international experience themselves, making them unable to evaluate

internationally developed competencies of repatriating SIEs. On the other hand, SIE1, SIE2 and SIE3 felt optimistic about their career prospects in international labor markets. SIE1 told that he receives frequent inquiries on LinkedIn from Finnish companies seeking Asian market entry advice, and he treats these inquiries as paid consulting opportunities. SIE2 expressed that he believes that American and Canadian employers would be more appreciative of the value of his international background compared to Finnish ones.

When asked about long-term career goals, the repeating theme was that the participants no longer aimed for hierarchical advancement, but were more interested in freedom, flexibility and quality of life. SIE1's primary goal was financial independence in order to have more time to spend with his family and to work less. SIE2 described freedom and flexibility as his main career goals. SIE3 described no longer planning his career in conventional terms:

"You can plan the direction, but not the exact path."

SIE4 reflected on a similar evolution when it comes to career goals and expectations. During the last eight years of his self-initiated expatriation in China, his motivation had started to fade, and his focus shifted to family and quality of life. He described having achieved more than he could have ever imagined, which made further advancement feel less meaningful:

"Getting a bigger role, bigger company, more money... They kind of stop being meaningful. So, it was just more about grinding, maximizing your annual bonuses, making enough money to be able to come back home, relax."

SIE5's long-term career goal was simply making his business sustainable enough to allow him to stay in Asia for a long time. Like many of the interviewees, he framed success in terms of stability and quality of life rather than career advancement. SIE6 described her goals as remaining flexible given her uncertain situation as a trailing spouse. Instead of pursuing specific long-term career goals, she hoped to focus on gaining more qualifications and skills she could use regardless of where she works.

All in all, it is evident that in the case of Finnish long-term SIEs in Asia, career capital developed in Asia has significantly impacted their careers. Acquired career capital has sustained their highly international careers and opened doors for career advancement in Asia, while, on the other hand, most of them do not have high expectations for their experience being valued in Finland. Moreover, their future career goals appear more subjective rather than hierarchical.

5 Discussion and conclusions

In this final chapter, the findings of the study are discussed in relation to the research questions and compared and interpreted against the theoretical framework established in the literature review. The aim of this thesis was to examine what type of career capital Finnish SIEs develop in Asia and how such development impacts expectations on future career development.

5.1 Conclusions of the study

The aim of this thesis was to study career capital development of Finnish SIEs in Asia. It sought to understand what kind of career capital they have developed as well as how they expect the acquired career capital to impact their future career development. To answer these research questions, a qualitative research approach was used, and the findings were analyzed through DeFillippi and Arthur's (1994) career capital theory as the theoretical framework. The key findings of the study contribute to the limited existing research on Finnish SIEs in Asia and the identified research gap in research on Western expatriates in Asia (McNulty et al., 2013). The findings showed that Finnish SIEs develop significant career capital across all three ways of knowing, which has both impacted and is expected to impact their future careers in ways that confirm and extend the existing research.

The first research question sought to find out what type of career capital Finnish SIEs develop in Asia. First, as the first way of knowing in DeFillippi and Arthur's (1994) career capital theory, knowing-how was studied. The findings showed that Finnish SIEs developed significant knowing-how career capital during their self-initiated expatriation in Asia. Developed knowing-how included cross-cultural communication skills, cultural intelligence and sensitivity, time management and availability, and business and operational knowledge specific to the Asian context. The participants' successful cross-cultural adjustment is consistent with the findings of Peltokorpi and Froese (2009), who found that SIEs typically exhibit better overall cross-cultural adjustment compared to AEs.

The findings showed that the key drivers for this development were direct immersion and working in demanding, unfamiliar professional environments without organizational support or formal training. Additionally, the SIEs developed as generalists and entrepreneurs, developing entirely new skillsets, and took on a variety of roles and responsibilities that would not have been accessible to them in Finland's more rigid career system for their educational or career backgrounds.

These findings are in line with previous research of Jokinen (2010), who found that knowing-how develops primarily through immersion in unfamiliar organizational and cultural contexts and that the level of development depends on the exposure to unfamiliar tasks, challenging work environments and cross-cultural interactions. These mechanisms reflected clearly in the interviewees' descriptions of their own knowing-how development. These findings are further supported by Dickmann et al. (2018), who found that compared to AEs, SIEs possess a more holistic attitude towards living and working abroad and therefore earn more diverse learning opportunities. However, Dickmann et al. (2018) also found that SIEs may develop knowing-how more slowly than AEs due to the lack of organizational training and support, and may gain less business knowledge as AEs, on average, hold higher status and positions in the workplace. The findings of this thesis add nuance to this, as the long-term SIEs had developed broad business knowledge, especially in the Asian context, and progressed in their careers to high roles rather quickly, indicating that the pace of knowing-how development of SIEs may improve significantly with long-term immersion.

The findings on knowing-how development suggest that self-initiated expatriation to Asia produces broad knowing-how through the necessity to immerse. While AEs develop knowing-how through organizational training, Finnish SIEs in Asia developed broad, adaptive and Asia-specific competencies and knowledge through engagement in an environment that is both culturally and geographically far from home. Therefore, this thesis extends DeFillippi and Arthur's (1994) career capital theory to the previously unexamined context of Finnish SIEs in Asia. Additionally, the sample, consisting of long-

term SIEs, extends the findings of Dickmann et al. (2018) by suggesting that over time, long-term career capital can produce broad business knowledge and career progression to senior roles among SIEs, even without organizational support.

Second, as the second way of knowing in DeFillippi and Arthur's (1994) career capital theory, knowing-why was studied with the aim to understand how Finnish SIEs' professional identity, values and motivations developed during their time in Asia. Compared to knowing-how, these findings were more personal and reflective. The three key forms of knowing-why development were strengthened professional identity and self-awareness, shifts in values and motivations, and the unexpected discovery of understanding the value of Finnish national identity as a professional asset in Asia. The mechanism behind the SIEs' developed self-awareness and better understanding of their strengths, capabilities and professional identity was navigating through challenges independently without organizational support in Asia. The interviewees had self-initiated their expatriation with adventure and new experiences as well as economic benefits as the initial drivers, which align with Froese (2012), who found that the desire for adventure and economic benefits are among the most common push and pull factors for self-initiated expatriation. But over time, the participants motivations had shifted to prioritize stability, quality of life and family. Additionally, and unexpectedly, the study found the value of the participants' Finnish identity as a pre-existing form of knowing-why that activated as a professional asset in the Asian context. The finding suggested that Finnish reputation of honesty, neutrality and good education generated trust and even new professional opportunities for the participants.

The participants described the exact same reflective journey into oneself as a mechanism in their knowing-why development as identified by Jokinen (2010), as they assessed their motivations, strengths and weaknesses to different situations. The participants developed this kind of fearless and adaptable professional mindset during their time in Asia. Therefore, it could be seen as a distinctive outcome of long-term self-initiated expatriation, supported by existing literature that identify personal agency and

the willingness to take initiative as key factors in SIEs' career capital development (Brown et al., 2023). The findings are in line with previous research when it comes to the shifts in motivations over time as well. Jokinen (2010) found that expatriates develop knowing-why increasingly through becoming more aware of what they look for in their professional lives. Additionally, Dickmann and Doherty (2010) describe perceived impact of developed knowing-why as a "rounding" experience, which aligns with what the participants experienced. The accumulation of experience appears to have shifted the participants' motivations and as they reached their initial goals of adventure and became more settled in Asia, they naturally let new priorities shape their knowing-why. A finding that this study adds nuance to, however, is Dickmann et al.'s (2018) finding that in the long term, SIEs had more difficulty than AEs in maintaining and deepening their sense of career purpose. The data of this thesis suggests that long-term SIEs had strong and evolved career identities, despite also having new, shifted values of stability and quality of life rather than career advancement, suggesting that the depth of knowing-why development among long-term SIEs may be greater than comparative research implies. The finding regarding the understanding the value of Finnish national identity goes beyond what existing literature on career capital development has covered. However, Jokinen et al. (2008) acknowledges that new forms of career capital have been tried to introduce. Still, national identity's value as a pre-existing form of knowing-why that activates as a professional asset or a strength in suitable contexts has not been studied before.

The findings on knowing-why development suggest that self-initiated expatriation to Asia produces deep and lasting knowing-why through independent self-navigation. Without organizational support mechanisms, the participants developed their sense of professional identity and purpose by facing challenges alone which resulted in resilience and deep understanding of one's own strengths, weaknesses and capabilities. The finding related to the Finnish national identity extends DeFillippi and Arthur's (1994) career capital theory by introducing a previously unexamined dimension of knowing-why that activates through expatriation, suggesting that national identity and reputation

could function as a form of knowing-why career capital in some international contexts. This finding broadens the understanding of what forms knowing-why could possibly take.

Third, knowing-whom was studied with the aim to understand how Finnish SIEs' professional and personal networks had developed during their self-initiated expatriation in Asia. The findings showed that this dimension of career capital was the most challenging to develop for the participants. The lack of organizational pre-existing networks and the temporary nature of expatriate communities made building lasting connections difficult. What is more, with the participants' lives being deeply rooted in Asia, for many the networks at home had weakened to almost non-existent over time. Despite the challenges, the participants had built extensive networks across organizations and cultures over time in Asia and saw the developed networks and therefore developed knowing-whom as highly valuable.

This finding is in line with previous research of Dickmann et al. (2018), who found that SIEs face persistent challenges when building networks, especially for not being able to build as strategically useful ones as those of AEs. While for some participants networks opened doors and acted a safety net, building networks was found rather difficult overall. Furthermore, the findings of this study are strongly in line with Suutari and Brewster (2000) when it comes to the weakened home country networks as SIEs spend longer in the host country and become more rooted there. Despite these initial challenges, the data complements previous research of Jokinen et al. (2008) and Dickmann and Doherty (2010), who found that over time, expatriates become more intentional about networking and see developed knowing-whom as highly valuable, like an insurance policy.

The findings regarding knowing-whom suggest that Finnish SIEs in Asia develop broad networks across organizations and cultures, but the strategic value of those networks vary between individuals. Finnish SIEs built their networks entirely through personal initiative without organizational backing, which reflected the importance of personal

agency in their career capital development (Brown et al., 2023; Suutari & Brewster, 2000). Also, the findings suggest that time is a significant factor, as the long-term nature of the participants' expatriation showed that most useful connections were built gradually over the years.

The second research question sought to understand how Finnish SIEs expected the acquired career capital to impact their future career development. For most participants, these expected future impacts had already become reality. In terms of objective career impacts, the career capital developed in Asia had allowed for career progression from more junior roles to managerial positions rapidly and for opportunities that would have not been available to the participants in Finland. Most participants were pessimistic about Finnish employers understanding the value of their career capital developed in Asia and intended to remain in Asia, as professional, financial, personal and even structural reasons made repatriation seem unappealing or nearly impossible. In terms of subjective career impacts, the findings showed that the participants' future career goals had shifted from hierarchical advancement and economic benefits toward stability, flexibility and quality of life, which mirrored the shifts in knowing-why motivations.

The finding that the participants expected their career capital to be valued in the external labor markets is in line with the previous research of Mello et al. (2023), Cerdin and Selmer (2014) and Crowley-Henry (2007). However, the participants' optimism was only considering Asian and international markets and not Finland, which adds nuance to the findings but confirms the findings of Mello et al. (2023), who found that not all employers recognize the value of internationally developed career capital. Despite this pessimism, the long-term impacts of career capital development had been positive and lead to significant career success objectively in forms of senior roles and higher compensation, and subjectively, as the participants felt the level of career satisfaction would not have been achievable in Finland. This finding of positive long-term career picture is in line with the findings of Suutari et al. (2018) and Mello et al. (2023), who found that the long-term impacts of career capital are usually positive leading to greater

career success. This finding is further supported by Carpenter et al. (2001) and Daily et al. (2000), who found that executives with international experience are valued by external labor markets and translates into tangible career rewards at senior levels.

The findings show that the Finnish long-term SIEs are reluctant to return to Finland, as they expect career and financial regression. This finding is in line with Shaffer et al. (2012) and Dorsch et al. (2012), who found that expatriates often experience underemployment upon return to their home countries and for that reason, many SIEs actually never repatriate. The findings of this thesis extend this by identifying Finnish taxation, lower salary levels and retirement systems as structural barriers for making repatriation undesirable or even nearly practically impossible.

The findings regarding future career expectations suggest that Finnish SIEs in Asia view their developed career capital valuable within the Asian and other international contexts but feel skeptical about the perceived value at home. This finding adds to the existing research by suggesting that SIE career expectations and the transferability of acquired career capital are dependent on the receiving country. All participants had initially intended to eventually repatriate to Finland, but most had over time built their careers and personal lives strongly embedded in Asia transitioning into long-term residents and localized professionals as described by Cerdin and Selmer (2014) and Suutari and Brewster (2000). The participants still based in Asia expected their career capital to continue opening doors in Asian and international job markets, while not expecting Finnish job markets to recognize the developed career capital.

To conclude the discussion, Finnish SIEs developed significant career capital across all three ways of knowing during their time in Asia, and this development shaped their career trajectories and future career expectations over time both confirming and extending previous research. The most unexpected finding was the value of Finnish identity as a pre-existing form of knowing-why that activated as a professional asset in Asia, extending career capital theory. The sample consisting of long-term SIEs showed

more positive career trajectories than existing cross-sectional studies would suggest. Furthermore, the findings showed that the value of developed career capital was context dependent as the participants felt their experience was strongly valued within Asia but expected skepticism from Finnish employers. Together, these findings address the limited existing research on Finnish SIEs in Asia and the research gap on Western expatriates in the Asia Pacific identified by McNulty et al. (2013).

5.2 Limitations

There are certain limitations to this study. Regarding the scope, this thesis investigates how Finnish SIEs expect the acquired career capital to impact their future career development. Therefore, AEs, theories outside of DeFillippi and Arthur's (1994) career capital theory and results on the expectations on career development of other than Finnish SIEs in Asia, are outside of the scope of the study. The focus of Finnish SIEs in Asia means that the findings of this thesis may not be generalizable to expatriates from other countries or working in other regions. Additionally, while efforts to recruit Finnish SIEs at earlier stages of their careers in Asia were made, these attempts were unsuccessful and therefore the final sample consists of primarily long-term SIEs with extensive experience in Asia. Given this, the generalizability of the findings, particularly regarding the second research question, is limited.

As the study followed the qualitative approach and no quantitative study was conducted, the findings do not include numerical data. The data used for the research consists of qualitative primary data collected by the author in the form of in-depth semi-structured interviews. Each participant was interviewed once, and due to the cross-sectional nature of the study, data were collected at a single point in time limiting understanding of changes that could happen in the long term. Moreover, the analysis was based on a small sample of six interviewees, which potentially limits the findings' generalizability as well as the ability to capture the diversity of SIE experiences. Despite these limitations, this thesis provides new insights into Finnish SIEs' career capital development and career expectations in Asia, contributing to the limited existing research on this population.

5.3 Practical implications

The findings of this study offer several practical implications for both individuals and organizations. For individuals considering self-initiated expatriation to Asia, findings suggest that finding work in Asia at one's own initiative can result in significant career capital development that may be difficult to gain domestically. As a result of the demanding working culture of Asia, these individuals develop cross-cultural communication skills, cultural sensitivity and intelligence and Asia-specific business knowledge in ways that organizationally backed expatriates may not. Therefore, Finnish professionals who plan on self-initiating to Asia should approach the plan with a long-term perspective. While the initial entry point can be low, the career capital acquired over time often results in notable career growth. The findings of this study also suggest that Finnish SIEs may benefit from an unexpected advantage in Asia: Finland's international reputation of honesty, trustworthiness and educational standards may offer ways to build credibility and professional networks in the Asian context.

The findings of this study further suggest that the knowledge and expertise accumulated by Finnish SIEs in Asia can be beneficial for organizations as well. Especially companies with plans to expand to the Asian markets would benefit from the regional experience of long-term SIEs in Asia, as the deep practical understanding of local business cultures, regulations and market dynamics possessed by these professionals would be difficult to gain through short-term assigned expatriation or remote management. Additionally, the findings of this study suggest that organizations may benefit from Finnish professionals' national identity as a trust building asset in Asia. Finally, the findings suggest that long-term Finnish SIEs who have their professional networks, financial circumstances and personal lives based in Asia may be difficult to attract back to Finland. But if Finnish organizations wish to leverage this pool of internationally experienced professionals, a critical first step would be developing recruitment practices that recognize the value of independently gained, Asia-specific career capital.

5.4 Suggestions for further research

The findings of this thesis open several avenues for further research. First, given the cross-sectional nature of the study, the data was collected at a single point in time. Therefore, this thesis is able to provide limited understanding of interviewees' career capital development and expectations on future career. A longitudinal study following Finnish SIEs in Asia over an extended period of time would give valuable insight into how career capital and future career expectations evolve as SIEs go through different career stages. This is relevant because the experiences of SIEs interviewed for this thesis show that the long-term career trajectories may look considerably more positive than many existing cross-sectional studies imply.

Second, five out of six interviewees for this thesis happened to be male and most were primarily long-term SIEs. Given that existing literature points out that a larger proportion of SIEs are female compared to the proportion of females among AEs (Jokinen et al., 2008), future research could examine whether the career capital development and future career expectations are equally applicable to female Finnish SIEs in Asia, or whether gender shapes the self-initiated expatriation experience in the Asian region. Furthermore, since this study was unable to recruit Finnish SIEs at earlier stages of their career in Asia, future research could specifically target individuals with less experience to examine how career expectations differ across career stages.

Third, this study identified Finnish SIEs' national identity as an unexpected dimension of career capital. The findings suggest that the reputation associated with being from Finland may act as a pre-existing form of knowing-why career capital that activates as a professional advantage in Asia. As this finding emerged organically from the interviews and it has not been discussed in existing career capital studies, despite Jokinen et al. (2008) acknowledging that scholars have tried to introduce new forms of career capital, future research could look into this phenomenon more systematically. It would be interesting to investigate whether this pattern applies to a larger sample of Finnish SIEs

in Asia as well as whether similar nationally attributed reputational advantages apply to Finnish SIEs in other international locations.

Beyond the suggestions related to the limitations of this study, there are broader gaps in the existing research on SIEs. While research on SIEs has grown over the past two decades (Brewster et al., 2021), it has mostly focused on short-term experiences and treated SIEs as a relatively uniform group, leaving the long-term and differentiated nature of SIE careers underexplored. Especially the existing research focusing on the different SIE types is limited, even though the trajectories of different types of SIEs vary considerably. Future research could therefore explore what factors affect these different career trajectories and how SIEs' different paths shape their long-term career outcomes. Additionally, longitudinal studies tracking SIEs across their different career stages would offer deeper insight into how the long-term impacts of self-initiated expatriation materialize over time across the different SIE populations.

Use of Artificial Intelligence

The author of this thesis Heini Ruohotie has utilized the following AI tools in the thesis writing process:

1. Grammarly
2. Anthropic Claude

Explanation of the use of the tools: The tools were used to assist with writing fluency and text organization. Grammarly was used to identify and correct grammatical and spelling errors. Anthropic Claude was used for structuring and organizing text for clarity.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Semi-structured in-depth interview guide

Semi-structured in-depth interview guide
Part 1. Introduction (2-3 min)
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Briefly introducing the interviewee to the research topic and the purpose of the interview. 2. Explaining confidentiality and asking for permission to record the interview.
Part 2. Background (5-10 min)
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Could you briefly describe your background and early career before moving to Asia? 2. What is your current job title and the nature of your role? Are you employed by a local company, a multinational corporation or are you self-employed? 3. How many years have you worked in Asia? Have you had other international work experiences?
Part 3. Self-initiated expatriation (5-10 min)
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What motivated you to expatriate to Asia on your own initiative? 2. What have been your biggest challenges or opportunities managing your own career in Asia?
Part 4. Career capital development (25-30 min)
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Looking back, how have you developed professionally during your time in Asia? <p>A. Knowing-how: Skills, expertise and knowledge</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Would you say you have developed new skills, professional expertise or knowledge during your time working in Asia? Could you give examples of projects or situations where you developed those? 3. Would you differentiate between general skills (applicable everywhere) and international/Asia-specific competencies you have developed? 4. How do you believe being in Asia has influenced this development? <p>B. Knowing-why: Values, interests and motivation</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. How has your self-understanding evolved during your expatriation? Have you, for example, gained better understanding of your strengths, weaknesses or capabilities? 6. Have any personal or professional motivations or values changed? 7. How would you say your professional identity has changed during your time in Asia? <p>C. Knowing-whom: Personal relationships</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 8. Have your relationships and networks expanded during your expatriation? How have they been useful to you professionally? 9. Have you maintained any professional networks back at home in Finland?

Part 5. Expectations and impact on future career (20-25 min)**A. Career capital impacts**

1. Which developed “way of knowing” (skills, motivation/identity or networks) aspect do you believe will be the most impactful for your future? Why?
2. How do you expect your expatriation in Asia and what you have gained to impact your career in these different scenarios:
 - You continue to work in Asia
 - You move to another international location
 - You return to Finland
3. Do you think employers might value your experience in Asia differently than you value it yourself?

B. Contextual factors and SIE vs. AE perspective

4. Do you believe that the length of your stay in Asia or the type of work you have done there will have an impact on how beneficial this experience will be for your future career?
5. Do you think self-initiated expatriates like yourself may experience different career effects compared to those sent by an organization?

C. Long-term career goals

6. What are your long-term career goals and how does your expatriation in Asia influence achieving those goals?
7. Do you have any concerns about how your Asia experience might be valued in your future career?

Part 6. Closing the interview (2-3 min)